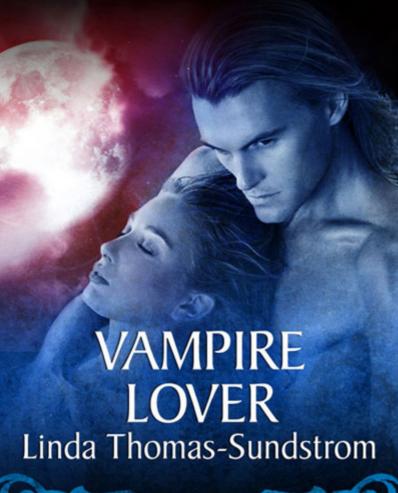


nocturne BITES





Vampire Lover

Linda Thomas-Sundstrom



Kelsie Connor is looking for a big headline to jumpstart her career as a journalist—like proving the existence of vampires and werewolves. She's always felt that Others exist, though she's never met one herself. So on the night of the Blood Moon, Kelsie goes looking for a werewolf...but meets a vampire instead. A vampire who makes her blood run hot and makes her feel things she never imagined a body could feel

Hayden Flann had been secretly watching Kelsie for some time, drawn to her by a powerful bloodlust and equally strong sexual attraction. But Hayden recognizes that he and Kelsie are connected by more than passion. Little does she know that Hayden is not just her lover—he's also her enemy, born to seduce her before he kills her....

CHAPTER ONE

The heat hitting Kelsie Connor in a wave was like a second-degree sunburn on midwestern-pale skin, but she refrained from touching her bare shoulder with the cool rim of her martini glass. Movement of any kind could prove suicidal beneath a moon like the one in tonight's balmy June sky, if the legends were true.

The majority of Homo sapiens might not perceive anything abnormal about the blaringly bright full moon lending a reddish cast to the sidewalk, but humans weren't the only species calling Miami home. And not all humans were unobservant.

Certainly not herself.

Tonight's moon had a special name. *Blood Moon*. A moniker for the second full moon in a single month. Not a Blue Moon, as some people called it. This particular one, appearing every five years, looked more like the sun viewed through a layer of smog. Nothing remotely white or silver or blue about it. Not so benign.

Rumor had it that this moon brought out other twolegged, night-loving species besides Miami's usual sleek human glitterati. Legends foretold these Others could smell movement, as if *action* was another word for *bouquet*. Not only that, it was said that Others had internal directional beacons spliced into their genes, and just flat out knew where to find fresh meat or fresh blood or whatever their particular dietary needs dictated.

"Disgusting..."

While poor human saps like herself had be lucky enough to utilize all of their senses, and then scramble to find two or three more in order to keep on the good side of the separation between life and death on any night in a city this size.

Kelsie took a second glace up at the strange, unearthly phenomenon overhead and rode out a ripple of internal heat at the thought of what that moon could do for her career if she was right about what might happen beneath it.

The thought actually turned her on a little.

Moisture gathered between her thighs.

This definitely wasn't the night to be strolling around, looking for a stray ocean breeze. Nor was it opportune for taking shortcuts on dark, underpopulated side streets. Five years ago, during the last Blood Moon phase, ten people had gone missing in this part of Miami alone. Maybe not so unusual in a decadent city on a steamy summer night, but she had crunched some unpublicized numbers, turning up the names of at least twenty more MIA's that had fallen beneath the radar.

What happened to those people?

As a fact-finder for the *Miami Tribune*, Kelsie knew that numbers, and the ways to get them, were her game. She was damn good at her job. Now, though, like all wannabe writers who longed to move up in the world of journalism, she needed a break.

"So here I am, in the market for a monster." An *Other*. A creature out of legend that would help her get that elusive byline.

What she wanted was a werewolf.

With a grin, Kelsie leaned back against the warm brick on the outside patio of the Havana Club, untasted martini in her hand, trying not to call attention to herself. Her gray silk camisole and black skirt amounted to camouflage in this chic crowd. She had understated her makeup; nothing too red or too vibrant. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was down, straight and combed off to one side.

As a matter of fact, she might have gone a tad too far by understating everything, she acknowledged, watching the dancing, flirting hordes of men and women making the scene. By keeping her distance and blatantly showing her indifference to the art of the pickup, she might actually stand out a little.

Still, if anyone could find a werewolf—given that there were such things—she was determined to do so. If anything could lure a werewolf out of hiding, a Blood Moon would be the ticket. Her senses were keen enough to sniff out a story, honed by her journalism background and the attention she paid to her surroundings. She tried to process details in a manner similar to the way she supposed werewolves sucked up moonlight. Taking it all in.

Thus far, at this club, however, she had only come across wolves of another sort. The usual kind. Problem was, there were too many people jammed into a tight space to see individuals clearly. The hum of voices had escalated over the thump of the music as bar drinks

flowed.

Kelsie scanned the crowd, darting hopeful glances here and there. For what? A bit of fur showing on the back of someone's neck? Like finding a werewolf would be that easy?

Closing her eyes briefly, she enjoyed the arrival of a rare ocean breeze. The night was glorious, even if it proved to be monster-free. She loved the dark, the stars overhead, the night heat that seared her lungs. Miami was like no other place on earth, and about as far removed from her family's Irish heritage as was possible.

Ireland hadn't held anything interesting for her in some time. Living in the States made it easier to chase interests and follow her own path. She just needed this one little *monster* in order to get ahead. A hairy one, preferably.

"Is that too much to ask for?" she said aloud. "Kelsie Connor, on the prowl. Trolling the dark in search of adventure." *Needing to ferret out the rumors and put my strange compulsion to find Others to the test.*

"Maybe you, big guy?"

Her gaze latched on to a man in a floral shirt, well beneath the club's blue awning. A decent candidate for a werewolf? Tall, broad-shouldered, with abundant auburn hair and a perfect tan, he moved with an animalistic, lumbering step as he stalked a woman sucking down a lime-green, nuclear-hued appletini.

Hell, he actually looked like potential, the epitome of something unmorphed. After all, Weres could be anybody, anywhere, without a full moon to trip their DNA switches. Recipients of gene splicing/coding between humans and wolves could either be complete fantasy, or an actual syndrome affecting a small segment of the population. She hoped for the latter. Because if there were such things as werewolves, one informative bio in a newspaper column would make this freaky Blood Moon worth her weight in gold.

"Tonight's the night. I feel it."

Squeezing her thighs together to fend off the thrill Kelsie figured she shared with most reporters about to close in on a story, she scanned the crowd again. Her grin faded as she riffled through the rest of the legends.

There were, of course, other Others. Vampires. An altogether scarier breed. The walking dead. As bloodlusting bloodsuckers, out only at night, they'd have to show up as pale anomalies in this city, and stand apart. As did pasty-hued tourists among the Miami sun and sand natives.

The thought of vampires in the area was a sudden deal-breaker, chilling the blistering night. Kelsie felt that chill waft in now, like a cold breath on the back of her neck.

Unlike werewolves, vampires weren't humanlike most of the time. None of the time, in fact. They might walk like humans and talk like humans, because that's what they had been once upon a time, but when the life had been drained out of them, they became animated cadavers who tended to pass on that same trait to people who came into contact with them.

The stuff of nightmares.

To make matters worse, there was more than one

kind. Besides double-dead vampires, there were living vampires who possessed human traits and heartbeats.

"I'll take a werewolf, please," she said aloud, trying to dislodge the chill that seemed to be sticking around and was now dribbling down her back, making a point to hit each vertebra, ending on the one closest to her butt.

Vowing never to even think the V word again, Kelsie leaned more weight on the brick, allowing the rough surface to scratch at her slinky gray silk, needing to cut off that chill. She took a good-size sip of her martini before remembering she didn't drink, and coughed. The alcohol had been purely for looks. A prop. Connors never had been able to manage their liquor.

And damn it, the pesky chills were unwarranted, since there was no way a vampire could be around others and virtually blend in. She didn't want one of *those*. Why would anyone go out of their way to find a vampire, when a pair of fangs could etch the word *lethal* across a jugular vein?

But wait! she thought with a healthy dose of sarcasm. Vampires were supposed to be cool-skinned, right? Considering tonight's hundred degree swelter, rubbing up against one might be so bad, after all.

She grinned widely. Pressing the martini glass to her throat, she muttered, "One good story is all I need. Something unique, and not too life threatening."

A werewolf would do. In particular, a werewolf hit by the light of a Blood Moon. *Think of the headlines!* If any man-wolf accidentally stepped out from beneath the awning, lured onto the moon-brightened patio, she'd be waiting.

"Come on, wolf boys, show yourself. Do it for me," she whispered to the blur of moving bodies inside the doorway, even though the damned chills persisted, despite the summer heat wave.

It felt suddenly as if a fog bank had rolled in. As if she was being watched.

Uncomfortable, curious, with little hairs standing straight up on her arms, Kelsie turned her head, surprised to find she had company. A man. Several feet away. His gaze intent on her—probably because he'd heard every silly thing she'd said.

What have we here?

Hayden Flynn's interested gaze slipped over the female across from him in a sensual glide. From her shining hair to her sexy high-heeled sandals, the sassy young blonde should have captured the interest of any male with properly functioning body parts, yet this woman was alone, set aside.

A beautiful wallflower.

He observed her carefully, drawn for reasons he couldn't put a finger on. There were plenty of attractive women in the club tonight, and prettier females within twenty feet in several directions. This one wasn't outstandingly beautiful by today's standards, though she was striking.

She had a narrow, heart-shaped face, big eyes, plus a sensual mouth turned up at the corners and perhaps a bit too large for the rest of her delicate features.

A mouth most males would know how to abuse, he

noted.

Her body was exquisite. An expensive haircut swung her hair softly over well-proportioned shoulders. Her choice of clothing showed off lots of smooth skin—neck, shoulders, chest, arms. The outline of firm, rounded breasts pressed against her filmy drape of gray silk.

She was incredibly sexy. Mouthwatering.

Hayden was sure he hadn't seen her before, yet felt as if he had. A stray thought, deliciously tantalizing, suggested that she might be waiting on this patio for him. *Wishful thinking?*

Hayden studied her further, intrigued.

On the surface, her body language was loose. She was enjoying herself, comfortable with her solitary status at a notorious pickup club. The glass she held was full, though she had been holding it for some time.

Cheap date. The cheeky notion brought on the rise of his own thirst, which he tamped down for the time being, fascinated by the strange things she was doing with her glass.

She pressed the glass again to her lips, but didn't drink. After resting the rim briefly against her cheek, she closed her eyes, then slowly slid it down to a bare tanned throat the color of honey.

The sliding glass routine was erotic, as was the nakedness of her throat. Naked, that is, except for the twinkle of a fine silver chain that picked up the patio's torchlight.

Hayden felt a pleasurable sensation run through him that was equal parts lust and intrigue, due to the challenge of silver so close to the woman's veins. Pangs of that lust beat at him. He hadn't ever experienced this kind of immediate attraction. The woman had to be special, somehow. That uniqueness separated her from the other women here tonight, and called to him as surely as if she'd wrapped her glossy lips around him. His entire body was alive, and on standby.

Breaking visual contact with her, Hayden sent his senses outward. He inhaled deeply, frowned, then refocused.

Yes, something is here. Something strange.

The air around the attractive wallflower was as disturbed by her musky scent as he was, as if her presence agitated the night. This sort of air displacement was usually reserved for creatures like himself, but this female was human, live, mortal. Her soul's song was low-pitched and vibrant, emanating from her like radio waves. A strong, steady heartbeat surrounded the twang of her soul, in the manner of an accompanying bass drum.

Why did she affect the darkness surrounding her?

Hayden searched his memory banks for an answer to that question, hunting for a word to explain the phenomena. He caught one quickly because it was a concept he knew intimately.

Hunger.

The woman was burning up with hunger. Her inner fires were stoked. Her carefully cultivated, languid exterior hid a scrambled ball of energy tucked inside. It was as though her honeyed skin acted as a barrier between her outward persona and a roiling inner chaos that could escape with one good sneeze. This was

evidence that she wanted one thing, while her soul wanted something else. The pretty blonde was not only at odds with the night, but at war with herself.

If he hadn't been completely attracted before, Hayden was fully captivated now. He inhaled again, smelling the complexity of her desire, now that he'd pinpointed her secret turmoil. The scent was dark, like the tumbling incarnation of a summer storm.

Adrenaline spiked as he took in every detail of this storm in her gray silk cocoon, as he followed the line of her short skirt to shapely legs, knees and ankles. Black polish, the color of midnight, tipped her toes, as did two tiny silver bands.

He continued to stare at her openly, growing more aroused by the second. Soon she would notice him. Would the games then begin, or be over before thirst overruled his curiosity?

He wanted his hands and mouth all over this woman. He wanted his lips on her long golden neck. These longings made him feel like the animal he'd never really been or accepted as part of himself.

His fangs were descending, and he knew better. Vampires had to exist on the periphery of mortal life, unexposed. Now was not the time or the place to explore his attraction to the woman. He had to be careful not to call too much attention to himself.

Leave now, before hunger obliterates good judgment.

Hunger was, in fact, circling, like a pack of snapping wolves. But he continued to search her face, noting that her eyes were a light jade-green and hooded by dark lashes. Familiar eyes?

The silver chain at her throat flashed as her head began to turn. Hayden winced, jolted by another surprise. Surely the little charm hanging from that chain, lying in the soft cleft between her collarbones, wasn't what it appeared to be?

Couldn't be.

Damnation, now that he'd seen it, he'd have to know for sure. Because if it was what he thought it might be, all hell was about break loose on the patio of a nightclub, and his move to America had been for nothing.

Forcing stale, steamy air into his lungs to maintain his composure, Hayden walked toward the woman, driven her way, fascinated beyond description, careful to keep his lips closed over the dagger-sharp teeth that defined him.

He is making a move?

The man heading Kelsie's way was tall, fair-haired and handsome, even in the shadows. Big, lithe, with aristocratic features and a fluid grace, he was, upon first glance, a poster boy for the term *sex appeal*. The whole package.

He was also a serious distraction from her task at hand.

His blond hair was worn on the long side, with just the right amount of curl. He was scrumptiously masculine in casual black slacks and a blue linen shirt that she hoped matched his eyes.

Males like this one were trouble to every female hormone on the planet. Except maybe for hers, tonight.

Tonight, she was on a mission. A career-building quest. Her entire future depended on ignoring distractions like this one, no matter how flattering they were, and in spite of the way her treacherous body might react to the guy's appearance.

Remember the job, Connor.

Despite the reminder, her heart skipped some beats as the stranger stopped in front of her, blocking her view of the doorway. A full two heads taller than herself, Kelsie had to look up to address his untimely intrusion.

"Sorry. I'm waiting for someone," she said, hating the fact that he was so classy, close up, and that she had to ignore it. He was, in fact, one of the most gorgeous men she had ever seen.

"I'm sure you are," he conceded in a voice that matched his exterior—deep, rumbling and private in a way that jump-started her chills all over again.

"Already have a drink." Kelsie held up her glass before noticing that her hand was shaking, and so was the glass. The back her of neck prickled, again with that cool rush of air.

Premonition, maybe?

Although most Irish people were superstitious about such things, Kelsie fought the impulse. She was young and moderately attractive, so guys routinely tried to pick her up. She was adept at giving a decent brush-off to pursuers she wasn't interested in. Yet damned if she didn't feel tongue-tied right then.

She bit her lip hard and tasted blood. She watched his eyes immediately go to her mouth, as if the blood had enticed his attention. With the arrival of more chills came suspicion.

Maybe this guy was too perfect to be human.

All of a sudden there didn't seem to be enough air on the patio. Her chills mounted, as did the inexplicable feeling that her wishes for the appearance of a creature of the night had been heard by the wrong person in charge.

Please let him be a werewolf!

She barely got that thought off before the man's face blurred, and his mouth touched hers.

CHAPTER TWO

He had tasted the woman before introducing himself, teased by the drop of crimson on her lip.

The mistake shot past Hayden's awareness. He was a vampire. Finding blood was what he was designed to do. *But not here. Not like this.*

Her bead of blood spread, slick as silk, as he pressed his mouth to hers. The heady scent of that single drop roared through him, tickling his veins, tightening his muscles.

Other body parts sprang to life, heating up from the inside out, as if he had just clamped on to a flame. Deep in the back of his mind, though, the talons of mystery coiled around his spontaneous action. He had meant to get away from her, to avoid this very thing. How, then, had he ended up in an unwarranted embrace?

Now that he had, though, sensations zoomed in, one after the other. The blonde tasted unusual. Hotter than most. Wetter than most. Her blood held a hint of aluminum, normal fare in humans, as was the anticipated sugary sweetness. But another, hidden component, drenched in a musky casing, also played on her soft lips. More hints of that storm brewing, plus a heady aftertaste of secrets.

Hayden's fangs began to ache. His pulse quickened as he held himself back from a full-out assault on the woman's taut body. She remained motionless. Although she had a mouth like liquid desire, it didn't respond to his. She didn't pull away, but neither did she bend or cave to this sudden hedonistic act of seduction. Shock ran through her body in ripples. She didn't breathe.

Hayden touched her teeth with the tip of his tongue as her blood curled into him, spreading throughout his body with the poignancy of a fire alarm. The moment was exotic, dangerous. Her blood was an instant aphrodisiac, an addiction to one who hadn't tasted the blood of a human since his awakening.

One slight flex of his jaws now, and he could bite right through the flawless skin. If he did, though, he would become something he'd vowed he would never be.

Darkness enclosed him as his urges raged. He knew that a multitude of people were close by, mere steps away. Still, he wanted other things from the woman who tasted of fire and sweetness, more than just her blood. He wanted it all, in that moment. All of her. Silver-clad neck to her black polished toes, and every moist, luscious space in between. Right here. Stretched out against this wall.

If her mouth was this hot, he could only imagine what the rest of her had to offer. Unimaginable bliss. An inferno to slide himself into. Heat like hers was a turn-on, an inescapable draw for a creature unable to bask in the sunlight.

Below his belt, he began to throb with need. His jaws tensed, desperate for more than a taste despite the warnings his brain was sending to stop such thoughts.

He didn't do this. He didn't bite, hunt, maim or kill. Those actions belonged to others of his kind who were less civilized. To the undead.

But as this woman's presence pulled at his baser instincts, spears of confusion struck him. Need versus want. Want versus sanity and the protection of his kind. The only way vampires could exist was in complete anonymity. He could do nothing here, and was behaving badly.

A sound reached him, bubbling up from the woman he had pinned to the wall. Hayden opened his eyes, dazed to find his fangs grazing her throat. A throat encircled by the stinging burn of silver.

Seconds of silence followed, in which neither of them dared to react. Then the woman's hands were on his chest, pushing.

Hayden leaned back, separating himself from what should have been sheer bliss with a viable partner, if he were merely a man. The finding of a lover on a warm, lovely night, who had very nearly succeeded in compromising his vow of blood celibacy.

Who is she?

The question repeated as he inched away, seeing something with this slight distance that he had missed before. This woman's aura was outlined in red, as if traced by a crayon. Her agitation swirled in the air between them like a live entity. Her eyes flashed green fire.

These changes had been mercurial, and a warning that she might be much more than she seemed. The blonde looked normal, but wasn't. Not completely. His uninvited advance had unlocked a clue about her true nature, setting part of her inner chaos free. That chaos had a name as black as her toenail polish.

"Slayer," Hayden whispered with distaste, just before she slapped him hard with her open hand.

The monster had her by the neck, unaffected by her slap, moving with a frightening speed. His eyes bored into hers.

She was up against the brick wall, held there by the brute strength of his arm. The situation had gotten real messy, real fast; a worst case scenario coming true.

Her glass fell to the ground and shattered.

Moonlight melted over this stranger's features, highlighting his cheekbones, casting shadows. If he'd been a werewolf, he would have been toast by now. But then she had already realized what he wasn't, leaving just one other category to describe the speed, strength, looks and attraction to her blood.

Vampire.

Her heart gave one giant thump. Keeping both hands raised to ward him off, hoping that vampires possessed a thread of common sense, contrary to the legends, Kelsie said breathlessly, "Back off! There are a hundred people here, all of them witnesses."

She should have been scared out of her mind. She should have shouted for help, but his hand on her throat was a caution against it. Staring back at this creature, Kelsie felt the kindling of her anger, in spite of the threat. There wasn't any way to make this work, jobwise. She hadn't wanted *him*, damn it—this creature who was unearthly handsome because he *was*

unearthly. He was interfering in a damn good stakeout.

She might not live to have another thought of any kind if she just stood here.

Luckily, he wasn't pressing too hard on her neck, but using just enough pressure to keep her from squirming free.

"Surely you wouldn't be stupid enough to bite me so close to a crowd?" she protested.

"You were waiting for me." His tone was accusatory. Darkness slipped behind the blue of his irises like free-flowing India ink.

Kelsie's stomach dropped at the sight. Her heart was beating so loudly, she couldn't hear anything else. She knew she had to hang on to her anger. If she didn't, she'd be totally helpless, totally screwed. No way did she want to become part of those missing-people statistics.

"Vain, much?" she snapped, her fingers tugging on his.

The vampire's head angled. One raised eyebrow suggested he questioned her response.

"I don't want you," she said. "I'm looking for a wolf."

His hold eased. Visibly perplexed, he said, "Wolf?"

"Why are you here, in public?" She didn't sound so very panicky, she thought. If his grip loosened more, she could tear herself away.

"I think you know the answer to that," he said.

His tone was as seductive as the shadows, seeming to caress her chill-riddled skin everywhere at once, in sharp contrast to the reality of the situation. He had just sampled some of that reason for being here from her punctured lip. *Blood*. An appalling thought, yet she'd be damned if she would show her reaction. Animals were attracted to weakness. Vampires were predators.

"I'm not part of the snack bar," Kelsie said. "And none of your business."

"On the contrary, your presence is of great concern to me."

"Said like a true homicidal maniac. But I didn't believe you existed. I'm not sure if I believe it now."

"You know who I am?"

"Don't you mean what you are?"

His eyes sought to deepen the connection. "You weren't waiting for me?"

"Get over yourself."

He considered that reply. "You'd find a maniac preferable?"

"Infinitely."

The handsome devil gave her a stunning, if uncertain, grin, without offering visual evidence of his species. Kelsie didn't have to see fangs to realize how serious her situation was. Each passing second made it more obvious that he wasn't going away.

He was toying with her.

Vampires, Kelsie remembered, were little more than tricks of darkness and light, occupying the gray space between life and death. Not here fully, and not there. It was anyone's guess how they survived at all, or why blood kept them activated.

This one's mouth had been on hers before she'd known it—a strange kind of introduction to the threat

of impending death by blood loss. But she was still alive.

"Why do you want a wolf?" His eyes were keen and demanding, daring her to explore their baby-blue depths.

Kelsie refused to answer. She hated being trapped by anyone or anything, anywhere. Her grandmother had raised her to be independent long before turning her loose on Miami. Years of martial arts would help her in another minute, she was sure, if she didn't drop from fear or fangs first.

"Wolves haven't helped your kind in a century," the vampire added. As if that made any sense at all.

"Why don't you have to wear a big V on your forehead to warn people who's in the house?" Kelsie snapped, flicking her gaze upward briefly to see the darkness behind his eyes nearly overwhelm the blue.

That darkness was a warning, she intuited. She had to power back her anger or risk further inciting his. A big sucker like this would be way too powerful to get away from if he marked her as a target. He could probably bite her and be gone before anyone noticed.

So, why hadn't he already done so?

She swallowed hard. "Go away or I'll scream."

The threat sounded anemic.

"Perhaps you're right," he said.

His voice was way too suggestive, deepened by unspoken sexual promise. Instead of backing off, though, he leaned more of his weight into her and whispered prophetically, "We can meet at a better time."

The vampire, she was astounded to find, was solid,

and hard all over. His arousal was evident. The fact that vampires could be sexual creatures came as a shock to Kelsie, since most people would tend to think the only thing to worry about were the teeth.

And as he leaned closer, the night...

The night seemed suddenly to extinguish the light of the torches, blackness blending with the red tint of a disturbed moon. She and the vampire were drenched in moonlight that seemed to stick in her throat, choking off her next breath.

When her eyes met his, all peripheral movement ceased. The club scene fell away into the distance.

Adrenaline shot through her veins as the vampire's blue eyes searched hers, seeking something. The intensity of their locked gazes was almost painful. Kelsie wanted to run, and keep on running, but couldn't move a muscle. She wanted to nail this bloodsucker to the wall with his own teeth, ripped from his preposterous mouth.

The moment was both deadly, and extremely erotic. A spark of wild attraction flared inside of Kelsie, burning as hot as the vampire's touch. Hot, and intimate. She couldn't look away to save her life.

Her chills were history.

The damned vampire didn't back off or let up. He met her heat, degree by degree, with his hips tight to hers. His body called to hers seductively. The distant part of Kelsie still connected to her brain realized that this could very well be the end of her life and the loss of her soul, and yet she stood there. As he did. He seemed to be waiting for something with obvious wariness. What? A poke in the chest with a sharp

stick?

In spite of thoughts of retaliation, Kelsie hadn't gotten in so much as one solid punch. With each passing second in his wicked embrace, she lost more of the will to fight him off. Her anger had been twisted, maneuvered, and he had to be doing this, using that mesmerizing voodoo vampires were rumored to possess.

She was in serious trouble. Already, her hips pressed back against his, independent of the inner red flags. Her unmentionable places dampened further, as if they might lure his greedy attention there. An uneasy feeling grew, deep down inside of her. The very core of her body wanted to know what this vampire had to offer. Chances were, the little devil on her shoulder whispered, he would have had years to perfect his bedroom skills.

Not. Good.

Needing to save herself, Kelsie scrambled for a last hold on reality, and found one. Facts. She was good at facts. And the main one here was that there was something decidedly wrong about a sexually charged vampire. Totally unfair. Slightly creepy.

"Dream on." She said the words defiantly, resolutely. "Not with this girl. Not tonight or any other night."

The realization of this statement being insincere was more frightening to her than anything else, and another hint that the fantasy heat trick the vampire had going for him was melting her judgment and inhibiting her ability to think straight. Why else would her imagination be conjuring up dangerously indecent

thoughts? About him?

Damn it, she was wavering, and not nearly scared enough!

In the midst of all the crashing thoughts and illicit cravings, while Kelsie's mind reached for a firmer grasp on how to get out of this, the vampire's lips brushed hers a second time, almost ghostlike.

She closed her eyes.

A brief pinch of pain woke her from her stupor. Ready to shove the damned vampire away, and back into the coffin he belonged in, Kelsie opened her eyes to find him near the doorway, looking at her over a broad, muscled shoulder.

"Connor," he said soberly, as if he'd just caught her name out of the ether and it didn't sit well. His eyes glinted. His blond hair settled to stillness against his chiseled cheek.

Kelsie just stared, teeth clenched, face flushed, fear and anxiety and embarrassment merging into a tight ball of aggravation. He'd been the one to break the spell.

And he knew her name.

He'd be able to find her in the future, if vampires used phone books or the Internet. Hell, having tasted her, he might be able to find her in some other revolting way.

He couldn't have missed the way her body reacted to his. He might assume it was a permanent invitation.

Seemingly in afterthought, the Other she hadn't been expecting spoke again, with a glance up at the moon.

"You want a wolf? Why not just call them?" he

suggested.

Then he was gone.

Giving in to the weakness in her knees, Kelsie slumped against the wall, lucky to be breathing. She'd had a serious mental and physical lapse. The arrogant bastard had gotten too damned close, and she had allowed it.

She swiped at her lip with the back of her hand to erase the feel of his mouth, and felt wetness. Glancing at the spot of blood on her knuckle, she swayed. It was a monstrous find—blood made to appear darker by the ghastly moonlight.

Her heart slammed against her ribs in protest. Both hands went to her neck. No blood there, thank God, but she did find a scratch that made her head go light.

The bloodsucker had tried to bite her!

Her gaze flew to the empty doorway. It took another minute to be able to speak. Tossing her hair out of her face with a quivering, bloodstained finger, she said with a rise of her Irish temper, "Yes, run, you lousy, bloodsucking son of a bitch."

"Connor."

Hayden pushed through the throng of people without stopping to return the attentions of the women eyeing him appreciatively.

He needed time to think.

It was absurd that after all these years he would stumble across one his old enemies. In Miami. In a nightclub. *The* enemy. One of the hellish Connor clan. The bane of his family's existence for as long as he could remember. Connor—the Irish equivalent of the Terminator in slaying his kind.

No wonder the air had been disturbed and his attention captured. The question plaguing him now was why he hadn't perceived the extent of the threat, even when it came in a delicious package. He had been all over her. Hell, he'd been aroused.

What was a Connor was doing so far from Irish soil, anyway? She had to have followed him, lured him to her on purpose. It was the only explanation for the meeting.

"Connor." Hayden reached the sidewalk without looking back, but didn't get any farther. Her perfume wafted upward from his hands and his shirt. Her sweetness sat on his lips. His hand still smarted from closeness to that silver chain she wore.

He glanced down the street. She would pursue him, no doubt about it. It's what Slayers did.

"You are a good liar, Connor. An actress of the highest caliber." Hayden closed his fingers over the burn on his palm. "You said you weren't after me, and I nearly believed you."

She had, in fact, seemed as shocked as he had been. She had allowed him a taste, and he still felt the aftermath.

Slayer blood was said to be a delicacy. But surviving any sort of closeness to a Slayer was unprecedented, and highly unusual. No vampire he knew of had survived such a forbidden assignation.

Still, the flicker of his excitement was tempered somewhat by a wave of residual resentment. A reminder that he had come to Miami to get away from the old feuds. He thought he had escaped the problem of ancient vendettas by leaving them and the blood oaths behind. Now he had to deal with this young Connor incarnation. Nothing had changed.

This Connor was part of the family that had hunted his family for centuries. Connor killings had been swift, brutal, until his family was all but extinct.

He was the last of his bloodline.

Of course, it was no secret that his family had enjoyed their share of Connor blood, in return. A blood oath went both ways. He had known there were two Connors left in his part of the world. One of them was old, nearly blind and feeble, in County Clare. The other one, this youngest Connor, had left Clare and against all odds was here. Not only in the same city, but blonde, youthful and as sexy as anything on two legs.

And she was a Slayer.

She'd inherited the gene that Connor men had for centuries scoured the countryside for. Connor men sought out and married women with a special gene they called "Sense," perhaps hoping to shore up their own family's longevity. The DNA that produced a Slayer was a delicate one, preferring to be housed in women. But rarely was it passed on from mother to daughter.

Except here, it seems.

This Connor was the daughter of Katherine, the Slayer who had taken his father to an early grave.

Hayden had to ignore the jumping pulses of interest, because the feud had merely changed continents. Against nature, Connors had found a way

to pass the gene along, by birth. He hadn't escaped his past at all.

Damn it, he should have recognized the shade and shine of her green eyes. He hadn't been prepared. How could he have been? Even with the name Connor, she should have been normal.

So, who was the real *sucker* in this bit of introductory foreplay?

What would transpire when she came after him?

"What will it be then, Slayer?" This time when his fangs extended, Hayden bared them with a sad, questioning smile.

It took Kelsie five more minutes to gather herself sufficiently to move, and then it was only to step over the broken glass.

Her trembling had lessened. She felt steadier, though oddly distanced from the world around her. Her anger had finally burned through some of the bullshit. She had peered into the eyes of the wrong beast. A willing sacrifice, for the sake of a newspaper.

"Thanks for nothing," she muttered to the moon.

Now she was all too aware of *him*. Although the vampire had gone, his presence lingered, wrapped around her like sticky, muscular, invisible arms.

Out of habit, she fingered the chain at her neck, pressing on the pendant her mother had given her on her tenth birthday, just hours before her mother had died. Touching the charm made Kelsie breathe easier. The necklace was all she had of her mother, and a reminder that although she may have been the first

Connor to leave Ireland, roots ran deep. She was never to take the necklace off. Her grandmother had requested that she not do so, and Kelsie never had. And Connors, she had been taught, never ran away from a fight.

So, what happens next?

Would the monster come back for her? Would her grandmother know what to do, if Kelsie called?

Maybe she'd whittle some stakes in the meantime, just in case. Having hooked a vampire, was she dead meat?

The patio torches sputtered beside her. Kelsie looked there, then again to the doorway, hearing an echo of the vampire's voice.

"You want a wolf? Why not just call them?"

A shiver of apprehension arrived as she thought about that. The pendant seemed suddenly weightier in her fingers, and icy to the touch.

Nothing was as it was supposed to be. Silver was supposed to ward off vampires, but this vamp had ignored it. Vamps were supposed to be pale, gaunt creatures, yet this one could have been a movie star. What else had the legends gotten wrong?

Why had this vampire left her alive and breathing? He hadn't really tried to harm her...much.

She glanced at her knuckle, at the smear of blood, and wondered if the scent would lure more nighttime creatures. She wasn't up for that, no matter how badly she needed a byline.

But the moonlight seemed to tug at her chest, as if attempting to pry free a rib bone. The vampire's eyes had pried something loose as well, by delving into hers. For a minute there she had felt different—defiant, belligerent, slightly dangerous and as though she carried someone she didn't recognize hidden inside of her. The vampire's unholy mouth on hers had started all of this strangeness, and his disappearance hadn't lessened the effect.

She felt...off.

"Wolves haven't helped your kind in a century," he had said. "Why not just call them?"

"What the hell." None of this made any sense, anyway.

Focusing her attention on the doorway, Kelsie said loudly, firmly, "Wolfmen. If you're there, come out now."

A hot breeze rose to circulate fallen leaves on the patio. Kelsie's heart rate notched up tenfold.

Light-headed again, she put a hand to the wall for support. How lame was calling werewolves with the expectation they would come? How ridiculous was it to take the advice of a bloodsucker? The encounter on this patio had turned her into an idiot.

She fought off another wave of distress, thought, What sort of person can call werewolves?

She frowned, trying to recall the term this vampire had used that had struck her anxiety cord, and shouted for the hell of it, "Weres! Come out!"

When she looked up, it was to find two men beneath the awning. Big guys. Their chests and arms rippled beneath their shirts like a freaky muscle mirage. Their curiously bright, animal-like eyes were trained on her.

"Shit!" she swore, as she raced for the gate.

CHAPTER THREE

After taking a good long look at the moon, Hayden turned his attention back to the nightclub, half a block away. A heated breeze ruffled his hair as he waited.

He had given her every reason to come after him. He had scratched her skin, bringing up the blood necessary to identify her. Now that he had placed her, he could hear his dead ancestors crying out for retaliation against the atrocities her family had performed on them in the past.

Hayden fought that notion, as he always had. More questions consumed him. Were Slayers always this attractive? He wanted her to come after him for reasons having less to do with what was wired into him, and more to do with the excitement of meeting a female strong enough to face him. A female with a shared past. One who already knew about him.

Wouldn't that be a relief?

In spite of the time she had spent in Miami, this Slayer still tasted like County Clare. She wore the Connor crest at her throat—a heart with a stake through it.

Cheeky Connor bastards. This wasn't a game, after all, or a date with a viable partner. It was the unexpected meeting of a Connor with "Sense" and a Flynn, whose name in old Irish, Flann, meant bloodred. This meeting was a continuation of a terrible,

centuries-old war.

A Connor Slayer would have to come after him. Her own blood would demand it, if not her soul. So why prolong the inevitable? He would wait for her right here, tonight, and get it over with.

He'd love to get his hands on her again.

And his mouth.

Hell, he did want to bite her. His soul cried out for that. No Slayer, or anyone else out of the fold, knew how seductive a fang slipped into dewy skin could be, or how incredibly erotic that physical metaphor was.

The longing for intimate blood sharing had a name. A Dark Surrender was a ritual that took place when a vampire found a mortal woman willing to take him in, body, blood and soul. Becoming like him. Leaving one life behind for another. The continuous line of Flynns was proof of the viability of the ritual. The offspring of that kind of liaison became what he was. A living vampire.

Not one of the undead, per se. Some special quirk in Flynn blood, long tended, allowed the vampires in his family to live and breathe and age as mortals did, with beating hearts in their chests. A unique side effect in the invisible manuals of vampirism.

He wasn't immortal. Unearthly strong and powerful, certainly, but susceptible to a stake or a silver bullet that might only slow the true undead down. After Flynns were killed, if they weren't immediately beheaded or cremated they became monsters, undead vampires, like the rest of the fangbearing breed. For this reason, his family had always taken precautions against an unwanted afterlife.

It was likely a Slayer from County Clare would know all about that, too. A Connor was certain to comprehend the nuances of a Flynn's existence. As the last Connor Slayer standing, this one would have been raised on the propaganda, fed it on a daily basis, along with her porridge.

Probably she had been hoping to throw him off balance with her silky, sultry aura. If that had been her agenda, she had reached her goal.

Hayden licked his lip. Catching a slight trace of the Slayer's sweetness, he pulled a face. This Connor was a forbidden delight. No one had mentioned this might be the case, or that he would be so attracted to the very being set upon this earth to destroy him.

He wanted to touch her, all right. *Needed* to touch her. For all the wrong reasons. Never would he have considered that a Flynn might want to take a Slayer to bed, instead of putting her under the ground. His fangs ached with a dull persistence. Not for the thrill of a bite, but being near to *her* again. The enemy. Like it or not, Hayden Flynn had been sidelined by a Slayer, and he was going to have to do something about that.

"Come and get it, then, Connor," he said, knowing she would hear him, wherever she was.

Hayden's body gave him a swift heads-up. His awareness filled in the rest. The Slayer had left the club. The night carried her presence: a whiff of blood in the air, sweet as nectar.

She had left the lights and the crowd to enter the realm of the beast. Who but a Slayer would dare

confront the darkness?

He was feverish with anticipation. If she sought him, knew him, had a bead on him, the outcome seemed bleak. One of them might die.

He focused on the sidewalk, saw her. She kept close to others on the street, her footfalls tentative, the gems on her sandals throwing off random glints of colored light as she passed beneath a streetlight. She looked wary, agitated and...inspired. If she was anything like her ancestors, this woman was Death in a pretty capsule, her outward appearance designed for a reason.

He waited by the side of a building, near the sand, observing from the shadows.

Can you feel me, Connor?

She paused midstep and turned to look straight at him. Hayden's blood boiled in his veins. His thirst beckoned. The Slayer's green eyes, though unfocused, held an unsettling, haunted quality that was alarmingly innocent. Almost vulnerable.

The unusual thunder started up again in Hayden's chest. Anticipation? Withheld aggression? Misplaced lust for an old enemy? He was still hard. His fangs were sharp against his lower lip.

Theirs was to be a unique duet, it seemed: a mortal woman with special strengths and a vampire with a plan that didn't include draining all her blood. Both sets of parents would roll over in their graves at this last thought.

Yes, here. He sent the message to her, anxious for closeness and at the same time dreading it, if she meant to fight.

Clearly sensing him, she crossed the pavement, heading his way, hesitating twice as if to think things over. Determination crept over her features as she continued on. Her silk blouse clung to her breasts enticingly when she picked up her pace.

Stopping just a few yards away, and in full moonlight, his beautiful nemesis spoke around the people on the sidewalk. "What do you want?"

Hayden scented the blood on her hand and on the scratch he'd made at her throat. His thirst responded with a roar that nearly kicked him sideways.

The Slayer took an unconscious step backward.

Fighting for control, Hayden growled, "Shouldn't I ask the same thing of you?"

"Why would you?"

"You're nothing like I expected," he said.

"Neither are you," she admitted warily.

"You did expect me, then?"

"Does anyone expect a vampire? Should I be flattered by the attention, or speed dialing 911?"

Clearly tasting her fear, but liking the exchange, Hayden said, "Ah, that's the question, isn't it? Which of us will be left standing?"

She blanched visibly. A puzzled expression crossed her face.

"For the sake of my ignorance, why don't you explain why only one of us will be left standing. Is it your bloodlust?"

Her act really was good, Hayden decided. It had to be one. He recognized her. The air around her swirled, caressing her slender form as if it knew her, too. The silver talisman at her throat was icing on the cake. "We're opposites, are we not?" he said.

"That's your explanation?"

"Old enemies," he elaborated.

"How can that be, when I don't even know you?"

The Slayer's weight shifted back and forth from foot to foot, evidence of her nervousness. Each move she made stirred the air, pushing the lushness of her scent to him. It really was a toss-up for him as to what to do. If she wanted to play games, Hayden decided, he'd play along, see where this went.

He pointed to her throat. "I recognized the Connor crest."

She fingered the charm. "You had to bite me to see it."

"I didn't bite you," he corrected.

"No? What would you call this?" She tilted her head to expose the scratch marks. Hayden's hunger exploded when he saw the nip he'd used to place her. *Sweet as nectar...*

He struggled to speak past the gnawing thirst, wondering if that thirst might be conceived more of emerging emotion than a desire for blood.

"I'm a vampire. You're a Slayer. I'm supposed to bite you," he confessed. "Or die trying."

Connor flinched, and tilted slightly on her pretty feet as if she'd been struck. She rallied quickly. "Go to hell with this Slayer business. But before you jump back into that hole you sprang from, tell me how you knew this was my family crest, and how you knew my name."

"Everyone in Clare knows about the Connors, and what that crest stands for."

"Clare?" She seemed confused. Her forehead wrinkled in thought. "County Clare? You're from there? Yes, I hear it now in your voice. Do you know my family?"

"You're the first Connor I've met in person, although our families have been at each other for years," Hayden replied.

"At each other?"

"Maybe arch enemies is a better description."

"Hardly any of my family is left."

"True. Yet you're here, and in the presence of the one being you were born to kill."

Hayden watched her rock back. Noticed how her breasts pressed against the shimmery silk as if straining toward him. Either she was as attracted to him as he was to her, or the thought of taking down a Flynn turned her on.

"Kill?" Her reply emerged slowly, and after a pause. "You're saying that due to an old argument between our families, you want to hurt me?"

"Just as you want to fight me. The blood feud is branded into us, Connor, served to us on a plate whether we want it or not." Hayden didn't mention how much the idea sickened him. He still wasn't sure about Connor's intentions.

"I don't want to fight you," she said.

"Then why are your hands fisted? Why are you here, so far from the club? Why haven't you already called the police?" He took a step forward, spoke around his fangs. "It's who we are. What we are. What I find strange is that I want to resist the temptation bred into me."

He was, in fact, wrestling with urges arising from a source outside of himself that told him to tear into her neck with the fever of a fiend. Part of him had been preset to eliminate whatever Connor he might find. But he had always been different. He had grown up hating the destruction, carnage and stories of sadness and loss the rest of his family had known.

He wanted this Connor for other reasons. She was radiating her own kind of pheromone, fascinatingly feminine and musky. He was sure that her green eyes, though half clouded by doubt, beckoned for him to fall into their emerald Irish depths.

Not only did he not want to kill her, the urge to bite her took on a whole new meaning, plumped up by desire of another sort. Bite for pleasure. Indulge in the splendor he was sure he would find here. Together, they might find new ways to vent the frustrations bred into them. *Love, not war*.

"Connor." Hayden pitched his voice lower. "It's what we are that finds us together."

"What we are?" she said, obviously perceiving the hunger in the intensity of his gaze, because she took a stance as wide as her tight skirt would allow, and raised her hands to fend off any movement he might make.

In her eyes, Hayden saw a flash of green fire that was contrary to the tremble in her voice as she said, "I suppose it's way too much to ask for somebody to tell me what the hell is really going on!"

CHAPTER FOUR

As soon as the vampire repeated the word *Slayer*, the air had gone right out of Kelsie, dragging her into a tunnel the color of pitch. She fell, folding into the darkness, with the night closing in after her.

In the darkness she heard whispers, though meaning skipped past her awareness, as if she'd dropped into a memory too painful to confront. Yet out of the murmur of voices she caught the word *vampire*. And seconds later, *Flynn*. The concepts swirled around and around, forming the image of a tall, light-haired man with a chiseled face and the teeth of a demon.

She blinked and came to, shaking, tense, cold to the bone. The vampire had set something into motion with his talk about Slayers and enemies. As she stood with her hands raised, looking at the handsome representation of the devil standing across from her, in his prime and in his element, Kelsie said "Flynn," with the inflection of an oath.

Yes, she knew that name. Had heard it before. Flynn was a cursed name tied to the very soul of the legends in Clare. And also, if she was right, tied to the creature across from her.

Not just a vampire. An ancient Irish one.

She lowered her hands slightly, her need for answers outweighing everything else. How had she known his name? What did this mean?

"You're one of *them*," she said. "I suppose Ireland's too small for the likes of you these days? Big city, easy pickings?"

"Again, couldn't you answer that question as well?" he replied.

They were alone on a street corner. No help was to be had if she shouted. She had made a huge mistake by wishing for monsters this night. She was no more a Slayer than...

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kelsie said. But thinking about the term *Slayer* produced a tingle of rightness she couldn't completely ignore. Was that a title for the thing she felt growing within herself? *Vampire Slayer?*

Absurd!

She was keyed up and ready to get off a potentially damaging roundhouse kick out of sheer frustration. This vampire hailed from the same county in Ireland as herself, and talked nonsense. He'd told her they had been born to take each other down or die trying. Just moments ago, she had called werewolves out of a nightclub, wolves who were hogtied to an awning by a full moon.

Her dizziness wasn't going away. She had to dial things back, hoping the vampire would maintain his distance until sanity intervened. It was important to understand why this was happening, how she could wind up here with him and why she hadn't sprinted in the opposite direction.

"If your perceptions are so evolved," she said, testing her voice, "maybe you'd be kind enough to

enlighten me further. Did you come all this way to find me, in particular, or was our meeting coincidence?"

The vampire smiled again, this time showing a flash of pure white fang. Stunned by the sight, Kelsie stood her ground. A fresh jolt of introspection occurred with the sight of those fangs.

Maybe the desire to find these creatures hadn't been just an idea for an article, after all. Maybe it had been an ongoing compulsion, and the Blood Moon over her head was the excuse she had used to act on that compulsion. She had never been afraid of the dark. Had never been truly afraid of anything.

Irish people were nothing if not superstitious. It wasn't a stretch to wonder if it might be possible for a Blood Moon to affect more than just things that went bump in the night. Including in the mix the things that chased those night creatures, for whatever reason. Breakout article or...the need to slay them?

A shudder racked Kelsie. Why? Because the vampire was right. She had come out here alone, looking for monsters. What did this say about her? That she really might be a Slayer, and didn't know it? She might have an alter ego she hadn't been aware of until now?

"If it's confession time, Connor, you start," Flynn said. "It was the other way around, wasn't it, and you were looking for me?"

Kelsie shook her head. "I was looking for a wolf."

"By the way, how did that turn out?"

His question had the ring of irony in it. The question she had asked herself minutes ago rose up again, as bright as the demon moon overhead and twice as discomforting to face.

What sort of person called werewolves, and didn't fear vampires nearly enough?

"Slayer," she whispered, short of breath, her gaze rising to meet the blue eyes that were now considerably closer.

Call me foolish, Hayden thought, but Connor didn't appear to be faking the surprise that turned her face an ashen-white. She was riddled with quakes. She did look vulnerable.

Without a second thought, he closed the distance between them, pinning her arms to her sides as a precaution, holding her tightly against his body—a move that primed his thirst to savage levels and sent his libido spinning into overdrive.

The fragrance of her blood filled him—heady, fierce, scintillating—as her body molded to his. In his arms, she seemed small, slight, though he knew looks could be deceiving.

When her body convulsed, he held her tighter.

Connor. Are you really a Slayer who doesn't know anything about herself? Truly as fragile as you seem at the moment?

His thirst nipped at him as mercilessly as a thousand slashing teeth, painful, terrible, new, sending the heat of apprehension across his nerve fibers, calling the beast in him over the line. His head angled toward her neck. He rested his lips against her soft, moist skin, independent of his will to stand firm against the urges, and shut his eyes.

Her protest gave him pause. Though it shouldn't have mattered, Hayden lifted his head, saw that Connor's teeth were chattering. She'd split her lip again. A final straw. All that blood... A vampire could only take so much.

She was up off the ground and in his arms before her next breath, and struggling like a wildcat to get free. He carried her over the sidewalk and into the enveloping darkness of a beach protected from the moonlight by line after line of old palm trees.

He set her on her feet near one of those trees, and pushed her up against it, waiting for her struggle to ebb. The fragile skin beneath her left ear lifted with each heartbeat, moving the silver chain ringing her throat.

"You haven't been taught well enough," he warned, his accent and fangs in full evidence now that he'd given in to the emotions gripping him. "The reputation of the Connors has markedly slipped."

He touched the tip of her earlobe with a finger, and watched the chain beneath it vibrate, as if it recognized an enemy when its wearer didn't. He could tear the chain from her in a second. Yet the delicate silver strand was a reminder of his adherence to a personal vow. *Harm no mortal*.

He had to let Connor go. He had to let her run, no matter what he was feeling or what he perceived in her.

A twist of pain stirred him from his thoughts. Hayden glanced up to find Connor digging her small white teeth into the flesh of his wrist.

He was hit by an overwhelming urge to laugh at the

irony. Searching her gaze, he found it openly defiant. But her green eyes held a hint of another emotion not so insignificant to get around. The Slayer's hunger was upon her. She also felt this attraction, and was...willing.

Heaven help them.

Forcing his thirst down with all of his might, leaning into Connor's young body, Hayden opened his mouth...and let the laughter out. Then he ducked as her fist came at him, faster than a mortal's normal reaction time, though not quite fast enough. He caught her fist easily in his, reveling in the meeting of skin on skin.

Pressing her arm to her chest, slipping his hand over the silk cloth, he noted how hard her heart was beating, felt the uplifted swell of her breasts. This time, when he kissed her, the night came crashing down.

Kelsie melded to the vampire's heat, thinking to fight, but parting her lips to receive him, sure she would burn in the same hell he had come from, for doing so.

This kiss was blazing, ferocious, rich. His mouth did terrible things to hers, provocative and mindnumbing things. His hands were fluid, touching her here and there.

The pleasure was extreme.

Caught up in the fire, Kelsie snaked her hands up his back and over the carved muscle beneath his shirt, bringing from him dangerous growls of delight.

If they were old enemies, these actions were insane.

The kiss deepened when she wouldn't have thought it possible. He devoured her, monstrously. Frightening new longings filled her. Inner fires ran rampant, her neck, chest, belly and hips lighting up like tinder.

"Flynn." She formed the name against his lips, her hips sliding against his invitingly, seeking a further connection in this ravaging of the senses.

He understood what she wanted. She felt the slow slide of her skirt over her thighs, followed by the sound of lace tearing.

She cried out when he entered her with a passionate thrust, and thought she might be losing her mind. But she gave in to the fever by wrapping her legs around him. Trapping him to her. Growling with her own wicked delight.

She wanted this. God alone knew why.

Flynn reached the core of her body with his next series of thrusts, slickly hitting the crucial spot over and over again. Kelsie clung to him as the sky threatened to explode, as the night went from reddrenched black to gray to white, and back to velvety darkness. She sent her hips to meet his, the crescendo deep inside growing steadily stronger, and arriving as a blisteringly hot orgasm that left her reeling.

She gasped, cried out, but wasn't so far gone that she missed the sharp prick of fangs dragging across her throat.

She slammed back into herself with a lucid warning. *One bite, and it will all be over.*

Fear of that sort of ending cut right through the passion and the desire, bringing up another chilling thought. Perhaps Slayers and vampires were shaped from a single stone. Designed to hunt, taught to kill each other to avoid this very situation, this very thing: the merging of their flesh and blood and souls that might mean the creation of some new abomination.

The spark of that possibility shook her. Her hands flexed. Her spine snapped straight. Kelsie broke from the flames of greed awkwardly, panting to get her breath back. With a strength she didn't know she possessed, she knocked the vampire away, got both feet on the ground and stood facing him, shaking so badly she could hardly stand.

He seemed as dazed as she was. His expression turned questioning. She could see how his body shook. But this separation allowed Kelsie enough distance for her anger to return, and for the new thing he had called her to unfurl.

Slayer.

CHAPTER FIVE

It took Hayden several seconds to realize what was going on. They'd shared something intimate, ultimate. Now, Connor suddenly looked formidable.

Her eyes were bright rings of color, her stance none too stable. She gave off a new vibration. Their union had caused some sort of untimely transition. Either that, or the vampire lover routine had been an act all along, and she'd used him for some nefarious purpose.

Not trusting himself to speak, his head spinning with the hastiness of the separation, Hayden gathered himself together. His hunger hadn't lessened, nor had the desire to possess her. After tasting all that heat, he wouldn't be satisfied until he had more.

He wanted to yank her back. Wanted to take her all over again. He'd nearly touched her soul.

"Connor?" he finally managed to say.

She stood with her hands on her hips, not bothering to press her skirt into place to cover herself, looking no less splendid in her flushed, disheveled state.

"You were going to bite me. The sex, the moment, wasn't enough."

"A bite doesn't make you like me," he said. "You should—"

"Know this?" she finished for him.

"Yes." Hayden held up his hands to placate her, watched her own hands fly to her neck—to search for

what? Fresh bite marks? Or maybe just to protect herself?

"I'm not one of the undead," he said. "I'm a living vampire, and as alive as you are. This union is—"

"Sacrilege," Connor said through bruised, quivering lips.

"Only if you're a-"

"Slayer?"

She sounded unsure of the word, Hayden thought, as if it had stuck in her throat. He took two cautious steps toward her, hesitated when she stepped back. The confusion on her face seemed real.

"It wasn't an act," he said, trying to believe that.
"You wanted this as much as I did."

Her eyes flared a brilliant green. The atmosphere around her grew thicker, as if she'd gained more substance. Yet she had invited this sudden union. She had participated. Would a Slayer do that?

She stood there, beautiful, different, silent. When she moved again, it was to touch her mouth. After that, she ran her hand slowly over her torso, her fingers trespassing over every one of her curves, ending in the valley between her legs. She looked down at herself, pulled at the shreds of the black lace panties he had torn out of the way, her face now devoid of expression.

Hayden's attention was riveted. He couldn't take his eyes from the woman he'd been inside of.

"Yes, I wanted this closeness," she admitted. "Why?"

"You tell me. Isn't it a strange time to come to your senses?"

"Better late than never, is the saying," Connor responded soberly. "But then, it doesn't take into account the lapse that occurred in the first place."

Truly perplexed, Hayden grinned ruefully. "You are good, Connor. Very good. You had me going. I wonder for what purpose?"

She contemplated his question, looking as though she truly had no idea what he was asking. If this sudden onset of innocence was some sort of taunt-thevampire routine, he should applaud her performance. She had, in fact, gotten him good. So good that his body continued to be racked with quakes.

"The woman kissed me back," he said. "What will the Slayer do?"

"Walk away."

That was the thing he wanted the least, and the answer that surprised him the most. He was riled up, overflowing with need. After an intimate affair with this woman, whatever else she might be, could he just let her go? Would he?

"I'm way too attracted to you," she said. "Your pull on me is too strong, unnerving. It's obvious I can't trust myself."

She hadn't blamed him. Connor, Hayden decided, was becoming more interesting by the minute. After that confession, even her hand on those filmy panties came in a lagging second place to the sheer wonderment of what she might do or say next. Although his hunger continued to rage, he was also curious.

"Another time," she said. "We can set a date, meet again."

Hayden knew he could be on her before her hand stopped fluttering, if he chose, Slayer or not. He'd been a vampire for a long time. Fifteen years ago he'd been handed his fangs and the thirst that came with them. He had passed through the fire of loss, losing his family in the flames of their final death. He was the last of his kind. The last of the Flynns. And he hated the curse that ensnared him.

He hated that this Slayer's mother had killed his father.

This Slayer he had just...

"Date?" he repeated. Now that they had been as close as any two beings could be, would it be back to fighting? Sex as foreplay?

"Dinner first, perhaps?" he suggested.

"In the manner of a last supper, you mean? I'll pass," she replied.

"More's the pity. It would have given us time to get to know each other even better." The words tasted bitter, and rang with unintended sarcasm. Hayden wanted a repeat engagement, her naked body hot against his and smelling of desire. His sense was that she wanted the same thing and would ignore it—for what? Taking care of business?

"Funny how things change," Connor said in a steadier voice. "An hour ago, all I needed was a story to further my career. Now I need the skills necessary to deal with a vampire, so that I can continue with a career of any kind." She paused, then added, "Do you want to kill me, Flynn, whether or not I am what you think I am?"

Hayden found her question absurd, having had his

tongue in her mouth and her legs spread apart.

"You said you were supposed to," she pointed out.

"I have never harmed anyone," he confessed, knowing his answer might allow this Slayer an edge. "I'm not what I am by choice, Connor. I've never had an urge for violence. Taking out a Slayer might make me worthy of my name, but I have no desire for that. What about you? Do you want to remove me from the world?"

"No."

"What do you think of when you look at me?"

"Sex," she said.

Unable to help himself, Hayden laughed at her answer. It was the second time he'd laughed in an hour, and it made him feel lighter, somehow.

"Is that a compliment?" he asked.

"Yes. And very un-Slayerlike, I'm sure. Also, though, part of me wants to break your teeth and string them on a necklace. That feeling is new."

Her eyes shone with interest. Her creamy skin gave off an almost supernatural glow, reflecting the dappled moonlight streaming through the palm fronds overhead. Hayden didn't know what to think. Indecision kept him silent.

"So," she said, rolling her skirt over her hips. "I need to find out what this means. What that name you called me entails. Can you give me time?"

He nodded. Now what are you up to?

"Meet me a week from tonight. At the castle on the cliffs of Clare," she proposed.

When she turned from him, Hayden felt a stab of regret so painful, he winced. He saw also that Connor

moved slowly, and perhaps with some discomfort. Their intimacy hadn't been gentle. He regretted that.

She spoke over her shoulder, as if knowing he was thinking about her, and sensing that he would let her go, for the time being.

"One week from tonight," she repeated, then walked off into the red-tinted moonlight like the ghost of Hayden's own botched bloodlust.

CHAPTER SIX

It took five hours of driving to get from the airport at Shannon to her grandmother's cottage. Tired, wet from the rain shower, Kelsie found herself heartily welcomed into her grandmother's fragile arms, and wanting to cry. Homesickness hit her hard. Familiarity was all around. But this was the same grandmother who might have kept things from her. Important things. She looked at Gran with new eyes, loving, and also silently accusing.

The weathered, feisty eighty-five-year-old, with her gray hair braided in two thick coils, had once possessed a strong, capable body, now softened with age. Cliff Cottage, with its view of castle ruins and the sea, had been her grandmother's home, and the home of scores of Connors before her, for as long as anyone could recall. Was it now also a house of secrets?

"Gran, I've come home to ask you a question," Kelsie said.

Seated in her chair by the window, her grandmother gazed at her quizzically, as if she might have perfected the trick of reading minds and body language. Connor green eyes, a slightly watered down version of Kelsie's own, examined Kelsie's face as she sat on a stool at her feet.

"Isn't it a fine welcome, then," Gran said. "You've not come to see an old woman, but to pump her for

information "

Kelsie found the straight-to-the-point dialogue both uncomfortable an necessary. Nevertheless, if she was going to meet a vampire on his own soil, she'd need all the help she could get. The basics would be a good place to start.

"Gran, I'm wondering if you have withheld important information from me."

"Why would you think that, child?"

"I've been called a name I'm unfamiliar with."

"And that name might be?"

"Slayer."

Her grandmother's face seemed to age further in an instant. The intelligent, gray-green eyes narrowed, and Gran's lips twitched, as if there were things she wanted to say, but didn't know where to begin.

"Ah," Gran said, visibly disturbed. "I see. So it's true, then."

Feeling sick to her stomach and desperate, Kelsie said, "What's true?"

"You were sent away to someplace safe, in case this happened," Gran said, with maddening disregard for answering a question directly.

"Evidently not safe enough," Kelsie said. "Does the name Flynn ring a bell?"

Her grandmother looked up. "There are none left with that name."

"There's one," Kelsie corrected. "He will be here in a few days to meet a woman he called 'Slayer.'"

In the quiet following her statement, Kelsie heard the ticking of the mantel clock. Had time, she wondered, become as much of an enemy as the vampire? What did her grandmother know about all this? Were these few days all Kelsie had left?

She hadn't been able to stop thinking about Flynn, and what they had done. To her shame, not a minute went by that she didn't want to do it again. She had to get to the bottom of this, so that she could either call his bluff or...not.

"The beginning, Gran," Kelsie said. "What is a Slayer?"

"A Slayer is a vampire hunter," Gran said reluctantly. "With the sole purpose of hunting them down."

"Where do Slayers come from?"

"Only a few people are chosen for such a path. The ability comes through females most often, and is unavoidable once it settles in."

"Damn it, Gran." Kelsie had to work hard to keep from shouting. "Do these abilities run through me? Do I have them?"

"Did this Flynn recognize you?" her grandmother asked.

"Yes."

"He called you by that name?"

"Yes. He knew I'm a Connor."

The fact that her grandmother nodded was like a spear to Kelsie's heart. "Then it's true, child," Gran said. "And I'm so very sorry."

Sorry? Kelsie had to get this straight, wrap her mind around what seemed so ludicrous. "How, Gran? How can I be one?"

"I don't know," she replied simply. "It's an ability that's rarely passed down."

"Passed down? What do you mean?"

Gran's expression flattened further. "If you are a Slayer, one of the chosen few, it's because you are like your mother."

The sickness in the pit of Kelsie's stomach threatened to erupt. *Like your mother?*

Blackness opened up in the part of her mind containing memories. Her sweet-scented mother had died on Kelsie's tenth birthday. A car accident while on an errand, or so she had been told. Was that a lie?

Maybe not an accident? Kelsie thought with a frightening snap of perception. God. Had her mother been a Slayer, and died in some other way? Perhaps at the hand of a vampire?

Kelsie couldn't make herself ask the question. Her hands were visibly shaking. Her face felt numb. If her mother had been a Slayer...and if her mother had met her death at the hand of a vampire...had that vampire been a Flynn?

Like mother, like daughter. The phrase rang in her ears.

"She...she was one?"

Gran nodded, keeping her focus on Kelsie.

"You encouraged me to go away," Kelsie said, recovering enough to speak. "Was that to protect me?"

Her grandmother nodded again.

"So," Kelsie began, almost inaudibly, "Connors have a blood feud with the Flynns? That's real? If there are vampires and werewolves in the world..." her tone sounded slightly hysterical "...why not Slayers?"

She wished with all her heart that her grandmother would admit that none of it was true, and nothing more

than a good bit of Blarney. No such luck was to be had, though. The seriousness of her grandmother's expression struck terror into Kelsie's soul.

"My mother hunted them? Is it what the title has to mean? Fighting and killing? The Flynn I met seemed so sure."

Her grandmother spoke at last. "I hoped, since the Flynns were gone, that you would never need to know about your family's history. How was I to know what you might become, or that the remaining Flynn had left for far-off shores that would turn out to be the same as yours? I perceived no danger for you if you left here, Kelsie. Please forgive me for not explaining sooner. I'd thought to save you from this. Keep you from this." Gran's voice rang with heartfelt emotion. "How did you find him?"

Her grandmother had said *him*, not *it*. She knew this Flynn wasn't one of the undead, that he was a living vampire. The distinction was clear. Kelsie held the sickness down, her energy draining with the effort.

"In a nightclub," she said.

Her grandmother's eyes went to Kelsie's neck. "Lord. He didn't—?"

"No." She knew what Gran was asking, and also that she could not mention how their physicality had gone way beyond a damned bite. Or that now she dreamed of him inside of her. How his closeness remained a nagging heat despite the distance and the terrible information she'd just gleaned.

"The ability isn't handed down?" she asked, at length.

"No. Connor men have sought women through the

ages with this special ability."

"Why?"

"I've come to imagine it was to keep the damage local. To keep Ireland from being torn apart by creatures unlike ourselves by marrying women who could face the creatures down."

After that, her grandmother sat silently for a while, her gaze on the window, her only movement the tap of arthritic fingers on the arm of her chair. It was several minutes before she spoke again.

"Will this Flynn come home to destroy the last young Connor, is the question in need of answering," she finally said.

"If I'm a Slayer, am I his enemy, Gran?"
"Yes."

"Do I have to be?" She was afraid to meet her grandmother's gaze, fearing her grandmother would see other things—such as how Kelsie had run her hands over the vampire's body, and opened herself to him.

Instead of addressing or answering her last question, though, the old woman got up from her chair. Taking a cane from against the wall, she said, "I don't want to be the only Clare Connor left on God's green earth. Come on then, child. We have work to do before he arrives."

But as Kelsie got to her feet, she couldn't dislodge the lump in her throat or the tears flooding her eyes when she imagined the fate that might have actually overtaken her mother.

Like mother, like daughter.

Katherine Connor had been a Slayer, and there was

little comfort to be had from that fact.

Hayden disembarked from his private plane and paused to look around the tiny airfield. The one useful thing about inheriting family money carefully gathered over the centuries was the protection it afforded him. He could come and go as he pleased. A car waited to pick him up.

As the scents of home hit him square in the face, he took in a deep, overdue breath. He'd forgotten how much a part of him this land was, but still approached the car with reluctance. He was home because of Kelsie Connor, and returning to Ireland was dangerous for them both.

Hayden nodded to the driver before climbing through the open door. Noting how few lights shone in the distance, he settled on the leather seat. After the illumination of Miami, with its circus-style neon and continuous noise, the utter darkness of the rural countryside, coupled with the total absence of sound, caused a pleasant ruffling of his senses.

He could hear himself think. His thoughts turned to *her*, as they had every waking moment for the past week. As the car started off into a nighttime landscape lit only by stars and the car's headlights, Hayden envisioned Connor's face and tried to reason with himself.

The dilemma was driving him mad. She couldn't have been faking, he was almost sure. Connor's arms and legs had wrapped around him. She'd been like nothing he'd ever encountered, but did she have an

ulterior motive for her behavior?

He lowered the window to cool off his face, and tried to think about something else. Home. Ireland. An ancient land ruled by ancient edicts and timeless grudges. No one had dared stand in the way of the Flynn-Connor feud in all the years it had been going on. No one had put a stop to it. The two remaining recipients of that deathly grudge were supposed to have been raised to hate each other, and trained to fight to the death. But from what had already transpired between them, neither he nor Connor appeared to have the heart for this war. Quite the opposite. She'd have him think she didn't know what she was

He remembered the night her mother had died, because he had lost his father at the same time. Each of them—his father, Connor's mother—had died by the other's hand.

Hayden closed his eyes, let his head fall back against the seat. Fifteen years ago, Kelsie Connor would have been a kid. By now, though, a staff member for the *Miami Tribune* with a Connor grandparent of long standing in the Irish community, would have to know the score.

She would have to know that his father had gone after her mother, and that her mother had taken his father with her to the grave. Still...would Kelsie Connor have invited Hayden close if she knew those things?

Inhaling the familiar green smells, he thought he could smell Connor's sultriness in the cool, fresh air. Connor, damn her beautiful hide, haunted him in ways

no female had. He couldn't wait until they met again. *Opposites, yet with so much in common*. Like himself, she had fled from a place that held too many memories. The land of her ancestors. It was ironic that he had stumbled upon her, thinking to go far out of his way to avoid that very thing.

Serendipity? Fate? Had those things played a part? Was the feud to end here, either way? Death, or a second embrace?

Kelsie Connor had some kind of mysterious hold on him. She was a warm ray of sunlight on his face, though she wore a curse around her neck. She had called this meeting, dictated its terms, he reminded himself. For revenge? In order to own her birthright? To get back at him for giving in as much as she had?

He should want those same things for himself, but didn't. Never had. He'd thought to relegate the battles to the past. He had made a vow to leave the next Connor Slayer alone. That it turned out to be Katherine Connor's daughter had been a shock. Now, anyway, their lives were impossibly intertwined.

What is that?

Memories scattered as Hayden jerked to attention. He inhaled again, frowned, felt his fangs drop, and moved his lips in silent acknowledgment of what he'd found in the breeze.

Bloody hell and back. Although he was the last of the Flynns, he wasn't the last vampire on earth, or in Ireland. The stink of the undead cruised tonight's wind with the fervor of an awakened banshee.

It was a sure bet those others would scent a Slayer in their midst. Quite possibly Connor's safety was the reason her grandmother had sent her away. If she truly hadn't been aware of him, and therefore ready to destroy him, then she'd been telling the truth.

His Slayer was in more danger than she knew if she had just begun to find herself and her strength. If she hadn't known what she was until he had gotten close, he was partly to blame for bringing her here.

He just couldn't cut a break. All he wanted was...her. As well as whatever gross oversight Fate might offer up that would allow for past sins to be forgotten.

"Take care, Connor," Hayden said, with his head in his hands. "For me."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The wind on the cliffs was unrelenting as it whipped through Kelsie's hair. The late evening sky was a deep charcoal-gray. Rain had retreated over the ocean.

What she needed was more time to think, and didn't have it. She had seen the family book, and in it the long list of Connor and Flynn destruction dating back to the Middle Ages, the names meticulously penned by enemies keeping track of each other.

All those Irishwomen, Murphys, Connelleys, Malloys and more, brought into the family to do their duty and protect their land from an invading species. Like Darwin's noted laws, Slayer abilities might have been developed over time to deal with vampirism.

In Gran's book Kelsey had found her vampire. Hayden, a lyrical, melodious name, so like him. A derivative of Aidan, after Aodh, the Celtic god of sun and fire. Funny, Kelsie thought, that a creature who couldn't exist long in sunlight carried the name of a sun god.

Gran, when pressed, had explained things about the Flynns, though not everything, and not to Kelsie's satisfaction. Suspiciously missing were the main points, like in most old arguments. Not even Gran knew the origins of Slayer mysticism, nor the secrets and rituals of dealing with a vampire rival.

Gran's daughter had been born with this gene. A

boon for the Connors, who didn't have to go looking for it, and also an anomaly, since Slayer "Sense" didn't usually run in families. And now, seemingly, another anomaly had appeared: Katherine Connor had passed this Sense along to her own daughter.

Surprise!

Yet Kelsie now understood it to be true. A kernel of internal memory had been awakened by her acknowledgment of the existence of vampires. This newness was as weighty a burden as it was mysterious. She waited anxiously for the full impact to make itself known, realizing that in order for old feuds to dissolve, the bad blood between families had to end here, on these cliffs. It was up to her to see that it did.

Was it reasonable to think you could discuss things sensibly with a vampire? Point out the negatives of this ridiculous relationship? See Hayden Flynn without wanting to end up in his arms?

It wasn't helpful to surmise why he had attracted her instead of killing her outright, or why their moments of intimacy had birthed a Slayer—even though those questions plagued her.

The biggest question of all: Why had she liked it? Liked him?

As for actually being a Slayer...could she refuse the title? Shun it? She didn't plan on hunting anyone, not even a gorgeous vampire from a family who hated Connor guts. Not even for a promotion. Hayden Flynn had said that he didn't want to harm her, but could a vampire be trusted to tell the truth or keep his word?

As an insurance policy, she carried in her skirt pocket a sharpened stake that she'd discovered in her

mother's trunk. If Hayden Flynn came after her, she'd try to defend herself, yet she hoped it wouldn't come down to kill or be killed. If Hayden Flynn wasn't prone to violence, maybe it was possible for them to call a truce.

When Kelsie looked up again, it was to see that night had fallen with the quietness of fine snow, and that the walls and broken towers of the castle ruins opposite the cliffs had been lit by a single torch.

She hesitated. She wasn't ready to see him again, might never be ready. But she was, in spite of everything, her mother's daughter. She had set this date.

It took her only two more steps toward the castle to realize she was indeed in the presence of a vampire. Vamp scent was everywhere.

But it was the wrong scent.

The wrong vampire.

Hayden saw the glint of light on the cliffs as he moved along the path after Connor, keeping her in view, as he had for the past few days. He sniffed the air, whispered "No!" The reek of the undead filled his lungs. Without a Connor present to protect his land and hold the chaos at bay for all these years, Hayden's worst nightmare had come to ground on his own damn soil.

Trespassers.

Rage filled him. Power surged through his muscles, fueled by the thought of losing Kelsie before he'd had the chance to know her. Before he'd had a chance to explain about himself.

He ran for all he was worth toward the castle, utilizing a speed mortal eyes couldn't have perceived. The savageness of his anger crackled the air as he reached the keep. He heard her voice as he entered.

Not too late!

Relief flowed through him. But an extraneous thought nagged as his boots hit stone. The old dilemma resurfaced. Had Connor been faking her naivete? Covering what she was? He could find the truth now, if he was careful. She would face another creature here, and he would know about her for sure—if he could hold off that long, when she was in danger.

He climbed the western tower wall quickly, hand over hand, until he stood on a decimated landing above what once had been the great hall. Looking down, he saw her and nearly shouted her name.

A big sucker had Connor cornered—an old thing, tall, gaunt to the point of emaciation, hungry as any depraved, ravenous beast. Against the threat, Connor stood rigidly upright, fear etched onto her features, her green eyes open wide.

Hayden's heart pummeled him mercilessly. Every muscle in his body seized with the need to move, to help, but he waited, barely able to keep himself back.

"You don't belong here," he heard Connor declare bravely.

The creature beside her didn't respond. Hell, Hayden realized, maybe it couldn't. Maybe it was so far beyond hungry as to be completely mindless.

Careful, Connor, my love!

Love. The emotion swirled around him as fiercely as the wind.

Three feet of distance separated the Slayer from her viable target. Hayden had been that close to her, once. Closer. They'd been glued together, mouths and hips and everything in between. It had been sublime.

"I don't want to hurt you," she told the beast. "God knows you've been through enough already. Still, I will defend myself."

The vampire lurched forward. Equally as quickly, Connor's hand rose, with a speed her expression registered as a complete surprise. Then the monster blocked Hayden's view.

Wait, Hayden told himself, his boots edging the gap in the floor above her, his muscles tense with strain. Hold tight. Wait and see.

"Connor," he wanted to shout, "what are you doing to me?"

Kelsie's senses reeled with input that was sudden and overwhelming. As if she'd jumped into a fire pit, feet first, her skin exploded with heat. Nerves blazed.

She knew this reaction, and also knew what it meant. Something that didn't belong in this world faced her. A thing apart, independent from the reality most people saw.

The torch, its flame flapping furiously and smelling of oil, gave the area beneath the castle's moss-covered arch an otherworldly aura. In the dim light, the monster edged closer.

She recognized the difference between this creature and Hayden Flynn immediately—not only in looks, but at a deeper, more intrinsic level. This one felt wrong. It stank of rotting flesh. Its white face shone like a clown's. Its eyes were empty black sockets.

The creature made no sound when it moved. It didn't appear to use its limbs, more or less floating on its own evil stench. Kelsie's heartbeat tapped out a fast staccato. With the monster right in front of her, she almost went down, the horror was so great. Her fingers held tightly to the weapon in her hand, the smooth wood foreign to her touch and not nearly as comforting as a revolver loaded with silver bullets would have been.

No time to be sick!

The monster's fangs were as black as its glaring eyes. It came on like a slippery darkness, fast as a blink. Like a spider. Two hands, cold as granite, tore at her sweater, tugging her toward its tattered chest. Its mouth gaped open.

Adrenaline kicked Kelsie into gear. She jumped sideways, landing on both feet with her hands still raised. The sharpened stake she clutched gleamed in the torchlight, catching the bloodsucker's attention. Angry at this show of resistance, it attacked.

Swinging to the right, ducking quickly, Kelsie hit the wall hard with one shoulder. Pain crashed down, hot, terrible, but she straightened in time to ward off another blow. Ducking again, she came up behind the vampire before remembering that the place where its heart was supposed to reside was on the opposite side. The fangs side.

The monster whirled before she finished the thought, and had her by the throat. The momentum of its attack sent them both stumbling into another wall.

A rain of stones hurled down on them as Kelsie stabbed at the gaunt, sunken chest with all her might, without penetrating the flesh.

The vampire tumbled back, flailed its arms, hit dirt and bounded back up as if its backside were made of springs. Kelsie shuffled forward with another shallow breath, but her attention was derailed by the sense of another intruder.

Had this bloodsucker brought a friend?

No. This scent is familiar.

As fast as her fleeting thought, a secondary dark figure appeared between herself and the gaunt bloodsucker. Tall, dressed in black, with his blond hair shining against the backdrop of cold gray stone, Hayden Flynn glanced at her briefly, grabbed hold of her sweater and carried her out of the keep.

He tossed her the last little way, onto the grass, onto her knees. When she looked up, Flynn had already gone.

She stumbled to her feet and sprinted toward the hall, hearing scuffling sounds and a long, piercing wail. After that there was nothing. Dead silence.

Sides heaving, and with the stake clutched in her fist, Kelsie stopped beside the torch, breathless, seeing nothing of the gaunt monster. Only one vampire occupied the ancient space now. Hayden Flynn. His blue eyes were on her, as dangerous as she'd remembered them, and flashing evidence of his hunger. His lips were open, showing her a glimpse of fang.

He didn't shout, growl, or move toward her. He stood there, unmoving, as if trying to get a grip on

himself. Then he said in a deep rumbling tone, "You weren't lying."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Slayer looked so small, standing there, her face highlighted by the fire from a torch, as it had been when he had first laid eyes on her. She was no less striking for all her disarray.

The stake she held was aimed, point out, at him. She was scared, and rightly so. His heart went out to her.

"Just another night in the life of a Slayer," he said, observing her expression carefully.

"You came," she said, breathlessly.

"It was an invitation I couldn't refuse."

He felt twitchy, wanted to ease her tremors, but was unsure of how to go about it. After seeing her grandmother, Kelsie Connor might have bought into the ancient-enemies scenario.

"Why did you help me?" she asked. "To save for yourself the pleasure of having a Slayer?"

"You haven't yet grown into that stake in your hand, so where would the sport be in that?" Hayden said.

"I know about you. Did you come after me, all the way to Florida?"

"I left Ireland to avoid the word *Slayer* altogether. To avoid this moment, in particular."

He watched her think that over. Her lush lips parted. "I didn't know about myself," she said.

"I get that now."

She eyed him suspiciously.

"You fought like a girl," he said, grinning. "Not like a Slayer in tune with her talents."

The wide-eyed Connor didn't let the comment anger her. Although her face was as white as a sheet, she offered a hushed "Thank you." Two simple words that Hayden saw she meant. A sentiment that had the similar effect to a stake through his heart. Because with those words she'd uttered, the war was over.

"You're welcome," he said.

Her eyes met his. "What now? We just go on our way, hoping that someday we won't want to take up where this left off?"

"Do you think you might change your mind?"

"No."

"Can you walk away this time, and forget about me, Connor?"

"No."

Hayden studied her more intently, his pulse still erratic at the thought of what that bloodsucker might have done to her. The depth of this emotion was new, and unusual. He felt protective. The big bad vampire wanted to watch over the same Slayer more or less assigned to seeing to his demise.

"Then I think you owe me," he said, trying not ruin the effect of his statement by offering her the smile that tugged at his lips... Because he was completely certain about how she could make this up to him. And it involved a bed.

Love thine enemy...

"Go to hell on the owe you thing," she said. "And

what's so amusing?"

"I was wondering if you'll forget that I saved you?"
"No one ever forgets their first."

Ah, Connor was sassy, all right, Hayden thought, if somewhat out of her league now, with that stake visibly wavering in her hand.

He could smell the scrapes in her skin from her tussle with the undead. The accompanying scent of blood was adrift, and tempting, but not nearly as tempting as her shirt, torn open at the neckline to expose a triangle of creamy, unblemished skin.

Skin unadorned by the special silver necklace.

Hearing the sound of wood striking stone, Hayden knew that Connor had dropped her weapon. He tried to understand what this meant, mentally, but his body had no such problem in translation, and took him toward her before he thought to pull back.

Her eyes were on him, disconcertingly green. Within her gaze was a strange, knowing light. Intelligent. Calculating. Nothing innocent about it.

He looked at her uncertainly. With twelve inches separating them, doubt again crossed his mind. *Have I been had?*

"Let me see," he said, testing his theory. "You don't really fight like a girl?"

"Not usually."

Was she hiding a grin?

"You aren't going to tell me that—"

"I knew you'd come, and wanted to see what you'd do? See if you would jump in to help me, true to your word about not wanting to see me harmed?" Connor said.

He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

She went on. "That I figured you would be doing the same thing? Waiting to see if I'd stake the monster or not?"

She let him sweat that out for a beat, then shook her head. "The answer is no to all of those things. It would have been something I'd do, though. Just so you know."

Hayden said, with relief, "You didn't know about being a Slayer."

Connor made a face as she moved a sore shoulder. "I had no idea."

"Now you do?"

"Oh, yes. I'm getting more and more used to it as the hours fly by."

"Do you want to end this here, as I do, Connor?"

"I do *not* want it to end here," she replied.

He took stock of that.

"We're the last hope for the old feud, so I'm told," she went on, stepping closer to him, looking up, her sultry scent punctuated by that saucy touch of musk.

Hayden knew that scent, and what it meant. His heart missed a beat or two as his fangs fully extended. Doubt melted away.

"Do you have an idea of how this is to go down?" he asked, wrapping his fingers in her hair, gently tugging her those last inches closer.

"Don't you?" she countered.

His mouth hovered above hers. She didn't pull away.

"This feud could have been stopped at any time. All it took was for one Slayer to cross the line," Connor

pointed out, licking her lower lip to moisten it, then adding, "Or one Flynn."

Hayden's fangs began to ache. Temptation was a millimeter away. When Connor's warm hands caressed the sides of his face, he nearly came undone right there.

"What I have to say about the whole Dark Surrender thing, vampire, is *dream on*. Why should a Connor agree to give in?" she said.

"A vampire can't change his stripes. I am what I am, by blood."

"As am I," Connor whispered, her mouth rising to meet his.

In the next second, Hayden had her on the ground, with her arms raised over her head and her body stretched out beneath his. Her heat burned right through his clothes. She didn't resist, even when he looked longingly at her neck.

"Where is the necklace, Connor?"

"Safe."

When she smiled, Hayden smiled back. Looking into her eyes with renewed respect and more than a little awe, he moved his hips teasingly. "You're saying you planned *this*, Connor?"

"Did you assume I'd also think like a girl, Flynn? I'm a woman, as well as a Slayer."

"Truthfully, I didn't care what you thought like."

"I get that now," she said, mocking his earlier reply. "You're not one of the undead."

"Indeed not, since you didn't use that stake."

"You're capable of everything a normal man is."

Although she knew some of this already, firsthand,

Hayden said, "And more. Much, much more. As long as my partner is a—"

"Slayer?"

"Maybe not quite a match made in heaven," Hayden admitted. "But it'll do in a pinch."

His mouth silenced her response, hungrily. Meeting his drowning kiss with ardor of her own, she flicked her tongue sensually across his fangs...

Then Hayden was on his back, with Connor on top and smiling down at him.

"Just to be clear," she said, "I might not have known about the Slayer gig, but I've never been a weakling."

"Point taken," Hayden conceded.

"When I love, it will be forever."

"Most commendable."

"There will be no surrendering here, dark or otherwise, on anybody's part. Just understanding. And plenty of sex."

"A Slayer after my own heart," he agreed.

Of course, he wouldn't tell her that he had allowed her get the better of him, this once. That he had seen her move coming, and that his strength would always be superior to hers. Getting him on his back had been a concession to the future. His own kind of surrender. And now she owed him twice over.

Trying not to laugh out loud over the hand Fate had unexpectedly dealt him, Hayden glanced at Kelsie Connor's smooth neck, currently flushed pink, so very inviting and silver free. He watched her skin pulse over her blue-tinted veins with each excited beat of her heart.

As her hips began to move against his, and she gave a low, sensual chuckle that he likened to the call of the wild, Hayden thanked those Fates again, seven times over, for this strange, lovely, unexpected, extraordinary gift.

With an answering growl, deep in his throat, and a firm hold on Connor's hips, he decided that this old ruin on the cliffs of Clare was as good a place as any to show a Slayer what miracles a vampire could perform, if given the opportunity.

She'd find out later that a vampire's libido, not unlike his thirst, was insatiable.

If you liked this story, look for these other paranormal romances by Linda Thomas-Sundstrom on sale now wherever ebooks are sold!

Blackout Moon Marked Red Wolf Wolf Bait Wolf Trap

And don't miss the other spooky and sensual NOCTURNE BITES, available at www.ebooks.eharlequin.com and wherever ebooks are sold. Titles include:

The Darkness by Nina Croft
The Vampire Hunter by Lisa Childs
At Your Command by Anna Leonard
A Vampire's Vindication by Alexis Morgan
Dragon Warrior by Meagan Hatfield
Firebreak by Anna Leonard
Halo Hunter by Michele Hauf
Prisoner of Temptation by Zandria Munson
Demon Kissed by Patti O'Shea
Marked by Lydia Parks

Looking for more paranormal romance? The sizzling and spine-chilling books of Harlequin Nocturne are available at www.eHarlequin.com or your local bookstore.

Interested in writing for Nocturne Bites? Send your submission to NocturneBites@Harlequin.ca

ISBN: 978-1-4268-7019-4

Vampire Lover

Copyright © 2010 by Linda Thomas-Sundstrom

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and TM are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

www.eHarlequin.com