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MID-WINTER

*Magic*

A PASSIONATE CHRISTMAS



NINA CROFT

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# *Mid-Winter Magic*

by

*Nina Croft*

**~DEDICATION~**

*To all the great ladies at Passionate Critters!*

## Chapter One

Ty spent the better part of three hours chasing the werewolf through the backstreets of London. Dawn hovered close by the time he'd cornered him on a rooftop in a rundown part of the city.

It was a foul night. Snow had started falling around midnight, turning to dirty sludge as soon as it hit the streets. Ty was wet, miserable, and pissed-off. He needed a new job.

The Were hadn't shifted, but his eyes glowed feral and inhuman—he wasn't far from the change. He stared at Ty, one lip curled up in a snarl, revealing elongated incisors. *Time to get this over with.*

“Lucas Grafton, by the order of the Conclave, you have been found guilty of violating the Armena code and sentenced to termination.”

He tried to keep the boredom from his voice. The wolf was going to die; he didn't have to know Ty found the whole thing excruciatingly tedious. He needn't have worried. Like most werewolves he'd met, Lucas was not too bright.

“They were only humans,” he whined. “Since when has the Conclave cared about a few humans?”

“We don't. We do care about keeping our existence secret from the human race, and the fact that you shifted in front of a whole crowd of them.”

Phasing the distance between them, he reappeared behind Lucas. He gripped his hand in the other man's hair and tugged back his head to expose the long line of his throat. The Were struggled, but Ty was far stronger and held him with ease.

He sank his fangs into the jugular, and the warm metallic sweetness of blood filled his mouth. He drank until the last of the life drained away then he drew back, opened his arms, and the dead werewolf collapsed to the rooftop.

Looking down at the body, he felt nothing. “Happy Christmas,” he murmured.

He pulled out his cell phone to call the cleaning crew and noticed he had five new messages, all from the same number. He pressed the button and listened.

“Hey, Ty, it’s Smith, answer your calls.” A pause. “Fine. Listen. I need confirmation that Lucas Grafton has been taken care of, and then I’ll deliver the Conclave’s message to Dalton. I may have pinpointed his location in the mountains. And there’s something else. Something you’ll want to know. So get a hold of me soon.”

He disconnected from the voicemail and punched in the number. Smith picked up at the first ring.

“Smith, what can I do for you?”

“Actually, it’s the other way round.”

Ty recognized the subdued excitement in the man’s voice and a prickle of curiosity shivered across his skin. Smith was a psychic investigator—one of the best. Ty waited for the other man to continue.

“Merry Christmas,” Smith said. “I’ve found your assassin.”

Shock ripped through him. He forced it down, kept his tone bland. “My assassin?”

“Come on, Ty, we all know you only took that shitty job with the Conclave so you could continue the search.”

Ty gritted his teeth. “She murdered my sire.”

His sire, Severino, was the vampire who had found him dying on the battlefield so many years ago, and had given him another chance at life.

And she’d used him to do it. Pretended she cared. Made love to him as though he wasn’t merely a means to an end, and he’d been the fool who’d believed her innocent act. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty much. I haven’t spotted her yet, but I can smell witch—she’s around here somewhere.”

A slow burn of excitement started in his gut. “Where are you?”

“A town called Five Oaks. Middle of nowhere. I’ll send the details to your cell, and I’ll keep my eyes open.”

“Thanks, Smith. Look, don’t approach her—she’s dangerous. And don’t go sniffing around. If she’s there, I don’t want her spooked and running.”

“I won’t. After tonight, I’m on holiday anyway—I’ll be out of touch. If you come up blank, I suggest you start with the local gossip, Edna Carruthers. Apparently, she’s crazy, but she’s lived here forever and knows everything going on in town.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Oh, and there’s someone else here you might know.”

“Who?”

“Ashriel.”

He frowned. “What the hell is Ash doing there?”

“No idea, we haven’t spoken. So, we’ll see you soon?”

“I’m on my way.”

Ty shoved the phone into his pocket. He could feel the smile spreading across his face. After fifty years, he was finally going to catch up with Dina. And make her pay.

## Chapter Two

Dina curled up on the window seat, hugging her knees to her chest. She'd switched off the lamp so no one would see her sitting in the darkness, and now she stared out through the glass. All along the street, the houses twinkled with fairy lights. The snow lay deep on the sidewalk, and the air was filled with swirling flakes.

Another white Christmas in Five Oaks.

Through the open curtains of the house opposite, a family sat around a huge table, all wearing colored paper hats. Even from here, she could see they were having a wonderful time. She sighed.

She had changed so much in the years since she'd come to Five Oaks. The rage that had been a part of her life for so long was gone now. Dina knew she would always retain some guilt for her past, but her time here had given her a level of peace. She'd loved living an 'ordinary' life. Not killing anybody. She'd even loved winding up that pompous ass, Dr. Ash Delaney, the local vet, who was an idiot if he thought he had her fooled. It had all been fun, but Five Oaks had served its purpose, provided her with a safe haven—now it was time to move on.

She was no longer safe here. Ash had brought attention to the town, with all his smiting, and yesterday, Dina had spotted a psychic investigator nosing around the place. Besides, Five Oaks was only ever meant to be a temporary hide away. How had it stretched out to fifty years?

A large tabby cat jumped onto the seat beside her, and she stroked a finger through the soft fur.

"Where would you like to go, Poppy?" she murmured. "Let's go search the Internet, make some plans. You can decide where we live next."

She scooped Poppy into her arms and made to get up when a movement at the end of the street caught her eye. She rubbed the window with the sleeve of her sweater and peered through.

"Holy shit."



For a moment, shock held every muscle rigid. She couldn't move. Couldn't think. Couldn't breathe.

"No. This is *so* not happening."

The tall figure was unmistakable. She hadn't seen him since the night she had killed Severino, yet his image had never left her mind. How could she forget someone she still dreamt about every night?

Could his presence be coincidence?

She didn't believe in coincidences. On the other hand, if he knew she was here, he would hardly be strolling along the street for anyone to see.

No. He'd have snuck up on her, and she'd be already dead.

He paused to check the number on the nearest house, and in the dim light from the street lamp, she saw him clearly. Dark hair brushed his shoulders, pale skin, sharp cheekbones, and a wide sensual mouth, held in a stern line. He had the almost inhuman beauty of his kind. All the better to lure his prey. She watched, unable to look away, as he moved on, only to come to a halt by her front gate.

Poppy hissed, reached across, and raked her claws down Dina's hand. She jumped as the pain brought her back to herself.

"Oh, my God, what do I do?"

Her brain refused to function. Poppy hissed again, and she glanced at the cat.

"You're right, I know you're right. Don't panic. Edna, we need Edna, and we need her now."

Edna Carruthers, town busybody, crazy cat lady, and her trusty disguise and alter ego for the last fifty years.

Placing Poppy on the floor, she crossed the room. She stared into the mirror as she tried to remember the incantation she'd spoken every day for the last fifty years. "I can do this. I can do this." She repeated the mantra in her head, until finally, the words of the spell filtered through the layers of panic fogging her mind, and fell from her lips.

The lines of her face and body blurred, and in her place stood an old woman—Edna. She took a deep breath. *She could do this.* He wouldn't be able to see through her magic.

But what could he want with Edna?

The question screamed through her mind as the front doorbell rang downstairs.

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Ty fastened his coat tight around him. While he didn't feel the cold, it would appear unusual otherwise, and he wanted this woman's cooperation. There would be time to use other tactics later when all else failed.

An ivy and holly wreath hung on the front door, and he swore softly. He glanced up and down the street, and for the first time noticed the decorations.

Since Smith's call last night, his mind had been on other things, and he'd forgotten all about Christmas. He shrugged. No way was he backing out now, not when he was so close. Dina was within his grasp, and he would finally put this obsession behind him and see Severino's murderer brought to justice.

He stabbed the doorbell and heard the slap-slap of soft footsteps on the stairs inside. A few seconds later, the door opened.

A woman stood before him. She appeared to be somewhere in her seventies, with curled grey hair, a body the same width all the way down, and a startled expression on her plump face. She clutched a small purse in her hand, tight against her chest, and was looking at him expectantly.

"I'm not giving you anything if you don't sing," she muttered.

Ty felt a frown forming on his face. "Sing?"

"You are a carol singer, aren't you?"

He shook his head.

Her eyes brightened behind thick glasses. "Then you must be one of those male strip-o-grams? Did the ladies of the Women's Institute, send you?"

It took a moment for the words to sink in. "No."

“Well, I can’t think of who else would be knocking at my door on Christmas night.”

He gritted his teeth. “Mrs. Carruthers?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Tynan Steele.”

“So?”

He attempted a smile. She didn’t appear impressed. One hand tightened on the purse, the other on the door, and Ty realized she was about to slam it in his face. He took a step closer and slipped his foot inside.

“I’m new in town, and I’m trying to locate an old friend. I was told you might be able to help me.”

Her small beady eyes narrowed. “And why would anyone tell you that?”

*Because you’re a nosy old busybody, with nothing better to do than stick your nose in everybody else’s business?*

Luckily, the question stayed in his head. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets. This was not going well, and he shifted restlessly. Perhaps he could torture the information out of her. The idea was becoming more attractive by the second. He took a deep breath and added a touch of vampire persuasion to his voice. “Perhaps I could come inside.”

Something flashed across her face—it looked as if the compulsion hadn’t taken, then she whirled abruptly and shuffled inside. He followed, brushing the snow from his coat. She led him into a large kitchen, placed her purse on the table, and held out a plate of pastries. “Would you like a mince pie, young man?”

The question threw him off balance. Again. “No, thank you.”

She put the plate on the table and picked up a bottle. “A glass of sherry?”

“No, nothing.”

She made to put the bottle down, then changed her mind and poured a large drink. She swallowed it in one gulp and filled the glass a second time. Ty raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

The soft pad of paws came from the doorway behind him. He glanced around to see a large tabby cat stroll into the room. It leapt onto the table and lapped the sherry from the glass.

Ty watched. He could feel a small frown forming on his face as he waited for Edna Carruthers to remove the cat. When she did nothing, he gave a slight shake of his head and lowered himself into the seat opposite her. “I’m looking for a woman.”

She removed her horn-rimmed spectacles and smiled at him sweetly. “Well, it seems like you’ve found one.”

He stared at her. Was she flirting with him? He fidgeted in his seat then cleared his throat. “No, I’m looking....”

“Now, don’t you go disappointing me.”

She sat back in her chair and regarded him expectantly, one grey brow arched. He was sure he saw a malicious glint in her eyes. But then Smith had said she was crazy.

“Don’t worry—I’m joshing with you, Mr. Steele.” She chuckled and sipped at her sherry. “I know a handsome young thing like you wouldn’t be interested in an old woman like me.”

A second cat strolled into the kitchen, followed by a third and a fourth. Ty lost count after that. He didn’t even blink as a Siamese with a cold blue stare leapt onto his lap and settled down to sleep.

Rubbing a finger across his forehead, he considered his questions.

No way would Dina have lasted in this town for long. She was used to far more sophisticated surroundings. Which meant he was searching for someone who’d recently arrived.

Edna Carruthers poured herself a third glass of sherry. Between her and the tabby cat, she’d gone through half the bottle. Hopefully, it would loosen her tongue.

“I’m looking for a woman—” he began a third time.

“You’re repeating yourself, Mr. Steele.” She leaned across and patted his arm, where it rested on the table. “I’m afraid that’s the prerogative of the old.”

He decided to ignore the interruption. “—who’s recently moved into town.”

“Is she a girlfriend?”

“No, she’s—”

“I bet with that cute British accent, you have girls falling all over you. And you being one of those male strippers as well.”

“I’m not—” he bit off the words of denial. What was the point? “She’s just a friend I’ve been trying to catch up with. An old colleague called me and said he’d heard she was in town.”

“Well, I’ll certainly think about it, but nobody comes to mind at the moment.”

Disappointment stabbed him hard in the gut. He was wasting his time with this crazy old woman—time he could use better out on the streets, hunting for Dina. If he got close enough, he’d somehow sense her presence. How could he not? For over fifty years, he’d thought of little else except finding the witch and making her pay. She wouldn’t be able to hide from him.

Ty rose to his feet, forgetting the sleeping Siamese on his lap. Razor sharp claws dug into his thigh, clinging for a second before the cat tumbled to the floor. It hissed, then turned tail and sauntered away.

Edna Carruthers blinked her myopic blue eyes. “Are you sure you won’t have a mince pie?”

She was starting to irritate him. He stared at her, allowing a little of the darkness to seep into his expression. But the woman must be half-blind. She gave him another of those slow-witted smiles. “Christmas cake?”

Ty clenched his fists, gritted his teeth, and forced down the urge to rip out her jugular. Instead, he whirled and stalked out of the kitchen, along the hall and out of the front door.

Once outside, he lifted his face to the cold air, allowed it to cool the anger that burned in his blood. He didn’t need the help of some crazy old woman. He would find Dina, if he had to tear the town of Five Oaks apart.

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Dina slammed the door behind him and stumbled back to the kitchen.

This time she didn't bother with a glass, just upended the sherry bottle straight into her mouth. Her hands trembled. In fact, her whole body was shaking, and she slumped into a chair, resting her forehead on the table.

She never wanted to go through that again.

To be so close. She'd forgotten how beautiful he was. Even knowing he hated her, her fingers had itched with the need to reach out and stroke down the hard lines of his lean handsome face.

Fifty years ago, she'd done what she felt she had to do.

And regretted it every single day of her life since.

Dina came from a long line of white witches who had only ever used their magic to do good. But all vampires love witch's blood, and Severino had been no exception. He had taken one look at Dina's mother and desired her. The feeling had not been reciprocated.

Dina had returned home from a trip, to find her mother and two younger sisters dead. Using her magic, she had cast a spell and seen a vision of their last horrific moments; seen Severino rape her mother then drain the blood from her veins.

From then on, Dina had tumbled headlong into an abyss of red-hot rage, her whole being focused on one goal—to kill Severino. She had traded much of her soul for the power and black magic to become one of the most successful witch assassins of all time. If ever her resolve weakened, she would conjure up again the vision of those last few moments of her mother's life.

She had eventually succeeded in her goal, and Severino had died at her hand. But Dina had paid a high price, spending the time since in hiding. Disguising who and what she really was.

Now the past had caught up with her. She knew Ty meant to kill her. He'd told her so at that last bitter meeting as they stood over the body of his sire. She was sure he would have killed her back then if she hadn't turned him into a toad, and gotten the hell out of there. Fast.

Obviously, the toad thing hadn't lasted.

At least she'd got rid of him quickly. Good old Edna Carruthers could be relied upon to scare off the fiercest of vampires. He'd have gotten out of there even faster if he'd known what Edna had been thinking.

She shouldn't have made the stripper comment. Now she couldn't get the image of him naked out of her head. The memory of what was beneath his clothes made her heart pound and the blood rush to places it had no right to rush into. She had a sudden flashback of lying naked in his arms, fangs lodged deep in her throat, a very different part of him buried between her thighs. The sweet pull as he drank her blood, the exquisite drag of his hard shaft as he filled her body.

*Oh, God.*

Poppy reached out a paw and swiped her face with a sharp claw.

Dina scowled. "I know. I know. I should not be thinking about naked vampires, especially naked vampires who want to kill me. But do you know how long it's been since I got laid?" She sat back morosely and took another gulp of sherry only to find the bottle empty. She slammed it down. "Over fifty years. That's how long. And do you know who with? Of course you do."

Picking up a mince pie, she crumbled it onto the table, then licked the sugar from her fingers. After a minute, she rested her chin on her hand and sighed.

"We should get out of here, except he'll come after us, and I'm tired of hiding. Besides, we can't leave town until I've sorted out the Jo situation."

Josephine Button was the one person who had kept her in Five Oaks for so long. Jo was in trouble and saving her might, in some small way, atone for the bad things Dina had done in her life—and she needed all the atonement she could get. Rising to her feet, she crossed the room and pulled aside the gingham curtains. Down the street, Jo's house stood in darkness.

Where could she be?

Kitty was keeping an eye on her but hadn't reported in for over a day, and worry gnawed at Dina's insides. Still, she could do nothing to help Jo until New Year when whoever had placed the curse on her, ten years ago, finally showed himself. Afterwards, Dina would leave Five Oaks forever.

In the meantime, she had to find a way to stop Ty from outing her and making good on his threats. The problem was she wasn't sure she would beat him in a face-to-face confrontation this time. He'd been powerful fifty years ago. He'd be even stronger now, and he had the resources of the Conclave to back him up.

There must be some way to get rid of him.

An idea flickered in the back of her mind. She knew one other person in town who might be a match for the vampire. While it wasn't a good idea, unfortunately, it was the only one she had. Her cover would be broken, but she was leaving anyway, so what did that matter?

She glanced at her watch. The time was already after midnight. She'd wait a few hours until morning then go visit the good Dr. Delaney.

See if he could put his unique skills to good use.



## Chapter Three

Ash Delaney lived in a large house on the other side of town that had once belonged to Jo Button's grandmother.

Dina kept her Edna disguise in place—no one in Five Oaks had ever seen the real Dina—wrapped her cape around her and trudged through the silent streets. She could have spelled herself there, but she needed to clear her head.

The snow had stopped falling; the air was perfectly still and icy cold. Dawn colored the sky to the east with streaks of tangerine and scarlet. Hopefully, Ty would be tucked away somewhere for the day, and she would have a few hours of safety to sort herself out. If Ash agreed to her deal, he could do his part tomorrow night, and the threat of arrest and execution would be over. She would have to leave Five Oaks, but she could help Jo first and leave in her own time.

She was not looking forward to the coming encounter. She'd sat through the long hours of the night, drinking yet another bottle of Edna's disgusting sweet sherry, trying to think of an alternative solution.

A dull ache pounded in her head, serving to remind her of what a fool she'd been all those years ago. What a fool she still was.

She would never be sorry for killing the vampire, she would kill him again in a heartbeat, but there were things she regretted bitterly about the years in between her mother's death and the death of her murderer. One of those things was Tynan Steele.

Severino had been careful; he'd made many enemies in his long lifetime, and he guarded his back. While Dina had infiltrated the Conclave with ease, she hadn't been able to get close enough to finish the job. Until, she discovered his weak link—Ty—the first, and strongest, of Severino's offspring.

She had investigated him closely, designed a web to trap him. She'd set out to seduce Ty, and succeeded, but in doing so, she'd found herself well

and truly caught in her own trap. It had taken her by surprise. The last person she would have ever of dreamt she could care for was a vampire.

The emotion had filled her with terror. She'd never wanted to love anyone again and risk losing them as she'd lost her family. So she'd done her best to see him as nothing more than a means to an end.

The night before she planned to assassinate Severino, were the worst hours of her life. She knew if she went through with it, she would lose Ty, and he would never forgive her. She might achieve her life's goal and put behind her the revenge that had haunted her for so long, but in doing so, she would lose the only man she had ever come close to loving.

She'd never tried to explain herself to him. What would be the point? Vampires killed. It was in their nature. He would doubtless see nothing wrong in his sire's actions. While he would see hers as the ultimate betrayal, which in reality they were. He'd loved her. It had been apparent in everything he did, and she'd used that against him.

If she'd been sensible, she would have finished him off back then. But really, it had never been an option. Besides, with Severino's death, Dina felt as though she'd stumbled out of a blood-red fog. For the first time since her mother's death, her mind was clear, and she realized she didn't want to kill anymore. So she ran.

Now she'd grown tired of running. She wanted her life back.

She rubbed her eyes to banish the memories as she stood on the doorstep of Ash's house and tried to work out what to say. She had a suspicion he would not be very pleased to see her. It was strange; some of her best moments over the last few years had come from winding up Ash Delaney. There were many benefits of being considered a crazy old lady; people expected them to act eccentric, and Edna had taken full advantage of that.

There was an old fashioned knocker, and she banged it hard against the wood. Inside she could hear faint movement, and a moment later, the door opened.

It was almost worth it to see the horror stamped on his face. His gaze dropped, no doubt searching for the cat basket that was her usual accessory.

“Mrs. Carruthers—”

“I need to come in.”

Not waiting for an answer, she pushed past him and into the hallway. He didn't try to stop her. From his expression, he appeared to be in shock and frantically trying to work out what she could be doing there in the early hours of the morning.

The door clicked shut, and she turned to look at him.

He was handsome enough—with his strong, square jaw, warm brown eyes, and tousled hair. Then again, Dina had met angels before, and never been much impressed. It always seemed to her, that they were quite pleased enough with themselves and didn't need their inflated egos blown up any further.

She watched him closely as he shifted from one foot to the other.

“Is it one of the cats?” he asked.

Dina pursed her lips but didn't answer.

He wiped his hands on his jeans. “I can get my bag and come over...if there's some sort of cat emergency.”

“There's no cat emergency.”

His eyes widened at her answer. Obviously, felines were something he could understand. He cleared his throat. “Not the cats? Is everything all right with you? Are you hurt?”

His concern was unmistakable. He hated her, she'd made his life hell, but he was an angel, so he cared. It was quite sweet really. Of course, there was also the fact that he believed he had killed her husband. Guilt could be a strong force—especially in one of his kind. “I need you to do something for me.”

He frowned. “You do?”

There was no point in dilly-dallying about this, better to come right out and say it. “I need you to smite someone.”

His mouth fell open. “Smite?” His voice caught on the word. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Dina rolled her eyes, a very un-Edna thing to do, but she was past caring. “You know, smiting, that thing you do with the loud bangs and lots of fire.”

“Mrs. Carruthers.” He sniffed the air in front of her face. “Are you drunk?”

She pushed her glasses up her nose. “Dr. Delaney, you can accept the fact I know exactly what you are and what you do. Or....” She paused and fixed him with a glare.

He lifted a brow. “Or?”

“Or I can tell the good citizens of this town who was responsible for reducing Five Oaks to five stumps all those years ago. Then there’s the matter of the fire at the church.”

His expression took on a pitying air. “You need help, Edna. Look at me, how could I have been responsible for a lightning strike some eighty years ago?”

Dina raised a mocking eyebrow, and Ash’s jaw clenched, his icy stare warning her not to pursue this particular line of events.

Yeah, right. She was *so* scared. She had a vampire on her tail, so a pissed off angel was hardly likely to cause her even a flutter. “It’s Mrs. Carruthers to you, and I saw you. I stood right next to you at the bake sale when you burned my cake with nothing more than a wave of your hand.”

He remained silent for a few seconds. Dina could almost see the thoughts racing around his head.

Finally, he shrugged. “Maybe I did incinerate your cake. Maybe that was wrong. You want me to apologize?”

“I don’t care about the bloody cake. I just need you to understand I know what you do, and I’m willing to use that information to get what I want.”

“What you want is for me to smite somebody.” Ice dripped from every syllable. “Anyone in particular?”

“Of course. You think I would want you to go around smiting someone *not* in particular? Do I look insane?” Her voice had risen, and he took a step

back. Dina bit her lip and told herself to calm down. Her nerves were getting the better of her.

He frowned. "You sound different."

"Yes, well, I've had a rough night."

"So who do you want me to smite?" A derisive sneer distorted his lips.

"Assuming I can do such a thing."

"A man has arrived in town. His name is Tynan Steele."

"And you want him dead?"

"No!" The word was out before she could think about it. Did she want Ty dead? Her whole mind rejected the idea. She took a deep, calming breath.

"No, of course I don't want him dead. I do want him out of town."

"Smiting is pretty serious stuff and I don't—"

"Have that much control?" she asked dryly. "I've noticed. But I'm sure if you concentrate *really* hard, you'll do better."

She patted him on the arm, and his brown eyes flashed with annoyance.

"I was going to say, I don't think it should be used for trivial reasons."

*Trivial?*

For a moment, she considered turning him into a toad. But while that might provide her with a fleeting satisfaction, it would hardly help her cause. Instead, she pierced him with her best Edna stare. "My reasons are my own, but let me assure you they are not *trivial*."

"What did this Tynan guy do to you? If he hurt you...." He trailed off, and his gaze dropped to her throat. Was he checking for bites? Why would he? She hadn't mentioned Ty was a vampire. Dina shook her head. She was getting paranoid. "That doesn't concern you. Do we have a deal?"

"A deal? Spell it out for me what you want me to *do*, exactly."

Relief flooded her. Perhaps this would work after all. "You get this man out of town and make sure he doesn't come back, and I'll refrain from explaining to the people of Five Oaks what you are."

"Are you sure you know what I am, *Edna*?" Suddenly his face took on a more serious air, a cold menace radiated from him.

"Ash?" A soft voice sounded from the stairs.

They both whirled around. Jo Button stood on the landing above them, peering down. “Sorry,” she said, “I didn’t realize you had someone with you.” Her gaze shifted to Dina. “Mrs. Carruthers, I hope there’s nothing wrong with the cats.”

“No, nothing. I just had a little business with Dr. Delaney.”

“At eight in the morning?”

“Important business—it couldn’t wait.” She glanced at Ash. The menace had been wiped away, his face softer than she’d ever seen.

He smiled at Jo. “We’re about finished. Sorry we woke you. Go back to bed for a while.”

She seemed unsure but disappeared into a room. Once she’d moved out of earshot, Dina eyed him coldly.

“What are you doing with Jo?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business.” The threat was back.

“And I think it is.”

His expression turned stony. “Someone ploughed through the power line outside her house, cutting off her supply. You want her to sit in a cold house, all alone, over Christmas?” There was a challenge in his voice. “I’m not going to stand by again while everyone mows her down out of spite. She’s staying with me until the power line is fixed.”

Searching his face, she remembered how his expression had softened when he looked at Jo, and decided he was telling the truth. “Well, don’t you take advantage of that girl. She’s been through enough.”

He nodded. “I won’t. She’s safe with me.”

She frowned, but at least if Jo remained here, she’d be unlikely to do anything stupid. She sighed. The last of her energy drained away, leaving her exhausted. Her body drooped. The headache had returned with a vengeance. She wanted out of there.

“So we have a deal?” she asked.

“I’ll think about it. I’ll call you when I know if it can be done. No promises.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Dina turned to go, then thought of something. “It will have to be at night. Ty doesn’t get out much during the day.”

She was at the door when he spoke, so softly she almost missed it. She glanced at him over her shoulder.

“Who are you, Edna Carruthers?”

She smiled sweetly. “Just an old lady doing her civic duty.”

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Ty waited until the lock clicked shut behind her then stepped into the hallway. Ash was staring at the closed door, a slight frown on his face. He looked at Ty.

“You going around town pissing off little old harpies? What did you do to rile Edna Carruthers?”

Ty had no clue. He leaned back against the wall, arms folded across his chest. “She thought I was a strip-o-gram.” He shrugged. “Maybe she was disappointed when I kept my clothes on.”

Except it was more than that. His mind raced, coming up with all sorts of ridiculous conclusions that refused to be ignored.

*No way.*

Oh, Dina was quite capable of the magic—she’d been one of the most powerful witches he’d ever met. But the Dina he’d known would never have given herself such an unflattering disguise.

“You’ve thought of something.” Ash studied him, head cocked to one side. “What are you thinking?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do. How the hell does Edna Carruthers know what I am, and why does she want your ass fried?” He frowned, his gaze running over Ty. “What are you doing in town, anyway? I said you could use the basement, I never thought to ask why you needed it. Are you here on Conclave business?”

“Sort off. I’m hunting a witch.”

“Well, can’t be anything to do with Edna. The old bag has been here forever.”

Ty pushed off the wall, every sense alert. “How long is forever?”

“Not sure. I think around fifty years. She turned up as a young woman, with a husband in tow, and has been here ever since. Now, she’s part of the town, you couldn’t shift her with a snow-plough. I’m sure plenty have tried.”

Ty’s brain didn’t get further than the word fifty.

Edna Carruthers had been here for *fifty* years.

He had been hunting Dina for *fifty* years.

His mind balked at making the connection.

It couldn’t be. No way.

He remembered sitting opposite her in her kitchen. Her dumpy little figure. The vaguely malicious expression in her pale, protuberant blue eyes. How she’d irritated him, made him desperate to get away.

Christ, she was clever.

Elation built inside him, tightening his muscles, sending ripples of anticipation dancing across his skin. He’d found her.

After all this time. A sense of urgency filled him. The need to go after her clawed at his insides. To rip away her disguise, and have her before him once more.

At his mercy.

He glanced out the window. The sky glowed pink with the coming dawn. The sun would rise any moment—he couldn’t go after her right now. He would have to wait the day out. And then....

“Ty?”

He’d almost forgotten the angel’s presence. He turned to Ash and smiled. “Call Mrs. Carruthers. Tell her you’ll smite me.”



## Chapter Four

Dina drummed her fingers on the kitchen table and stared at her cell phone, willing it to ring.

Darkness had fallen a good two hours ago. Where was Ash? Why hadn't he called and told her Ty was gone?

She picked up the phone and punched in Ash's number. He didn't answer, and she tossed the phone back on the table.

He'd surprised her by calling not long after she arrived back home that morning. He'd told her he'd do the job, and she'd sagged with relief. The relief had been rapidly overtaken by some other emotion. One she didn't care to identify. She'd tried to ignore it, but the feeling had refused to be banished, niggling at the back of her mind all day long.

Desolation.

She would never see Ty again.

While last night had been terrifying, she'd felt more alive than she had in years. Fifty years ago, she'd done her best to ignore the fact that she was falling in love with him. She'd made passionate love to him night after night and told herself it was all part of the job. But then, she'd known how dangerous love could be, how easily the object of her love could be snatched away. Her mother's death had taught her that, and she never wanted to descend into black despair again.

Anyway, even if she was willing to risk loving him, it was too late. He hated her.

Damn him for coming here.

Why wouldn't he let it go?

Then again, would she? Wasn't that why all this had happened, because of her inability to let go of her need for revenge?

And wasn't Ty just doing the same thing? Avenging the death of someone he loved. Even if that someone was a depraved, murderous, bloodsucking leach.

She glanced at her watch again, jumping to her feet. She'd go and see Ash. Find out what was going on.

No. She must be sensible; she was safer in here. The house was warded with powerful magic, hopefully sufficient to keep a vampire at bay, while if she stepped outside and encountered him she'd have no protection.

Sinking back into her seat, she leaned forward and banged her forehead against the wooden table. "Ring," she muttered to her cell phone. It remained silent. She pillowed her head on her arms and closed her eyes.

"Good evening, Mrs. Carruthers."

The voice came from behind her, low and dark, shivering across her skin. Dina knew only one person with the power to affect her this way, and her whole body went rigid, while her mind screamed in panic. She raised her head and twisted around in her seat.

Ty stood in the kitchen doorway, leaning against the frame, arms folded across his broad chest. His dark eyes were hooded, gleaming from beneath his thick lashes. His mouth was a stern line, but when he caught her gaze, his sensual lips curved into a satisfied smile. The tip of one fang showed briefly, white and razor sharp. He touched it with his tongue, and something hot and dark stirred to life deep inside her.

"Or should I say, good evening, Dina."

Her heart jolted at the sound of her name. It had been so long.

She examined his face, trying to gauge his thoughts, while her mind searched frantically for the best option in a very short list of really bad ones.

Did he know, or was he guessing?

She pushed her glasses up her nose, and forced an air of disdain onto Edna's features. "If you've come back to rob me, young man, I'm afraid you'll find very little of value here."

"Oh, I think what I'm searching for is quite valuable." He straightened and took a step toward her. "Did you know there's a price on your head? A considerable price. But then the Conclave was hardly going to look lightly on your assassinating its esteemed leader."

“Esteemed by whom exactly?” Dina didn’t try to keep the scorn from her tone. She bit her lip and sniffed. “I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

For a moment, he allowed his mask to drop, and she caught a brief glimpse of the maelstrom of fury whirling beneath his cool facade. She swallowed the lump of fear lodged in her throat.

“Cut the crap, Dina,” he snarled.

“I don’t—”

He phased, vanishing to reappear by her side, so close she could reach out and touch him. She breathed in the cold musky scent of vampire. Ty was the only vampire she had ever been physically close to, and his once familiar aroma shot a jolt of remembered pleasure straight to her groin. Heat flooded her body, melting her insides. She closed her eyes tight, but behind her lids, she saw images of them together—Ty pushed inside her as far as he could go, as though he could make them one body.

Her hands fisted on the table until her nails dug into the sensitive flesh of her palms. She forced her eyes open.

He leaned in a little closer and inhaled. “I can’t believe I sat across from you last night and didn’t know who you were. You’re good, very good.”

Uncurling her clenched fingers, she breathed deeply, forcing herself to relax and her mind to function.

Maybe the time had come to try the first of those bad options. Reaching deep inside for her magic, she whispered a spell, felt it fly through the air towards him. And bounce harmlessly back.

His cool smile was loaded with triumph. “Did you really think I’d come unprepared?”

“A girl can hope.”

She was finished. She should have known her magic would be no help. He’d gotten through her wards, after all. Yet instead of the expected panic at the thought, something relaxed inside her. For a long time, she’d suspected she would have to pay for the things she’d done. Not Severino, he had deserved to die. But she’d killed others in those long years between her mother’s death and that of her murderer, and while Dina might have found

a measure of peace here in Five Oaks, deep down the guilt still gnawed at her.

“What do you want, Ty?”

He leaned in towards her, and her breath caught in her throat. “I think you have a good idea of that.”

“You plan to kill me?” She was proud of how steady her voice sounded as she said those words.

“Not just yet. I’m going to take you back to the Conclave. You’ll be tried and no doubt sentenced to termination.”

So he wasn’t going to kill her immediately. There was still hope. Her racing pulse slowed to something approaching normal, and she forced her trembling lips into the semblance of a pout. “Oh, but then you won’t get to do it, someone else will. Where’s the fun in that?”

He raised an eyebrow, his expression mocking. “As the current enforcer for the Conclave, I’ll get the job anyway. I’m hardly denying myself the pleasure.”

Had he changed so much that he could now work for such a corrupt organization? “I didn’t know you worked for the Conclave.”

“Why should you know? A lot has changed in fifty years.”

“You once swore you would never work there. So you’re following in Severino’s footsteps?”

“The Conclave is better now. It’s been purged since—”

Dina laughed, the sound laced with bitterness. “Since Severino’s time? At least I did something useful then.”

A heavy silence hung between them.

“Why did you do it?” he asked.

He’d never asked her that before. Dina had always presumed he wasn’t interested, and she wasn’t prepared to answer him now. “I’m an assassin. It’s what I do. Severino was just a job, and I was offered a lot of money.”

“Who paid you?”

“You know I can’t reveal my clients.”

His gaze ran over her. “I could make you.”

That dark, rich voice again, sending shivers down her backbone. She couldn't imagine him purposefully hurting her, though she supposed he could have changed since she'd known him. After all, he worked for the Conclave now, and she would never have considered that a possibility either.

All vampires held the seeds of darkness within themselves. They all, at some point, hovered on the edge of that darkness. Maybe she'd tipped Ty over the edge when she'd betrayed him, yet she sensed no miasma of evil clinging to him.

"Torture? That sounds like fun. You never used to be kinky." She gave a casual shrug of dismissal. "Anyway, I doubt it."

He pursed his lips, but didn't push the subject. Instead, he kicked out a chair and sat, never taking his gaze from her.

"Ash said you were married."

Her mouth fell open. It was so long since she'd even thought of her 'husband' that she'd almost forgotten his existence. "He did?"

"He said you turned up here fifty years ago with a husband."

Dina heard a faint accusation in his voice. She rested her chin on her hand, and settled what she hoped was a dreamy expression over Edna's features. "Wilberforce Carruthers. He was a lovely man."

"Wilberforce?"

His tone held disbelief, and for a moment, she considered carrying on the pretence. Except what was the point? She sighed. "Actually, he wasn't real. I spelled him up—and he was a lot of work. It was a relief when Ash burned the church down and gave me the chance to dump him."

A smile might have flickered across his features, but it was gone so quickly she must have imagined it. "I brought you something," he said.

She didn't answer, instead she watched as he withdrew a small box from inside his pocket.

"Think of it as a belated Christmas gift."

Ty placed the box in front of her, and Dina shoved her hands under the table. "What is it?"

His face remained cold. “Why don’t you open it and see?”

While she didn’t want to, one hand came out and inched towards the box. She picked it up, stroked her fingers over the worn, midnight blue velvet. Turning it over in her palm, she glanced up and caught a brief glimpse of expectation burning in his dark eyes.

Finally, she flicked open the catch and lifted the lid. A ring nestled on the cream satin, and she gasped. A heart-shaped ruby stone, blood red, sat on a slender white gold band. Something broke inside her then, and she fought to rally her forces. He couldn’t mean what had flashed through her mind at the first sight of that ring. He was toying with her.

“How sweet,” she said mockingly. “It’s the color of your eyes—just after you’ve eaten.” She snapped the box shut and placed it carefully on the table. “Really, Ty, if this is your idea of a proposal—I have to say—you’re timing is crap.”

Amusement flared in his dark eyes, quickly banished. “I planned to give it to you that night. After we’d met with Severino.”

“Oh.”

What else could she say? Besides, she didn’t think she could speak while her heart was shattering into a thousand pieces. Why did he have to give her the ring? He was torturing her after all. Why couldn’t he just kill her and be done with it?

“Do you remember that night, Dina?”

How could she ever forget? She lifted one shoulder. “Vaguely.”

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What godforsaken impulse had made him do that?

Ty had carried the ring everywhere with him for the past fifty years. As a reminder of his stupidity and gullibility. He found it hard to believe he’d actually given it to her.

For a brief moment, he’d seen something flicker across her face. He’d believed her heartless, a paid killer, with a reputation for taking on any job as long as the price was right. That’s what he’d learned about her in the time since she’d killed Severino.

Now, the first pangs of doubt clouded his mind. He remembered how she used to feel in his arms, as though she belonged there. What it was like to be inside her, how she had held him that last night as though she had to get enough to last her a lifetime.

He'd always believed she had used him, that her emotions had been a fabrication of lies to get close, so he would lower his guard, introduce her to Severino.

Ty studied the old woman, hunched in the chair opposite. Her gaze fixed on the table, one stubby finger tracing the grain of the wood, close to where the ring box sat.

Her head was bent, showing only the tight grey curls of her hair, and he tried to see beyond the magic of the disguise. A deep, burning need to see the real Dina swept over him. To have her stand before him with no lies between them. He got to his feet.

“Why don't we get rid of Edna?”

She jumped as though lost in her thoughts. “Sorry?”

“Lose the disguise. I think it's served its purpose.”

She pushed her chair back, rising to her feet. In her Edna disguise, she only reached up to his chest—some things didn't change.

She whispered a word, and Edna vanished.

In her place, a stunning blond stood—tall, voluptuous, with bedroom eyes, and a lush pouting mouth. As he watched, her tongue came out and licked her lips, leaving them glistening with moisture.

“Is that better,” she purred, and the low husky voice sent shivers down his spine.

He shook himself to clear his mind of her magic. “No,” he snapped.

She blew a kiss at him. His lips compressed in a tight line, and she shrugged. “Oh well, if it's the real thing you want.”

The blond vanished, and the real Dina appeared before him. She still only reached his chest—he remembered how it had made him feel protective—and she was still slender, her breasts and hips only a slight curve beneath the tight black jeans and top she wore.

She'd hardly changed in fifty years. Her hair had been long back then, now it was cropped short, spiky, though the same vibrant red. Her grey eyes were huge in her small pointed face.

"You haven't changed much." The words sounded like an accusation in his ears, and he realized he'd wanted her changed, had hoped she'd changed so much that he wouldn't be reminded of what they had once shared.

"That's what bathing in virgin's blood every night will do for you."

Studying her now, he realized there were differences. Back when she'd first met him, she'd been a seductress, with her long red hair and sultry make-up. He didn't think he'd ever seen her without it, as though it was a mask she wore to keep him from seeing the real Dina.

Tonight her face was clean, her skin almost white, her lips a soft natural pink. She nibbled at one with small white teeth, and it darkened as the blood pooled beneath the surface.

The tiny action held him mesmerized as he remembered the feel and taste of her. Her tongue flicked out to lick her upper lip, and heat coiled low in his belly. She'd been gazing at the floor, now she peered at him through half-closed lashes, and his cock stiffened in his pants.

She lifted her head, tilted it to the side, exposing the line of her throat, with the faint tracing of blue veins so close to the skin. Her blood had been the sweetest thing he had ever tasted, then or since, and his gums ached at the memory.

His jaw clenched. Was she tempting him on purpose? After all, this was how she had caught him before. Got him so tied up and hungry for her, his brain had ceased to function. At the thought, a wave of fury washed through him.

"Hold out your hands." Time to make their positions clear.

Her arched brows drew together. "Why?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the silver cuffs. They'd been spelled to prevent the wearer from performing magic. He'd been carrying them around for a long time. Next to the ring. For her.



Dina's gaze shot to the cuffs then back to his face. Her eyes widened, and her hands went behind her back. She shook her head. "No way."

She shifted suddenly, making a dash for the door. Ty phased in front of her, and she skidded to a halt.

He stepped past her to stand at her back. "I thought you'd be more comfortable that way, but this works for me."

Moving fast, before she had the chance to realize what he meant to do, he grabbed one narrow wrist and slid the cuff on, locking it in place, followed by the second.

Her skin was warm and soft to his touch, and he dropped her hands as though they burned him. She rattled the cuffs, turning to face him. Her eyes were huge, drenched with tears, and shock held him rigid. She blinked. A single tear spilled over and rolled down her cheek.

Assassins didn't cry.

He had to remind himself the tears were an act, but Christ, it was hard, and a shaft of pain sliced through his chest. He fought it down and remembered how she had behaved in the past. She was dangerous, and he could never forget that. "At least I haven't turned you into a toad."

She sniffed and twisted to wipe her face on her shoulder. "I should have made you a toad permanently."

"Why didn't you? Or why didn't you just kill me?" He was genuinely curious as to her answer. The fact she'd left him alive had puzzled him at the time and returned to confuse him again and again over the intervening years.

Tonight he'd come prepared, knowing what she was capable of, but back then he hadn't had even an inkling of her imminent betrayal. He'd been in shock, and she could have finished him off with the blink of an eye—yet she hadn't.

Finally, she shrugged. "I only kill people I'm paid to."

## Chapter Five

*Damn.*

For a moment there, Dina had thought the tears were going to work. Not that she didn't feel like crying. She did. Bawling her eyes out right now would be good.

She didn't know what was wrong with her. Well apart from the fact she was handcuffed, about to be hauled away, tried for murder, and very probably executed.

But that wasn't it.

Before she'd met Ty, she'd never looked any further than the day she would kill Severino. She'd always presumed she would die doing it. Except she hadn't died—instead, she had fled, running away from her feelings for Ty as much as anything.

For a long time afterwards, she'd moved through her life as though in a trance. Until she'd stumbled into Five Oaks, or Five Stumps as the locals affectionately called it, assumed her Edna disguise and stayed. At that point, she hadn't even been sure she wanted to live, but Five Oaks had worked its magic. Living an ordinary life, among good people, Dina had finally realized she could change and had made peace with herself.

Thinking about 'Five Stumps' brought something else to mind, or rather someone—Ash Delaney. "How did you know it was me?" she asked. "Last night, you didn't have a clue." The only way he could have known was if the angel had messed up.

Ty folded his arms across his chest, and a smug self-satisfied smile curved his lips. "Ash is an old friend of mine."

At first, the words refused to make sense. "I don't understand."

"I was in the house when you came around this morning," he continued.

"Of all the freaking bad luck."

He leaned back on the counter behind him, the amused expression still on his lean handsome face. "It was an interesting conversation."

“Goddamn, sneaky angel.”

The smile faded. “Why didn’t you ask him to kill me?”

“What?”

“Why not get me off your back for good?”

Her brain worked furiously. “He’s an angel. You know—one of the good guys. While he might have agreed to scare you off, he would never agree to kill you.”

“Hmm.”

He didn’t sound like he believed her, yet what else could she say? That the thought of Ty dead, filled her with despair?

*Not going to happen.*

A small black and white cat trotted in through the open door and leapt onto the counter beside her, saving her from any further explanations. It was Kitty, the cat who had been keeping an eye on Jo Button. She was clearly agitated, hissing until she got Dina’s attention. She listened for a minute then turned to Ty, who stood watching them, one eyebrow raised.

“Can you contact Ash? I’d do it myself but it’s a little difficult right now.” She rattled the cuffs to make her point.

He frowned. “Why?”

“Something’s happened to Jo.”

“Jo?”

“Jo Button. You must have met her if you were at Ash’s house this morning.”

“The beautiful blond?”

She ignored the comment. “We need to warn Ash. Kitty’s lost sight of her. Jo’s in trouble. I know it.”

His brows drew together as he scrutinized her. “Why do you care?”

How could she even begin to explain? She liked Jo, was impressed by how she had stood up to the town’s condemnation over the last ten years. Yet it went deeper than that. She saw Jo as a way to make up for some of the bad things she had done in her life. Jo was her redemption.

Ty pulled a cell phone out of his pants pocket and punched in a number. Dina chewed her lip while she waited. He remained silent, and after a minute, he lowered the phone. “He’s not answering.”

“Then we need to go and warn them.”

“Tell me what you know.” The order left no room for argument.

Dina sighed. At least he was willing to listen to her. “There’s some sort of curse on Jo. I haven’t been able to identify where it came from, but I’ve been watching, waiting for whoever it was to show themselves. Now according to Kitty, she’s disappeared.”

He shoved the phone back in his pocket. “I’ll go.”

“No, you need to take me with you. If there’s a warlock involved, I can help.”

Ty examined her through narrowed eyes, nodded, and stepped behind her. For a moment, she thought he would uncuff her; instead, he unfastened one bracelet and locked it around his own wrist.

She stared at his hand so close to her own. “I won’t run.”

He raised his wrist and shook the cuffs. “I know you won’t.”

She pulled a face. The expression was wasted on him—he was already heading for the door, dragging her with him. He led the way along the hall. Dina followed; she didn’t have much choice. She managed to grab a purple shawl from the peg by the front door with her free hand and wrapped it around herself as he yanked her out into the icy night.

Huge snowflakes dropped gently from the sky. The houses lining the streets were festooned with fairy lights that twinkled as they passed. This had always been her favorite time of year in Five Oaks. Christmas had never played much of a part in her early life, and after her mother’s death, she hadn’t been in the mood for celebrating for a long time. But in Five Oaks, she had come to love the festive season.

She tucked her free hand inside the shawl, but the one attached to Ty felt like an icicle. She flexed her fingers, trying to get the circulation going.

“Stop wriggling.”

“It’s all right for you,” she muttered. “Everyone knows vampires have no feelings, but I’m getting frostbite.”

He frowned, wrapped her hand in his larger one, tucked them both into the pocket of his leather coat, and continued walking.

Dina peered at him sideways, and her breath caught in her throat. He was so tall and handsome, with his midnight hair brushing his shoulders, and his pale flawless skin. A shaft of pain stabbed her in the gut. What would it feel like to walk with him as though they were a normal couple, out for an evening stroll?

Maybe she’d pretend, just for a little while.

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Dina’s fingers tightened in his, and Ty glanced down. She appeared almost carefree, showing nothing of the vicious, amoral killer, he knew her to be. He’d investigated her career, and she had killed many times in the years leading up to Severino’s murder.

Then nothing.

He’d always presumed she was somewhere, carrying on her trade under a different name—business as usual. To find she’d been here, in this small, unexciting town all those years, made nonsense of his beliefs.

Beside him, she sighed. “Don’t you love Christmas?”

The words brought him up short. He looked around at the quiet streets, the brightly colored lights hanging from every building. The town was so far from anything he’d ever imagined for her, and he needed to understand how she had ended up here. Why she had stayed. He came to an abrupt halt and turned to face her.

“What?” she asked.

“You know, I always pictured you living it up in some glamorous city somewhere.”

She shrugged and wrapped the shawl tighter around herself. It clashed beautifully with her vibrant hair.

“How did you survive fifty years in this godforsaken town?”

Her eyes widened with surprise at his vehemence. “I love it here.”

Frustration gnawed at him. He couldn't get a grip on the truth. One minute, he thought he had it, and then his preconceived ideas would slip away from him. He'd been so sure that once he found her, he'd prove to himself that the woman he'd thought he'd loved didn't exist—and he'd finally be free.

She glanced away. When her gaze returned to him, her expression had softened. "You never really knew me."

Pain ripped through him. "Was my Dina a complete act?"

She considered him for a minute, head cocked to one side. "Not an act, no, but I wasn't the same person then. I was mixed-up. In a bad place." She paused, biting her lower lip. "I didn't mean to hurt you, but you were in the way." Her voice was gentle and filled with something he didn't want to identify. Pity, perhaps?

Fury and frustration warred inside him, and he turned from her and continued along the street in silence, pulling her after him. Her hand slipped from his and out of his pocket, yet she didn't complain about the cold again.

Ash's house stood in darkness. Ty rang the bell. No one answered the door.

"They're gone," Dina said.

"Yes. We'll go back, keep trying his cell."

"You don't understand. We need to help her—she has no friends in this town."

He frowned. "She has Ash. He'll take care of her. He loves her."

She stared at him, shock stamped on her face. "Ash cares for Jo?"

He nodded. "He's in love with her. He'll keep her safe."

"I didn't know. I thought—" Her lips curved up, and her eyes brightened. "That's wonderful."

It was the first genuine smile he'd seen, and it animated her face. Why couldn't she look at him like that?

His brain froze at the thought.

Why the hell would she ever smile at him? He planned to deliver her to the Conclave. She'd be executed. She'd never smile at anybody again. He ran his free hand through his hair, his fingers digging into his scalp, trying to force his brain into more expected channels. He glanced at her. She still appeared radiantly happy, and he shook his head.

"I got the impression you hated Ash."

She grinned. "I never *hated* him. I just thought he was too smug, and Edna needed some fun."

He shook his head again. Nothing made sense. She was an assassin not a woman with actual feelings. Ty tried to keep firmly in his mind what she was, all that she had done. But that smile kept slipping into his thoughts.

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Dina had no clue what Ty was thinking. Since they'd left Ash's place, he hadn't said a word.

She let them back into her house and led him into the kitchen. She wanted to know when he planned to take her back to the Conclave. Most of her life was in order. She still had to sort out new homes for the cats, but she had a good idea how to solve that little problem. She turned to him and opened her mouth to ask. Then shut it again. He was staring at her, a strange expression in his dark eyes.

"I need to try something," Ty said.

Alarm flicked across her nerve endings as he took a step towards her. "What do you need to try?"

He trailed one lean finger down her cheek, along the line of her jaw, slipped it beneath her chin.

She stayed perfectly still.

He applied a slight pressure, and her head tilted upwards. His face remained blank, except for his dark eyes gleaming in the dim light. Her heart rate picked up until she could hear the blood thundering in her veins.

She suspected he could hear it too, as a slight smile curved his mouth. She swallowed.

The pad of his thumb rubbed over her lower lip, and awareness shot through her. She struggled, her arm pulling against the cuff that tied her to him.

“Shh,” he murmured, leaning in close, his breath feathering across her skin. “Stay still. I’m not going to harm you.” His hand slipped behind her to cradle her head. “Not tonight, anyway.”

Then he kissed her. Shock held her motionless as his cool lips crushed hers, and his hard body pressed her backwards. She gave way before him, until the counter at her back stopped her retreat. With her hand fastened to his, she could do nothing to escape the onslaught. After a few seconds, she didn’t want to try.

Her mouth parted beneath his, and his tongue thrust inside. Ty groaned, low in his throat, as he grasped her hips, lifting her onto the counter without breaking the kiss. His hands slipped between her thighs, spreading them wide so he could step between them and push in close.

Dina kissed him back. She stroked her tongue along the length of his, skimming the hard edges of his teeth. She flirted with the tip of one fang, and when it pricked her, she tasted the sweet, metallic tang of her own blood.

His grip tightened with a new urgency, as his hands slid beneath her top, gliding over her rib cage. She didn’t wear a bra. She’d never needed to, unlike Edna, and the feel of his large hand cupping her bare breast sent waves of pleasure crashing into her. Her body remembered how they had been together, and moist heat flooded between her thighs. His fingers tugged at the taut peaks, sending darts of exquisite sensation shooting down through her belly, to pool in her sex.

His mouth left hers, but his hands continued to play with her nipples while he nuzzled her throat, his fangs grazing her flesh.

She had no thought to deny him. Her whole body screamed to let him do what he would. Only when he pressed her back, and her bound hand twisted painfully beneath her, did she come out of the sensual trance.

“Ty, stop it, you’re hurting me.”



He froze above her. He stayed like that for long moments, his hand still holding her breast. She closed her eyes against the pull of desire. It had always been like this between them hot, fast, and undeniable. "Please."

His palm slid from her breast, and he straightened, drawing her up after him so she sat perched on the counter. Her top was pushed up exposing her stomach, and she tugged at the hem until it covered her.

She stared over his shoulder, unwilling to see what might show in his face. Finally, she forced herself to look at him. His expression was closed, and a dull flush stained his cheekbones. While she watched, his eyes hardened and his lips formed a tight line.

He hauled her off the counter, and slung her over his shoulder, one palm resting on the slight curve of her bottom.

"Where's your room?"

Like she was going to answer that. And why did he want to know? Another wave of heat hit her as the question ran through her mind. She would have asked, but with her face squashed against his back, she was hardly in a position to talk.

Instead, she closed her eyes, gave in to the bliss of being so close, breathing in the intoxicating scent and feeling the ripple of hard muscle as he carried her with ease, up the staircase.

Would she try to stop him? Did she want to stop him?

He kicked open a couple of doors before he hit on her bedroom. He hefted her up and dropped her onto the center of the big brass bed. She lay on her side, her arm raised where it was still cuffed to his, her gaze hungrily devouring his form, every inch of her clamoring for his touch. Maybe just a few minutes, then she'd order him to leave.

He came down on one knee beside her and reached for her wrist. Her heart leapt. He was going to free her. Instead, he unlocked the cuff from his hand and slid it into the brass bedstead, relocking the bracelet before she could even think of making a bid for freedom.

She looked from her shackled arm to the vampire. "Kinky."

“You wish.” He shrugged. “Actually, I’m going out for a while. So don’t go anywhere.”

His words were like a bucket of icy cold snow, dropped on her from above. She tried to think of something cutting to say, with a mind that had turned to slush. Her mouth gaped open, and she snapped it shut, speechless.

He was going out!

“Now be good,” he murmured, and strolled from the room as though he hadn’t a care in the world.

## Chapter Six

Dina ground her teeth and glared at the ceiling.

She listened until the front door slammed. He'd left, and she was alone. She tried tugging at the cuff tying her to the bed, but it was magical, and she knew she would never break the bond. After long minutes of futile struggle, she collapsed back on the pillows and curled into a ball on her side.

She needed to call Ash, tell him what she knew about the curse on Jo, but right now, she couldn't dredge up the energy.

One by one, the cats crept into the room.

"Well, you did a good job," she muttered. "You were supposed to be on patrol. You know, tell me if anything dodgy is around. Like a vampire who wants to kill me."

Pain unfurled inside her at the thought.

She wished he hadn't kissed her. She'd almost resigned herself to death up until that point. Now she didn't want to die. She wanted...Poppy leapt onto the bed, pushing close to her body and purring loudly.

Dina stroked her with her free hand. "Now, if this all goes bad, I want you to take the others and go to Dr. Delaney. He'll take care of them." She bit her lip. "You should have enough time after I'm gone, before...."

The cat hissed.

"I know, except this time I think I'm well and truly got." She pressed her nose into the cat's soft fur. "You know what this means, don't you?"

While the other cats were all strays that had turned up in search of a home, Poppy was her familiar. They had been together a long time; the feline's life extended by Dina's magic. When she died, so would the cat. She blinked away a tear at the thought, and Poppy rasped a rough tongue across her cheek. "I know—everyone's got to go sometime. I just wish I could be as philosophical about it as you."

She also wished Ty would forgive her—and maybe make love to her one last time. Her breast still tingled from his touch. She ran a hand over the hard nipple and shivered.

Why had he kissed her? And having kissed her, why had he then walked away? She'd sensed his desire, felt the hardness of his erection push against her.

Maybe there was a way to get at least some of what she wanted. She suspected that the forgiveness side was beyond her, but if she tried hard, perhaps she could have the one last time. She glanced down at her simple jeans and top. Hardly suitable for seduction, but she could change that.

While she couldn't do any magic with the cuffs on, she didn't actually need magic—just a little cooperation from the cats.

She would seduce Ty, and afterwards, she could die, if not happy, then at least resigned.

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He should never have kissed her. His whole body ached. His cock was rock hard and pressed painfully against his fly.

The snow was heavier now. He lifted his face to the sky, let the icy flakes fall onto his skin, surprised when there was no hiss of steam. He was burning up and nothing could quench the fire.

At least, nothing out here—Dina was what he needed.

He glanced at the upstairs window, picturing her on the bed. She'd told him he was kinky, and he suspected she might be right. There was a first time for everything, and seeing her cuffed to the bed, something primitive had risen up inside him.

If it had just been sex, he might have stayed. She'd hardly shown herself unwilling, and it would be interesting to see how far she'd be prepared to go. But it was more than that. Seeing her helpless, he'd wanted to protect her, keep her safe from the bad guys.

He'd had to get out of there. Before he crawled onto the bed beside her and lost himself in her body. If he did that, then he had no doubt he would lose everything. His mind, his sanity, any chance of future peace.

If only he hadn't kissed her.

He blamed it on that smile. It had played on his mind all the way back from Ash's place. As had her tears earlier. He'd never imagined her capable of crying. It had knocked him off course.

Then again, she could be playing him. She'd been trained in seduction techniques. No doubt, the tears were part of her skill set. If all else fails—cry.

"Murderous bitch," he muttered, except his words had no strength—not anymore.

Everything he'd learned churned in his mind. He'd never understood why she hadn't killed him all those years ago. Hadn't tried to kill him tonight. She was a ruthless assassin, yet she'd spared his life. He'd seen a softer side, a side that took in stray cats, worried about a human woman, got pleasure out of Christmas lights.

He'd never been able to reconcile the woman he'd loved with the killer he knew her to be. He'd presumed it was all an act, now he wasn't so sure, and he hated the doubts that clouded his mind.

He needed to know something.

Whirling around, he raced back into the house and up the stairs. The bedroom door stood open, and for a moment, he lingered in the doorway. There were cats everywhere. Dina glanced up from where she lay curled among them, a guilty expression on her face.

"Back already?" She sounded annoyed.

He stood staring at her. "Why?"

"Why what?" She came up on one elbow and gave a half-hearted shrug. "Why did I kill your sire? I've already told you."

"No. Before that. Why did you become what you are? What turned you into a killer?" He held his breath as he waited for her answer.

Her lips pursed. "You don't know? You never investigated my past?"

"You killed Severino. You used me to do it. I knew everything I needed to know."

She wrinkled her nose. “You always were an arrogant bastard. Why not admit it—you never cared enough to find out.” Her tone was laced with bitterness.

“Tell me now.”

“No. If you’re so interested, find out for yourself. It won’t be hard—it’s a matter of public record.” She rolled back onto her side, clutching a large tabby cat to her middle. “Go away. I’m saying goodbye to my cats.”

He stared at her for a minute longer, jaw clenched against the frustration that threatened to overwhelm him. He’d come back looking for answers, but it was obvious he wasn’t going to find them here. He turned around and stalked from the room.

It had all seemed simple; capture the witch, see justice done, and finally move on with his life. So why did she have him all twisted up inside?

He needed space to clear his head. Ty left the house and walked towards the town center. Snow still fell heavily, but he didn’t feel the cold.

A matter of public record?

What did she mean? There was one way to find out.

He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and punched in the number to the Conclave. He asked to speak to Rosa, his assistant, who’d been pissed off she had to work over the holiday season. Five minutes later, he shoved the phone back in his pocket and resumed walking. Rosa would get back to him. All he could do was wait. In the meantime, he needed a drink. Or two.

He’d been alone for a long time before Dina. His kind did not forge ties easily. Mortals eventually died, and most of the immortal races were wary of vampires. With good cause—vampires loved immortal blood.

When she came along, their connection had been instant. Ty knew now that she must have researched him, and would have known exactly how best to appeal to him. He’d fallen hard, and the stupid thing was, he’d been happy to fall, his thoughts not straying beyond the way she made him feel.

Then she had killed Severino, and he’d realized it had all been a sham.

He remembered back to the black rage that had engulfed him knowing she'd used him—betrayed his trust. His only thought had been to find her, punish her.

Yet now Ty realized that he hadn't wanted to punish her for his sire's murder, but for using him to help her do it. And even that wasn't the whole truth. What he'd really wanted to punish her for, was not loving him.

He was in a foul mood by the time he reached the center of town. He didn't see a bar, but a restaurant stood across the way. Stump's Diner.

Stepping through the door was like stepping back into the 1970's. He'd hated the 1970's. Back then, Dina's betrayal had still been raw and the decade had passed in a haze of bitterness. He took in the stained Formica counter and the set of deer antlers hung on the wall and almost turned straight around. Except he needed that drink.

A man slumped at the bar, otherwise the place was empty. Ty slid into one of the booths along the wall, facing the door.

"Hi, honey."

He turned to look at the waitress. Her gaze wandered over him, and by the time she got to his face, she was smiling.

"Whiskey," he said.

"How about a nice slice of pie. To warm you up."

Her shrill voice grated on his already tense nerves. He stared at her, not attempting to hide the darkness in his soul. It was a pointless exercise. She pouted at him and thrust her breasts a little further out.

"We have cherry pie. It's very popular."

"Whiskey."

"Or a nice piece of Christmas cake..."

*How about a pint of blood?*

He managed to bite back the words, but only just. However, something must have gotten through her thick skin, because she finally backed off. She returned a minute later with his drink.

She opened her mouth. He glared, and she shut it again.

Why the hell couldn't he shake the feeling that he was somehow in the wrong with Dina? A sick nausea churned in his gut. Where the hell was Rosa with his information? She'd had—he glanced at his watch—only ten minutes had passed. He swallowed the whiskey and raised his glass. The waitress brought another. He didn't look up, and this time she didn't linger, and she didn't mention pie.

He downed the drink in one gulp then stared at his phone some more, willing it to ring. It didn't work and he was about to phone Rosa again and ask what the hell was holding her up when the door of the bar swung open, and Ash stepped in.

He hovered in the doorway, searching the bar. When his gaze caught Ty's, he nodded and headed over, sliding into the seat opposite.

"Dina and I were looking for you earlier," Ty said. "Is Jo all right?"

Ash glanced sharply at him. "No. She's missing. I might need—" He was cut-off by the ring of his cell phone from his pocket. Ash pulled it out and pushed a button. He made to put it away when it rang again almost immediately. And again.

Ash cut the caller off for the third time, obviously irritated with the persistent attempts to get his attention. He'd barely cut the call, when it rang again.

"Who the hell is this? Can't you take a hint?"

He listened for a moment, a frown forming. He glanced at Ty, and his eyes widened. He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Edna Carruthers is your witch?"

Ty almost smiled at the disbelief in his voice. He nodded. "Her real name's Dina. Why?"

"No reason."

Every muscle tensed. Angels were crappy liars, and Ash was no exception—his expression was shifty, and the only reason for that would be Dina on the other end of the phone. "Let me talk to her." Ty made to grab the cell. The Angel leaned away and twisted in the seat so his back was to Ty before lifting the phone to his ear.



“What about Jo?” he said.

Ty leaned in closer and blanked out the sounds of the bar. He could hear her clearly. How the hell had she gotten hold of a phone?

“Jo’s been cursed,” she said. “You need to break it.”

“According to Ty, you’re a witch. How about *you* take the curse off her?”

“I can’t. I didn’t put it there. And besides, I’m slightly...incapacitated right now.”

Ash raised an eyebrow. “Thanks for telling me about Jo. I’ll get back to you.” He ended the call and looked at Ty, his eyes hard. “What did you do to the witch?”

Ty folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. “None of your business.”

“Come on, spill it. She says she’s incapacitated and can’t help Jo.” Ash glared at him. “If you did something that endangers her, I’m going to take you to the dentist.”

He curled his lip. “You could try.”

They stared at each other for long moments, before he shrugged. “I’ve done nothing to her...yet.”

“Yet?”

“She’s a wanted murderer. I plan to return her to the Conclave where she’ll be tried.”

Ash shook his head. “You know, I’m still finding it difficult to see Edna Carruthers as anything other than an annoying busybody, who did her best to make my life hell. By the way—what are you doing about her cats?”

“Why should I be doing anything?”

“They’ll need re-homing. She has a lot of cats.”

Ty rubbed his forehead trying to make the ache go away. He hoped Ash had finished. No such luck.

“And how have you incapacitated her? Is she hurt?”

“No, she’s not hurt. I’ve cuffed her to the bed.”

“Kinky.”

Ash smirked, and Ty ground his teeth together. “It is *not* kinky, and she’s totally unharmed.”

“She’d better stay that way. So you’ve left her cuffed to the bed while you come out here and,” he paused and gestured to the empty glass, “get drunk.”

Ty narrowly avoided squirming.

“Drowning your sorrows?” Ash asked. “Feeling guilty about something?”

“I do not—” His cell phone rang. He grabbed it from the table and rose to his feet.

“Rosa?”

“Yeah, boss. I’ve got that information you wanted.”

“So?” He tried to keep the impatience from his voice, and failed.

“It was easy to find. I don’t know why it wasn’t in her file.”

Because he hadn’t put it there. Because he had never looked.

“Get on with it.”

“Dina Swanson’s mother was found guilty of using black magic by the Conclave seventy years ago. She and her two younger daughters were executed.”

“Why the daughters? And why not Dina as well?”

“It’s not clear, but Ty....” He heard the uncertainty in her voice.

“Yes?”

“I know you’re not going to want to hear this, but....”

“Get on with it, Rosa.”

“The case was one of Severino’s, and it didn’t go through the normal channels. There was never a formal trial.”

“Who carried out the executions?”

“Severino himself. There were no other witnesses.”

“How old were the daughters?”

“Eleven and fourteen.”

Nausea roiled in his stomach, and he swallowed. “How did he get away with it?”

“He did whatever he liked. You were close, but you had nothing to do with the Conclave back then. You didn’t see it. And since he was killed, you’ve—”

“I’ve what?”

“You’ve refused to hear anything bad about him.”

For long minutes, he stared into space, trying to assimilate the information and not liking the conclusions he was coming to.

“Boss?”

He forced himself to answer. “Thanks, Rosa. I’ll get back to you.” He ended the call and ran a hand through his hair.

“Ty?”

He turned to see Ash watching him.

“Bad news?”

“No,” he replied. “Just not what I expected.”

What had he expected? He had no clue. His mind felt like glue. Severino had executed her mother and sisters. Except he knew, even as the thoughts flashed through his head, that the word executed was wrong. Even the Conclave would never have sentenced two children to death. No, Severino had *murdered* her mother and sisters. Dina had waited twenty years to get her revenge, had planned her whole life around it. She’d used everything and anything to achieve that one goal. Including him.

Could he blame her?

He stared at the phone still in his hand then hit Rosa’s number.

“Rosa, I want you to close the file on Severino’s assassination.”

“What?”

“It’s over.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, just ended the call.

Why hadn’t Dina told him, explained? After all, hadn’t he done the same thing, in dedicating the last fifty years to hunting his sire’s killer? How could he condemn her, when he understood her so well?

“Ty?”

He glanced back to Ash. “I’m sorry—did you want me for something?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure.” Ash’s brow furrowed. “I might need a favor.”

“You’ve got my number—call me.”

“How long will you be in town?”

Ty frowned. He wanted out of there. Every particle of his being urged him to get back to Dina. But Ash was a friend, so he forced himself to concentrate and answer. “Another day at least.”

“Will you be back at my place tonight?”

“I don’t know.” He pivoted and walked towards the door.

“Ty?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t hurt her.”

He didn’t bother answering. He didn’t plan to hurt her. He planned to talk to her.

They had never really talked. In the past, their time had been taken up with making love. Talking had always seemed an unnecessary waste of their valuable hours together.

Tonight, he was going to have it out with her. Maybe she had never cared. But she was also not the evil monster she’d pretended to be at their last meeting, when they had stood over Severino’s decapitated body.

And maybe there had been a flicker of truth in her feelings for him. He had to know if it had all been a lie.

Tonight, he wouldn’t be side-tracked. Tonight, they would finally talk.

## Chapter Seven

This time she would not give him the chance to open his mouth and spoil it all. It always went wrong when they talked. If they talked, someone would say something bad, and the chance would be gone.

No, she'd get in there fast and hard. If she was going to die, then she'd have one last night to remember the good between them.

He seemed to be gone forever. Maybe he'd left town, and meant to leave her here. She'd eventually starve, and the cats would eat her and....

The front door slammed. Her whole body went rigid as his footsteps sounded on the stairs. She forced her muscles to relax and stretched out on the bed, her cuffed arm raised above her head. She'd switched off the main light; or rather, one of the cats had done it for her. Now she lay in the crimson glow from the bedside lamp.

Ty stood framed in the doorway. His hair was damp, snowflakes glittered like stars among the midnight blackness, and his dark eyes gleamed with determination.

"We need to—"

He stopped dead, shock stamped on his face. The shock was quickly replaced by red hot desire, and a thrill of success ran through her like wildfire. She'd never considered herself sexy. She was too thin. Her breasts too small, her hips too narrow. Yet she'd never felt like that with him. He'd always looked at her as though he'd found her the sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

It had made her feel desired...and guilty.

She pushed that thought aside.

Just one night, she told herself. Then she would pay for the past, but let her have this night first.

He appeared dazed, his gaze fixed on her, and she stretched languidly, arching her back.

He swallowed. "We need to talk."

No way. A sense of panic took hold of her. She needed this—and after fifty long years of being Edna—she deserved this.

“I don’t want to talk.” She pouted and slid her palm over the curve of her hip under the black lace tube dress. She’d worn this dress for him once before, the night she had killed Severino. The night she had thought would be her last, and she’d wanted it to be special.

He followed the movement of her hand, but still he stood in the doorway, every muscle locked tight. She needed to break his rigid control. She peered at him through her lashes.

“Are you *hungry*, Ty?”

She bit down on her lower lip, hard and tasted the sharp metallic tang of fresh blood.

His gaze shot to her mouth. His eyes closed, and he breathed in. When they opened, they were dark with hunger and need, and she knew he was almost hers.

Dina dabbed at the bead of blood with her tongue, saw the moment his control crumbled, and a wave of relief washed through her.

“We’ll talk later,” he growled.

Flames licked through her body as he stalked across the room to stand at the foot of the bed. He stripped off his shirt and tossed it on the floor revealing a broad chest, with the smooth swell of muscle under sleek skin. A line of dark hair bisected his lean belly, disappearing into the waistband of his black pants.

Her fingers ached to touch him, but the cuff held her out of reach, and she could only watch as he crawled up the bed until he crouched over her on all fours. She breathed in, and moist heat flooded between her thighs. She’d always loved his scent, spicy, utterly intoxicating, especially when he was aroused.

Leaning in close, he stroked his tongue over her lower lip then nibbled it with his sharp teeth, and every nerve ending screamed into life. The breath caught in her throat, and she lay perfectly still beneath him.

He kissed her, not touching her anywhere except her mouth. Gently at first, his tongue slipped inside. It felt like warm velvet, stroking against hers, filling her with the hot, heady taste of him, then harder, as the last of his control vanished. He crushed her mouth beneath his, and she tasted the sweetness of her own blood once more.

After long drugging seconds, he raised his head. His eyes were wild as he stared at her, and his lips curled back, revealing razor sharp fangs. She knew what he craved and raised her head, tipping it back to expose the line of her throat, holding her breath as his head lowered. His tongue caressed her, tasted her, searching out the point where her blood flowed close to the surface.

He was a killer, yet she felt no fear as he sank his fangs into her vein.

There was no pain, just a rhythmic tugging that drew on places deep within her. The dragging pull of his mouth sent electric shocks darting to every part of her body, concentrating on her breasts and between her thighs.

Her nipples pressed painfully against the too tight dress, and her sex was already drenched and swollen with need. He had always made her feel like this. Right from the very start.

He withdrew, his tongue swiping across the wound in her throat, and he sat back on his heels and stared at her.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

Dina didn’t answer. She didn’t want to talk; she wanted to lose herself in him.

For a moment, he watched her, his eyes sleepy, glowing crimson with the blood he had taken. Finally, he stroked a finger along the inside of her arm from where the silver cuff bound her wrist to the swell of her breast. Her skin tingled where he touched, and a shiver danced across her flesh.

A brief smile flashed across his face. “You know, I think I might be kinky after all. I like you like this.”

His hand continued to trace the neckline of her dress until she thought she’d go mad for his touch. She reached out with her free hand, but it fell

back to her side as he hooked one finger in the top and dragged it down exposing her small breasts.

The nipples were already beaded and throbbing with need. Ty pinched one between his finger and thumb and pleasure pierced her belly. His palm smoothed over the sensitive peak, soothing her, then pinched again, harder this time. He remembered so well, what she liked. That hint of pain behind the pleasure.

He tugged the dress the rest of the way off and tossed it on the floor leaving her in nothing more than black hold-up stockings and stilettos.

Dina saw the line of his erection pressed against his pants. She kicked off her shoes and ran her foot over his thigh, wriggled her toes against his hard shaft. His hand cupped her foot, pressing her against him.

Holding her gaze, he flicked open the fastening of his pants and lowered his zip. His cock sprang free as he pushed them down over his lean hips. He left her for a moment, to stand and pull them off. He was big, hard, his shaft thick and broad, the skin silky pale, the head swollen and flushed with blood.

“Like what you see?” he murmured the question, and Dina dragged her avid gaze from his arousal to his face. He watched her, eyes half closed, and she licked her lips.

“Yes.”

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Ty’s body buzzed with the blood he had taken. His cock ached with the need to be inside her. She was so beautiful, naked except for the stockings, black against her white skin, one slender arm raised above her head, fastened to the brass bars of the bed by the silver cuff.

He moved closer, meaning to release her. At the last moment, he changed his mind. Instead, he took hold of her other wrist. Her eyes widened, but she didn’t resist as he unlocked the cuff attached to the bar, looped it around the back of the bed and cuffed her free hand.



He stepped back and a groan caught in his throat. Oh yeah. He could definitely get into this kinky stuff. He'd thought he couldn't get any harder, but now the blood throbbed in his cock.

Both arms were raised above her head, drawing her body into a taut line that thrust her small breasts upwards. Her nipples were already tight and swollen. He leaned over her and sucked one stiff pink tip into his mouth. She moaned, and her back arched higher, her hips straining up from the bed and her legs falling open. The air filled with the hot, sweet scent of her arousal.

He came down besides her, lying on his side to trail one finger over her stomach and lower to ruffle the dark red curls. He slipped a finger between the folds of her drenched sex, and pushed inside.

She made small whimpering sounds of pleasure, pressing against his hand, and he felt the ripples of pleasure shivering through her. She was close.

He nibbled his way down the satin skin of her belly, dipping into her navel, then lower. Finally, he parted her sex with his fingers, and stroked his tongue over the tight little bud between her thighs.

Her whole body went rigid beneath him. He licked again, sucking her clit, and she exploded.

Rising over her, he braced on his elbows, every muscle locked in anticipation as he held himself poised at the slick opening to her body. He stared into her face, and the past fifty years disappeared, wiped away, and he was back where he belonged.

He held her gaze and thrust inside. She was so small, but she accepted him easily, wrapping her legs around his waist and pulling him closer. He kissed her, flexed his hips, and pushed in further. She was burning hot, her muscles clenched him tight inside her, and he sensed her rising pleasure with each thrust and grind of his cock.

Ty drew back from the kiss and burrowed his lips against the soft flesh of her throat, found the spot he had bitten her earlier and, as the orgasm ripped through her, he sank his fangs deep into the vein. Her hot blood

flooded his mouth, releasing the last hold he had on his control. He thrust harder, faster into her welcoming body, feeling the pleasure build inside him until his own climax crashed over them both.

\*\*\*

Dina didn't sleep, not wanting to waste any of their time together. Instead, she watched him, her head propped on one hand. Ty lay on his stomach, his black tousled head pillowed on his arms, and she couldn't resist trailing a finger across the satin skin of his back, over the swell of his buttocks.

He stirred sleepily, rolled over, and reached for her. For a moment, she thought he would wake, but his eyes remained closed. She stroked the silky hair from his forehead, leaned over him, and kissed his mouth, soft in sleep.

After they'd made love, he'd released her. She had wrapped her arms around him, and he'd made slow, sinfully erotic love to her a second time. As the exquisite pleasure pulsed through their bodies, he'd held her close and whispered against her skin, "I love you."

Dina had wanted to reply, but fear kept the words lodged in her throat, and now the night was nearly over. If she was going, then it should be at once. If she stayed longer, she would weaken. She knew Ty loved her. She just didn't know what that meant. He had a strong sense of duty and might still see the need to take her back to the Conclave to stand trial. And she truly believed if he did that, then he would destroy them both.

Pain blossomed inside her, piercing her heart. She had known what she had done to him all those years ago. She had lived with the regret most of her life, and she couldn't bear the thought of destroying him for a second time.

His lips moved under hers, and she pulled away. She glanced at the silver cuff that still hung from the bed frame then shook her head. Instead, she whispered the words of a spell, and his sleep deepened until his breathing came slow and calm. She kissed him one last time and slid from the bed.

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Ty woke in the early hours of the morning. Darkness shrouded the room, but he knew he was alone, and a wave of despair washed over him. He reached out and switched on the bedside lamp. The silver cuff dangled empty from the brass railing.

He'd let her go. Why was he so surprised to find her gone?

Black despair flooded him. He'd known releasing her was a risk, yet he'd hoped she would trust him enough to stay, to see this thing through.

He sat up, swung his legs out of bed, and searched the room for some sign of her. Breathing in deeply, he caught the faint, sweet scent of her lingering in the air.

A note lay on the table next to him. He picked it up.

*Ty,*

*I'm not sorry for killing Severino, but I am sorry for taking your loved one—I know how that feels.*

*Maybe we'll meet again in another fifty years.*

*Love, Dina.*

*P.S. Please take the cats to Ash.*

*P.P.S. If you love something, let it go.... Thank you for letting me go.*

Rage overwhelmed his despair. He gritted his teeth, scrunched the paper and flung it to the floor. Then leaned down, snatched it up, smoothed out the creases, and ran the tip of his finger along the 'Love, Dina'.

Another fifty years?

No fucking way.

## Chapter Eight

Dina meant to leave.

She was heading out of town. On foot. She told herself she was saying one last goodbye to Five Oaks. As soon as she hit the town limits, she would cast a spell, and she and Poppy would be off.

Poppy had picked Hawaii, and Dina couldn't wait for some sunshine.

Or so she kept telling herself. Yet each footstep that took her further from Ty dragged, and her heart had frozen to a huge, heavy ball of ice that no amount of sunshine could melt. Only he could do that.

Poppy hissed. She glanced at the feline. "What?"

The cat stared at her with inscrutable amber eyes.

"You think I'm wrong, don't you? You think I'm a coward for running away?"

Dina stopped abruptly. She imagined herself lying on the beach in Hawaii, perhaps sipping a frothy cocktail.

And never seeing Ty again.

"Oh, God, I *am* wrong."

Fifty years ago, she'd been terrified. Not of loving Ty, but of loving him and then losing him, as she'd lost her family. It was why she had held some part of herself back and never tried to explain. Why she had run. Why even now, she found it so hard to say, I love you.

Warmth stole through her as she remembered his whispered words in the night. She wanted to hear those words again, every night of her life. She raised her left hand to her face and admired the ruby twinkling against her skin. The ring had been sitting on the kitchen table, and she hadn't been able to resist slipping it on to her finger.

All those years ago, Ty had been ready to marry her. Last night, he'd told her he still loved her. He was willing to take the risk on love, and suddenly she realized, so was she. Besides, if she imagined she had any choice in the matter, she was deluded. She couldn't pretend any longer—she already

loved him. She'd go back, find him, tell him, and hope there was some way they could be together. She was still scared, but some things were worth the risk.

She turned around and headed back into town, Poppy trotting beside her. As she walked, she practiced under her breath, "I love you. I love you."

And each time she whispered the words, the ice around her heart melted a little more.

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Above him, the night was still dark, while to the east, the faint glow of dawn tinted the sky with crimson.

Ty knew he should go back to Ash's place and wait out the day, yet something drove him on. He couldn't believe Dina had run away again. Logic told him she was long gone, but an inner voice whispered she was close. Magic hung in the air, witch's magic, leading him onwards. Ty felt as though he teetered on the edge of some great discovery. If only he could find her, he would know the truth.

He wandered the dark, empty streets of Five Oaks, searching for any sign of her. He had to find her, and this time they *would* talk. He would tell her the Conclave was off her back for good, and maybe they could find some way to move forward together. He knew she cared for him. He just needed to make her admit it.

Eventually, he came to a square in the center of town, with a tall monument at one end surrounded by the charred remains of five oak trees.

Dina sat cross-legged on one of the tree stumps. The air around her sparkled and danced with magic. A large tabby cat lay on the ground at her feet, long tail twitching. It watched him through narrowed eyes.

Relief flooded him.

"Did you know this is where Five Oaks got its name?" She gestured to the four other stumps around her. "Ashriel smote them. About eighty years ago, before Edna's time, but the locals still talk about it."

"Why?" He stared into her face trying to sense her thoughts.

“Why do they still talk about it?” She shrugged. “Not a lot goes on in Five Oaks, and eighty years isn’t that long.”

“No, I meant why—” He shook his head—there were too many questions. “We need to talk.”

Her brows drew together. “So you said.”

“I know about your mother.”

“It was never a secret.”

“Severino had her executed.”

“No, he raped and killed her himself. Then he murdered my sisters. They were children.”

The pain lacing her voice pierced his heart. “Why didn’t you tell me? I would have understood.”

“I think I knew that, and I was scared.”

He frowned. “Scared I wouldn’t forgive you?”

“No, afraid you would. Afraid I would have to admit to myself that I loved you. Back then, I wasn’t ready to love anyone.” She gave him a small smile and shrugged. “I was a coward. I didn’t want to risk that pain again.”

She stretched out her legs and stood. Ty held himself still as she moved towards him, stopping a foot away. He curbed his impatience, waiting for her to finish what she needed to tell him.

Finally, she continued. “You know, I’ve done some bad things in my life. I was so full of rage when my mother died that for a while, I believed I was truly evil. By the time I met you I’d changed, but I was afraid. Afraid that if I loved you and lost you, I would turn into that person again. So I ran.”

“You’re not running now?” He held his breath as he waited for her answer.

She stared at the ground for a long time, fiddling with something on her finger, and he realized she wore his ruby ring. It gave him hope.

“I’m tired of running.” She took a step closer, and her lips curved into that same sweet smile he’d seen last night. This time it was for him. “I’m still scared, but I won’t hide anymore. I’m here because it’s where I want to be.”

“Five Oaks?”

“Five Oaks or London. Anywhere so long as it’s where you are. You see, I love you. I think I’ve always loved you.”

The tension in his muscles relaxed, and a wave of relief washed over him, so strong he staggered under the weight.

“Do you know the end of that quote?” Dina asked. “The one from my note? ‘If you love something, let it go...’”

“Tell me.”

“If it comes back to you, it’s yours forever.” She reached up and cupped his cheek, her hand warm against his skin. “I’m yours Ty—if you want me.”

She was giving herself to him. Unequivocally.

A sense of peace settled over him. He took a final step towards her, and she was in his arms. He lifted her, holding her against him and kissed her fiercely, while the snow fell around them. Finally, he released her. He looked at the sky; saw the faint hint of crimson to the east. Dawn would come soon.

“I know a nice basement where we can spend the day.”

Her face lit up with a bone-melting smile. “You do?”

He stroked his finger down the soft skin of her cheek. “Hmm. Your cats are already there, all thirteen of them.”

“Good, but as long as you’re there, then nothing else matters.”

She tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, and together they walked through the silent streets of Five Oaks.

## ***~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~***

Nina Croft grew up in the north of England. After training as an accountant she spent four years working as a volunteer in Zambia which left her with a love of the sun and a dislike of 9-5 work. She then spent a number of years mixing travel (whenever possible) with work (whenever necessary) but has now settled down to a life of writing and picking almonds on a remote farm in the mountains of southern Spain.

Nina's writing mixes romance with elements of the paranormal and science fiction.

*You can visit Nina on-line at: [www.ninacroft.com](http://www.ninacroft.com)*





## ***Snowy Encounters***

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**Ever since her divorce, successful Event Planner Maddy Glover dreads visiting her hometown. For the first time in three years, she returns home for the holidays and finds herself caught at the end of an avalanche. Only to be rescued by the one man she's determined to avoid: her ex-husband.**

**Ambitious and desirable Cole Harmon lives to rebuild the town and to forget the woman who hadn't believed he had enough to offer her—until Maddy shows up in her cute city-slicker attire and sexy black boots. In need of a decorator for the holidays, he hires his ex-wife to help, only to be thrown into dark buried memories and snowy encounters that may thaw the ice between them. Will their love rekindle or will Maddy walk away once again?**

### **~Excerpt~**

“Oh, Cole, sweetie!”

The shrill voice ran a chill down his spine as Cole Harmon drew in an agitated breath and slowly turned around. The brisk winter air brushed against him. He pasted on a smile. *Just what I need. Great.* “What’s up, Brie?”

“You weren’t going to leave without saying ‘bye’, were you?” Brie, the diner’s waitress, slapped a hand to her waist and jutted out a hip.

*If I could help it, then yes.* The woman was constantly after him. Cole forced out a

chuckle. “Sorry. You were busy, and I didn’t want to distract you.”

“You should have asked me to serve you. I could have slipped you some pie or something.”

She was being nice. But Brie’s pout and female wiles didn’t come off as attractive. Instead, he couldn’t help but become annoyed. It was the same game he played every time he came to the diner—the same conversation he had with every female in town. If he wasn’t believed to be such a great catch because of his recent successes, the women probably wouldn’t have given him the time of day. “Next time, I will. I’m in a hurry though.”

Brie closed the distance between them from the diner’s front door to stand in front of him. “You need to stop working yourself so hard. It’s not healthy.”

“Gotta do it. The lodge isn’t going to run itself. I don’t have time to rest.” He glanced impatiently at his watch, wishing he’d never decided to stop for a bite. But they had the best grilled cheese sandwiches, and he couldn’t resist. “I gotta go. I’ll stop back in later when I get the chance.”

Brie beamed him a wide smile. Her hand flattened against his chest. She moved in a little closer. “Good. We should have dinner together or something. I get out at eight.”

He stiffened. As much as he liked the attention he’d received, he didn’t feel anything. Brie was a good woman, worked hard and always friendly with the locals, but he didn’t have the energy to court anyone. His last attempt only left him with a broken heart and divorce. “I’ll try my best, but don’t count on it.”

She pouted. “That’s what you said last time.”

Irritation pinched him. “I swear, I’ll try.”

Brie eyed him warily then dropped her arms to her side. “It’s okay. I heard that the decorator from Pentonville backed out on you. What are you going to do?”

He shrugged. He was still trying to figure that part out. With a lodge full of tourists expecting a spectacular Christmas, he had nothing—no trees, holiday decorations, or entertainment—just lots of snow and skiing. And his new lodge due to open in less than ten days and no one to plan the grand opening party either...life was great. *If it didn’t crush me like the frequent avalanches around this damn mountain.*

“Well, if I don’t see you tonight, at least save me a dance at the Christmas Eve party.”

Cole blew out a relieved sigh. She wasn't going to drag on the game. "Sure thing. I'll see ya."

He climbed into his truck before Brie could wave goodbye. With the start of the engine, he jerked the clutch into drive and carefully maneuvered out of the parking lot. Batting at the garland and strings of lights poking at him from the passenger seat, he tried to focus on the road. Fluffy snowflakes fell across the open, narrow streets of Five Oaks, a.k.a Five Stumps. The town had been in the pits for so long until Cole renovated and re-opened Tall Oaks lodge, drawing in new tourists from across the country. Who could resist a day of skiing on the slopes and cuddling in front of an open fire with hot chocolate?

He needed a drink. Something strong. Maybe a scotch.

Four days before Christmas and he had no one to celebrate it with besides his father and little brother. The men in his family had no culinary skills. They'd probably end up at the diner or the lodge for their holiday meal like they had the past two Christmases. Since his divorce. Sure, he had women offering to spend this time of the year with him, but he couldn't bring himself to. It was still too soon.

Cole shook his head. What difference did it make if he started seeing someone again? Maddy wasn't going to return to him. She'd stated very clearly she didn't want to stay in the hick town. Just like his mother.

Giving the decorations one last jab, he turned down his street and pulled the truck to a stop in front of his ex in-law's house. He'd tried to distance himself from Mary and Hank, but they wouldn't have it. They still treated him like their own son. It didn't matter that he and Maddy were divorced.

Hopping down from the driver's seat, he slammed the door shut and went to the back of his truck, where he lifted the snow blower down. No matter how many times his in-laws told him he didn't have to clean their driveway, he did it anyway. Maddy's parents weren't old, but with them alone, he hated that they had no one around to take care of them. His ex-wife had run as far as New York City, almost to the other side of the continent from Five Oaks.

The snow crunched under his boots as he pushed the snow blower to the driveway. Already five-inches thick, the white stuff fell faster. Cole started up the machine and

glanced towards the house, noting the lights. He frowned and immediately flicked the off button. The Glovers should have left to spend Christmas with Maddy in the city. He trudged through the snow to the front door. A burglar couldn't have broken in since he'd made sure they had an alarm system installed years ago.

Lifting his hand to knock, he jumped back a step when the wooden panel swung open, the wreath on the door swaying with the force. Mary Glover stared at him, mouth opened as relief surged into her green eyes.

“Thank God, you're here.”

Cole pressed a quick kiss to her weathered cheek, concern knotting in his chest. “What's going on? Shouldn't you and Hank be in New York?”

Mary gave him a quick hug and drew back. “No. We decided to do Christmas here. I meant to tell you, but we've been so busy and I wanted to invite you and your father and brother over. I'm making your favorite turkey, so you have no choice, but to accept.”

He grinned then tensed. If they were spending the holiday here, then that would mean...? “What about Maddy?”

Mary's hand fluttered to her chest. “That's why I'm glad you're here.”

He arched an eyebrow while his heart started an unsteady beat. A million possibilities ran through his mind. Was Maddy hurt? Did something happen to her in the city? Or worst yet, was she getting married? “What's going on?”

“Her car is buried under an avalanche.”