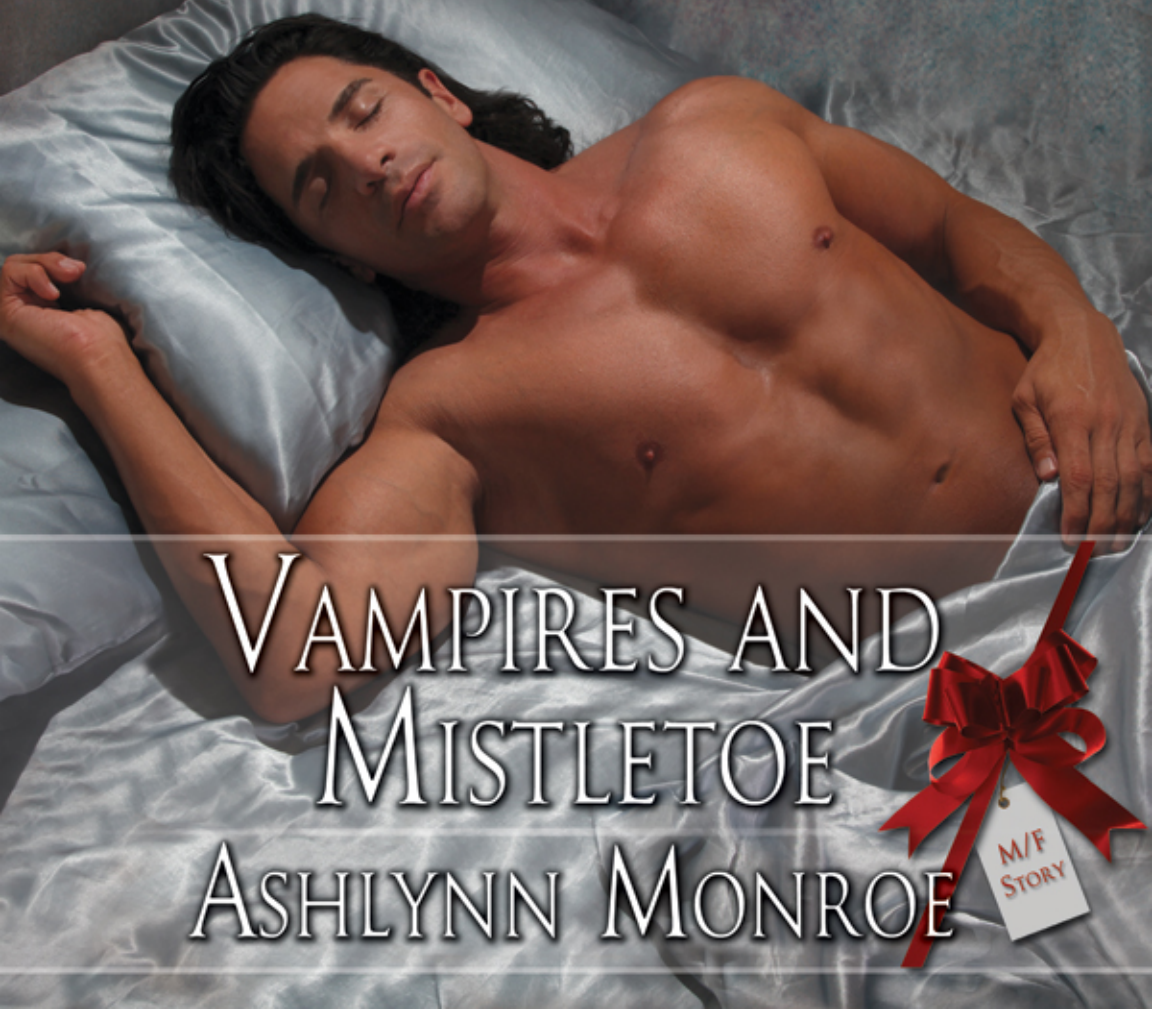


Another bedtime story from Silver Publishing

25 Days of Christmas



VAMPIRES AND
MISTLETOE
ASHLYNN MONROE



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ASHLYNN MONROE

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ISBN # 978-1-920468-14-9

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PUBLISHER

SILVER PUBLISHING

<http://www.silverpublishing.info>

TRADEMARKS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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DEDICATION

To my friend, Amy H., thanks for reading my work and encouraging me to pursue my dream. Your encouragement has been such a blessing. A true friend is a rare gift; thank you for being mine.

CHAPTER ONE

December 21st

Cold and still, a soft dusting of sparkling snow mocked her in the lamplight. Her New York state apartment was a world away from the life she'd known as a child. Snow always made her think of a happier time before her mother died. Tessa tried not to be depressed; Christmas was a week away after all.

Once again she would be going to her father's domain without a boyfriend. Granted, she had a family that would make most regular guys flee in terror; but she still hated to go home alone, again. Once she'd brought a human man home, a man she thought she would marry. He'd told her that he could handle it. She'd been very clear and frank about her families... differences. However, her heritage freaked him out, and as soon as they were in the human realm again he broke up with her. In fact, he'd been so afraid of her he'd moved out of the city, without leaving a forwarding address. She'd received his break up email telling her that he just couldn't deal with what she was. Tessa knew she deserved more from him after living with the jerk for two years. The coward even changed his phone number. She wouldn't be surprised if he'd left the country.

He was the last man she'd allowed into her life, or her heart.

Her heritage would scare away the most determined of men. Blaming her father for her lonely existence was easy. Every paranormal creature great or small called her father Master; he was a dark dangerous force of nature. He could be frightening when he chose to be cruel. Victor Dark was a very powerful demon, and he'd fought his way to the top of the Other World hierarchy to be the current Grand Master of Other World. As an adult she understood his need to rule his realm with an iron fist, but as a child she'd been confused and afraid of him. This fact had caused a very strange childhood for Tessa and her five sisters. They'd been born in the human world never knowing what their absent father was until the death of the mother who loved them. Tessa's mother would leave her with a friend or her grandmother for a few weeks each year. At the time she'd wondered why. After meeting her father she felt certain her mother was trying to shelter her. She'd never worked up the courage to ask him why he'd shown her no interest. At time she'd wondered if she'd even have met him if her mother hadn't died. Tessa loved her sisters, but she hated what they were — half demon. Her heart belonged in the "normal" world of her mother's kind; humans.

Her sixteenth birthday present had been tail removal. What kind of a thing was that to have as a memory? Tail removal, *blech*. Her family didn't understand her anger about what she was. They didn't understand that all Tessa wanted was to be human! And having a tail grow in at puberty (even if you could hide it) was not normal for a human. Most of her sisters reveled in the fact that they were Victor's children. They didn't remember what it was like to be sure you were human. Finding out that she wasn't had been shocking, especially as the knowledge followed her mother's death so closely.

Tessa was the oldest of the six girls and she'd the most memories of their mother and of living in the human world. She'd been the only one to attend regular school and the only one to remember their mother dying. The triplets; Tara, Tonia, and Tabitha, had been infants and Talia and Trista, two and three. Tessa's mother's best friend kept the children for weeks after her death, and there had been no mention of a father in all of that time.

Tessa never met the man until the dark night he arrived with an entourage of weird, scary people. Her mother's friend acted strangely when the dark man arrived, as if she couldn't see him. She sat down in her favorite chair and immediately fell asleep. Doing her best to wake

the woman she considered a second mother proved futile. Tessa had realized something made her sleep unnaturally. Even to a child, that was clear.

The tall, dark man who came for them hadn't smiled or said a kind word to the frightened, grieving seven-year-old Tessa, only said that he was her father. She remembered gazing up at his dark scowling eyes and bursting into tears. The stranger offered no comfort or condolence to her, a terrified little girl just needing a kind look or word in that horrible moment.

When the large hand came down to take her smaller one, she shied away, afraid, and he looked displeased. That was the last time he attempted to touch her. What she was seeing was not for just any eyes. It was obvious that somehow not all humans could see the group that followed her dark mysterious father. Having been born with magical abilities, Tessa knew she was different to the other kids at school, but her mother had never made her feel badly, only careful, about those differences. His menagerie rushed them out of the house. Tessa managed to grab her stuffed cat, but every other memento or piece of her human life had been lost to her in that painful moment.

A small blue woman took her and her sisters to a waiting car. Blue was not a normal color. Heartbroken, she

watched her neighborhood melt away into the darkness.

The car lurched strangely and she remembered clinging to her stuffed animal. When she saw a shimmering wall of sparkling light she thought they'd be hurt. Shaking and crying she felt the change, the difference when the car left the world she'd always known. In that moment she entered the Other World, and her life changed forever.

Pulling herself out of her sad memories, she felt a keen sense of loss. She had a small Christmas tree, decorated with red and gold balls, just as her childhood Christmas trees had looked. She knew a large lavish tree waited at the castle, but her little tree was far more special in her eyes because of how similar it was to the ones her mother had decorated. She'd avoided going to her father's world for several years, but she just couldn't do that her sisters again. Regretfully she'd taken an extra week's vacation to "travel" for the holidays. As she never took time off her accrued bank of vacation hours sat bursting at the seams. Her boss seemed genuinely relieved that she was finally taking a little time off.

Out of the entire year Christmas was the time she missed her mother most. Hannah, her mother, loved Christmas, and she had instilled her sense of wonder and joy over the magic of the season in her eldest child. After

her mother died, Tessa felt a sense of responsibility to her little sisters. Her mother would bake and sing while dancing in the kitchen. They'd been close, she and her mother. After she was gone all the giggling and laughing had ended. No one sang in the kitchen at the castle. Victor had hired an assortment of creatures to nanny and tutor his daughters. Having nannies who gave you nightmares didn't exactly help in developing a close bond. She'd decided that she was all that her sisters could rely on. She owed it to her mother to keep them human.

She seldom saw her father, and when she did it was because she was to be reprimanded. At such a young age, the weight of it changed her and made her quiet and serious. Tessa, intense to a fault, was nothing like her wild sisters, and she had only accepted training in her powers so that they wouldn't overwhelm her. Her mother had ignored the burgeoning abilities, but Victor pushed her tutors manically to make her powerful. When she wanted to play imaginary games with her sisters or the few children he allowed her to know she'd be pulled away and locked away indoors to train.

She wasn't allowed to watch cartoons, or to play with the normal toys she'd been used to. All she'd wanted for that first Christmas, only three months after her

mother's death, was a Barbie doll, simply one doll. Her father was the most powerful man in his world and he couldn't manage to scrounge up one silly plastic fashion doll. That was the year she realized there was no Santa Claus.

Their father was cold, the polar opposite of the mother they'd lost. He made Tessa nervous. Her sisters all seemed to be Daddy's girls, but Tessa stood apart. She didn't see Victor as a hero, he was the villain. Maybe it was how broken his relationship with her was that saved her sisters from the constant training. Or, he might just have decided they didn't have lost time to make up for, but the other girls had an easier childhood. If she had to pick one thing about Victor Dark that redeemed him, it was that. Tessa would always be grateful that her sisters hadn't suffered as she'd suffered trying to fit into Other World. She remembered her humanity, whereas all her sisters but Talia embraced their demon sides. It didn't make the evil or bad, just more suited to their father's realm.

Every Christmas the girls made a trip to the human world to go skiing at a beautiful resort. Because it was tradition she never missed it; even if she spent the entire holiday reining in the mischievous imps. Tessa suspected she had been the main reason for the trips. When she was

seventeen and desperate to leave Other World, her sisters had begged for the trip. Seeing how important it was to the girls, Victor had begrudgingly allowed it. For the others it was the first time they could remember experiencing their mother's world, for Tessa it felt like coming home. It was her best Christmas memory since she'd come to Other World. She'd visited the resort with them for the last three years, but her sisters complained about her not going to the castle for Christmas with Victor. This year she'd finally given in because Talia had personally come to her and begged her to join them. Talia was her favorite; Talia was the only one to have lived with her during her college years.

When Talia became pregnant Victor blamed Tessa for allowing it. As if she'd have been able to stop her sister, the girl was of age. That was the main reason she'd not gone to see her father for three years. Talia had announced her pregnancy just before they'd left the castle for the ski trip. Victor lost his human glamour in his anger and he'd morphed into his very scary true self. Screaming at his oldest daughter Tessa had screamed right back. Everyone else in the castle had fled in terror, even Talia. For over an hour they'd screamed at each other. Tessa let all her resentment out and told her father just how much she hated

his world and him. Before she'd left he demanded she give up playing at being human. He informed her that she was going to be the mistress of Other World after his death. Why he wanted to doom her like that was beyond her comprehension. She hated his world, why would he decide she should rule it?

Dragging her mind away from how much she didn't want to see Victor she looked out into the darkness of the street again. Streetlight hit the glittering falling snowflakes as they fell. She tried to focus only on the pretty and delicate sight, but soon her rebellious brain brought up the other subject she tried not to dwell on. At twenty-nine, Tessa despaired of finding Mr. Right. What kind of man would want a half demon wife? Only the kind she didn't want — Other World men; or, more accurately, monsters! What her mother ever saw in her father, Tessa would never know or understand.

Tessa worked as a secretary for a chiropractic office. Located in a small town in New York she loved how very average it made her feel. She treasured the city for its picture perfectness and all American flavor; she loved the job and the people who came in to see Dr. Everest. Everyone asked her about her unique accent. She lied and said her father was a military man stationed all over the

world, and her accent was a result of that experience early in life. She had told it so many times she almost believed it herself. At least if father was in the military he'd be human.

Tessa Dark. People made a big deal about her last name and were always curious and questioning. When she had gotten her driver's license in the human realm, she had considered changing her name, but it felt strange just randomly picking out a new name. She'd kept the name. She felt almost positive that her mother's last name had been something common, yet she wasn't sure and she had no one to ask. She'd even tried to find records on her mother, without luck. She wasn't even sure if she had a birth certificate. Other World had strong connections in the human world, so it would be easy for false records to be forged. With his abilities, she sometimes wondered if Victor hadn't tampered with her memory, stealing her mother's last name. Tessa kept her father's last name out of necessity, not pride or love.

Victor didn't like that his daughter lived in the human realm, held down a menial job, and refused to use her powers unless pressed. He considered his progeny above such a life. In the Other World, half-humans stopped aging on their twenty-fifth birthday; unlike in the human world. It irritated her father that she would let her life

escape day by day. Equally human and demon, she chose her mother's heritage. Movie monsters were fun on Halloween, but every other day of the year it was a pain in the ass to deal with them.

Tessa missed her sisters, but the thought of staying forever in the nightmare her father called home terrified her. Every visit, rare as they were, her father would threaten to forbid her return to the human realm. When he made the threat it frightened her, because she knew he could do it. This anxiety was one of the reasons that she didn't return more often.

Christmas brought her back each year, only because her sisters begged her to join them. She spoke to each of them daily on the phone, texting and emailing too; but seeing them was much better. They would spend one terrible—for Tessa— night in Victor's castle, and as soon as brunch finished, they would leave.

Having magic and a long life ensured that Victor was very wealthy in the human realm as well as Other World. He had wise financial managers in both worlds. As much as he hated coming into contact with humans, having a foothold in each of the two worlds was unavoidable. Her mother had been a young bank teller who'd caught his eye. The years he'd spent with Hannah were the only years he

took frequent and regular trips into the human realm, or so she'd been told.

He constantly offered Tessa cars and money and she always refused. If the man had taken a personal interest in her as a child, even for a moment, it would be different. He'd been trying to buy his way into her heart since she'd come into her full abilities on her eighteenth birthday. She could do some scarily powerful stuff. Knowing that her father only cared about her because of her talent bothered her. She hated the sight of the man. Taking his gifts would be hypocritical, most assuredly. She accepted one gift from him each year—buying out all the rooms at a chic ski resort in Aspen for a week—and that was a gift to all six of them.

She refused every wrapped box from him under the tree. It infuriated the triplets, because they adored Victor; in their eyes he could do no wrong. If they didn't love her they would most likely disown her. It surprised her a little that she always saw so many gifts under the tree from her father. After years of refusing them, she wondered if he'd gotten wise to her feelings and just had empty boxes wrapped for show. The idea made her a bit curious, but not curious enough to let down her guard and accept anything from the man.

She tried to be a good person, but forgiving the person who'd crippled you emotionally was hard. Her sisters had never dealt with the same kind of pain and abandonment she'd experienced. She was almost thirty and she still slept with a nightlight to keep the terrible nightmares at bay. The first two years she'd lived in the castle had been filled with fear and confusion. No one understood that she wasn't used to monsters popping up everywhere. No human father would've assigned his daughter a werewolf as a bodyguard or a zombie nanny. Victor forgot she'd been raised by humans. The blue woman was the closest thing she'd had to a normal caregiver. She'd been afraid of monsters under the bed before she'd meet her father. After going to live with him she was afraid of the monsters who *put* her to bed. She'd slept in her closet until she was thirteen. It would take more than a few shiny babbles to make the wall of bad memories go away.

CHAPTER 2

Mid Morning, December 22nd

The throng of waiting sisters quickly crushed Tessa in a group hug as she entered the warm, lavishly decorated main hall of her father's home. Talia looked a bit forlorn; her son was with his father for the Christmas holiday this year. Tessa missed hearing his cheerful little voice. She had brought gifts for the servants and all of her sisters, and even one for her father. It was Christmas after all; and her mother had taught her about the importance of giving.

Mutely supervising her return from a dim corner, her father nodded to her levelly in a pathetic excuse for a welcome. She returned the nod with equal casual coldness. A tall zombie helped carry in all of her packages. He gave her the creeps, but she attempted to graciously thank him for the assistance. His throaty growl quickly caused her to back off. He was definitely on Santa's naughty list for next year!

The family settled down in the comfortable room. Almost the moment her backside hit the cushion her father made a drastic announcement.

"Your Aspen trip is canceled. Recently, several attempts have been made on Tessa's life recently."

His announcement was met with stunned silence. After several panicked heartbeats Tessa spoke earnestly, "That's a lie, Victor."

In her shock she forgot to call him Father. Victor's eyes glowed a deep angry red and Tessa could literally see little flames dancing in them. Her use of his first name always caused him anger.

"There's a fringe group of humans who know about the Other World. They call themselves demon hunters. Somehow they've discovered you are a demon. On three occasions they have tried to kill you."

Her mind fought to process what he was saying. Her brain turned off, but her mouth unfortunately, stayed operational. "Shut the fuck up!"

He raised his eyebrow. Looking at her sister's terrified and surprised faces made her feel even more nervous. The last time she'd seen him things had gotten scary. You could only push a demon so far before it got dangerous. She hated the thought of ruining her sister's holiday —again— with a fight with Victor. His eyes glowed red, not a good sign. Her words were a mistake, and she knew the moment she said them that Victor would make her regret them. Cringing, she waited a second, and then another second passed. Nothing happened, and she

glanced up at her father. He hadn't lost his glamour yet; that was a good sign. He didn't look happy; but he wasn't calling his wrath down on her like he would if anyone else talked to him like that. His eyebrow stayed raised, and she wondered if it was stuck.

"No, I will not."

He could be so literal sometimes, she thought with a sigh. "

Listen to me, Tessa. Your life is in danger. If you take your sisters to the human realm they too will be in danger. I know how much you love them. Stay here; be safe. This is your home, child."

"This has never been *my* home, and you know it! I'm not an idiot. You can't fool me into staying here. I give you kudos. This was a creative idea, but I would know if someone was trying to kill me. What would stop them?"

"Your bodyguards would stop them."

"My— my— my what? Have you had me followed?" Tessa felt confused. Why hadn't she known? "How long has it been going on?"

He looked menacing, as if he could slay all these would-be enemies himself. "Do you think I would let my heir, my eldest, wander around foolishly playing human unprotected? I've always had a security detail charged with

your safety."

It was the greatest outrage she could imagine. Horrified, she didn't even know if she could scream her rage at him. No wonder some crazies knew she was part demon. Demons were *stalking* her. Feeling uncomfortable and almost dirty she slammed her hand against the table in frustration. Tessa's whole body shook with the rage she felt building inside herself. What had the strangers seen? What details of her life did her father know? It just seemed grotesque.

Violated beyond words, Tessa tried to pull herself together. Regally she stood, and with all the demon fury she daily suppressed, she used her magic for the first time in years. Snapping her fingers she teleported herself back to her apartment.

Rushing to her closet, she began to pack. It would be hard to escape his long reach, but determined, Tessa made a mad dash for the door. She would not be house-bound at her father's like she had during childhood.

Because she had left her coat back in Other World she grabbed a thick sweater and left her apartment, knowing she would never see her small, tidy home again. The life she'd built —home, job, and friends— was lost to her.

Taking only the single suitcase and her purse she rushed away; hoping to lose her father's goons. Tessa wasn't his pet. She would make sure her father and the demon haters never found her again.

CHAPTER 3

Early Evening, December 22rd

As much as Victor hated vampires, this time he made an exception and hired one. Gideon, a badass vampire, stood waiting for admittance to his Grand Master's office. When he'd risen to power the vampires had been his greatest source of opposition. His older brother and father had been killed by vampires, so his hatred for them ran deeply.

Contacting the vampire proved just how terrified he was for his most beloved daughter. Tessa, the strongest and most stubborn of the girls, was also the most talented demon. She fought it, but she certainly took after Victor the most; she shared his stubbornness, his power, and yes, even his ability to ignore facts he didn't want to see. His inability to connect with the traumatized little girl had caused a lifetime of distance between them and he accepted his responsibility for it. However, he would not accept her foolishness. In the human world she was mortal and could easily die.

He should have lied about the reason for cancelling the trip. When she walked into the room the other girls, and even the servants, had lit up brighter than the Christmas

tree in the center of the great hall, and his long worry had turned to anger. Tessa honestly couldn't see how precious she was to all of them. When she wasn't brooding or angry with him, the girl had a delightful sense of humor. She'd insisted that her sisters be happy and she'd filled the castle with her love for them. It was a different place when she'd been home. She'd taught her sisters to dance and sing. She'd been fearful, but she was always good to his servants and truly tried to see past the stereotypes she had been taught as a child. She'd earned their love without ever realizing it.

Tessa put her life at risk every day that she lived away from the Other World, her family, and her birthright. Someday—in centuries, he hoped— she would take his place when he died. Tessa rejected the notion entirely, but Victor knew the truth. The moment of her birth he'd felt it; she was the one to carry on his legacy. If only she could get past her anger and resentment.

He could never tell her the truth about her mother. It would devastate her. He accepted her hate to spare her the misery of the truth. Pulling his mind away from the crippling pain of the memories he cleared his throat and spoke into the intercom at his desk.

"Send in the vampire."

Casually, as if the man were Grand Master himself,

the vampire entered and, without permission, sat down. Victor raised his eyebrow, but said nothing. He needed the man's skills too desperately to alienate the vampire right now; Gideon was the best tracker in all the Other World. Victor hated having a vamp in his home, but for Tessa he would tolerate the man. Vampires knew his aversion to their species and resented his rule, probably with some justification. He'd had more trouble with them than any other race in his domain.

The vampire put his feet up on Victor's desk. Insolence! If he didn't need the arrogant creature he would order an immediate execution. Gideon smiled, and Victor knew that the vampire knew he was safe for just that reason. Clearing his throat, Victor spoke with barely restrained anger.

"Vampire... Gideon of Burning Side, I called for your assistance and will tolerate your insolence only so far. You are to return my daughter, Tessa, home, and will receive a handsome payment when you have completed the task. She is using her magic to cloak herself. Human demon hunters have their sights set on her and are determined to end her life. If she dies or is harmed in any way, it will be you I call my vengeance on."

"Why should I drag some spoiled demon Royal

home? It's not my concern if hunters get the foolish girl."

The vampire's eyebrow rose mockingly.

Victor could feel his horns growing long and curled and his fingers became claws at the disrespect to his daughter. His current worries left him absolutely no tolerance for arrogant vampires.

"My child is not a spoiled girl. However, she is stubborn and independent, and needs to be here at home. I expect you to take this task seriously. If she dies I will kill every female vampire in the realm in retaliation. Your choice; save my child or watch your species become extinct."

* * * *

Gideon felt shocked. Had the bigot actually stated he was going to kill his people's women? Could he actually *do* that? For a moment, he just stared at the Grand Master in silent disbelief. It was obvious that he meant what he said. Frowning, Gideon realized there was no choice. His reply held every ounce of his disgust for a man who would threaten a species to get his own way.

"I will bring your daughter home."

Levelly they stared at one another. Both men held their pride before them. With a slight jerk of his head, the Grand Master nodded in dismissal. Gideon wondered how

the man could casually return to paperwork after threatening genocide. His scowl never left his face as he got up and left.

* * * *

Late Afternoon, December 23rd

After an entire day of staying on the move and looking over her shoulder, Tessa felt exhausted. Reasonably certain she wasn't being followed; she decided to go to the last place her father would ever look for her in the human realm. He knew how she thought, his goons didn't. She felt sure he would give them a list of potential locations where they could find her.

It was irrational, but Tessa had a terrible fear of lakes; an instinctual side-effect of her demon nature. Of the six of them, only she had inherited that particular fear. One year her father had booked a beautiful resort near Mary's Lake in Estes Park, Colorado, as a change for them. Tessa had remained in the comfortable and quaint room with the curtains drawn, hiding from the lake, until the trip ended.

In anger she'd reminded her father that if he loved her he would certainly know her greatest fear. Just one

more argument in a lifetime of anger and misunderstandings. Tessa's reaction certainly ensured he MapQuested any area's geography to avoid lakes after that disastrous Christmas vacation. The same experience ensured he would never think to look for her at the lodge and resort on Mary's Lake. Taking a deep breath, she held in her fear and snapped her fingers, hoping she had enough energy for one more jump.

Several ATMs across the country had given her access to the modest nest egg she had in the bank, and bouncing around kept her paper trail confusing. She'd made a point of using several in Florida to confuse her father's goons. She had enough money to stay at the resort for a week. The day after Christmas she'd be broke and homeless, but she'd have one last Colorado Christmas before she left to escape her father.

Without her sisters it wouldn't be the same but she felt safe, and that mattered most at the moment. After a short registration process she took her room card and single suitcase to her room. Smiling, she noticed the strange look she received for wearing only a sweater on such a cold winter night. It was solstice; the longest, coldest night of the year, and Christmas was four days away.

Her continual expenditure of magic had exhausted

her, and after a quick cloak of magical protection and invisibility over her room she stripped off her clothing. Lying down under the covers in just her adorable yellow and pink bra and panties, she immediately fell asleep.

* * * *

A rustling noise, as if something had brushed the drapes, startled her out of her deep sleep. Sitting up and gasping, it took Tessa a moment to remember where she was. A strange bed always left her feeling frightened for a moment upon waking. Rapidly rewinding the memories of why she was there reminded her that she needed to get used to the sensation.

Blinking, she rubbed her eyes and tried to see in the darkness. Her demon blood gave her keen night vision, but it was so unnaturally dark she couldn't tell what had made the noise. For a moment, she felt tempted to call out into the darkness to whoever had woken her. A dark blur suddenly grabbed her and pulled her to the floor. Since Tessa had rejected her demon nature, she'd never properly learned to morph to her stronger demon form without having to concentrate. Fear trapped her in her human form. Now someone choked her, and she was helpless. Gasping

and coughing for air, Tessa slapped out futilely at her attacker. Unconsciousness threatened; if she allowed herself to pass out she knew her attacker would easily and quickly kill her.

Suddenly the bliss of unexpected freedom left her fighting for breath like a fish out of water. Confused, she realized her assailant was under attack. Vaguely, she realized how quiet the scuffle was. She listened in terror, unsure what she should do. Someone must be using magic in her room, to make it so disorienting. A cracking noise put an end to the battle. Having heard the sound before, in the Other World, Tessa knew it was the sound of someone's neck being broken. But whose?

Even as the darkness lightened slightly, the adrenaline-fueled fear remained, and as a tall form approached her and Tessa cringed, terrified. Was her attacker coming to finish the job, could she trust her rescuer?

* * * *

Gideon's vision was perfect in the darkness he'd created; even the demon couldn't see him. He looked down at her; she was exquisite. When the hunter had silently broken the lock to her room Gideon had followed him in and called the darkness to them. It slowed the attacker

down enough for Gideon to gauge his best options for attack as he glanced around the room for his charge.

His first view of the sleeping woman had made him catch his breath. Her long black hair had spread across the pillow, highlighted by the ivory perfection of her skin. Long lashes lay peacefully on her cheeks. Her perfect bone structure and small cute nose made him wonder if she was really the biological daughter of the Grand Master, because this woman was beautiful. One small hand curled innocently under her face, and she sighed restfully in her sleep.

When the hunter had grabbed her, Gideon felt an unusual wave of protectiveness toward the woman the Grand Master commanded him to rescue.

Having dispatched the human hunter easily enough, Gideon hovered over the girl. So this was the one who never appeared in public; the heir no one ever saw. The demon who wanted to be human. It was certainly a conundrum, but he just wanted to get her home and be done with her.

Terror shimmered in her bright blue eyes. He'd never seen a demon with blue eyes and it took him aback for a moment. She looked delicate and fair, except for the thick lush mop of black hair. For an irrational moment he

wanted to bury his face in it. Coming closer he smelled her blood, it smelled very human. A piecing moment of hunger surprised him. Her blood should most certainly be demon, but something very human ran through her veins. Vampires could not drink from a pure-blood demon because it was poisonous to them. But this girl was most assuredly appetizing! The scent of her blood confirmed it would be safe for consumption. Involuntarily, his fangs lengthened. Stepping back, he almost tripped over the body of the hunter.

His quiet movements seemed to frighten her even more as she sat almost naked in the chilly darkness; looking up at him like a lost little lamb. Her innocence belied her demon nature. Strangely, he felt the purity of her soul and was moved. Rumors of her rejection of her heritage and place as heir had abounded, but until that moment he'd put no belief in them.

Needing to comfort a being he wanted to hate left him feeling uncomfortable. Clearing his throat and banishing his darkness he spoke with quiet, firm confidence. "There is no need to fear. You're safe now. I'm here to take you home."

A tear leaked from her eye and she opened her mouth. "Please, don't do that to me. I can't go back to that

place. I just want to be free. I just want go back to my life and the human world." Her words took him completely by surprise.

The rumors were true; she didn't plan to be the future Grand Mistress of Other World. A moment of pity almost made him agree to let her go. Then he remembered that the future of his species hinged on her return. Reaching out, he was ready to take her home. He'd take her by force if necessary. When he touched the woman a red flash lit the soft blue eyes and he felt electricity pulse inside his body. As he snatched his arm back, she looked sadly up at him.

"I can't let you take me back; I have to hide. I don't want to live in an eternal prison. Humans need to live and die a mortal lifespan. Without death, life has no meaning. I'm not a demon, I'm human. I won't let you take me back to that place." Her soft words angered him.

Crackling all around them the electricity filled the room as it filled his body. *This is not good, not good at all*, he decided, as the glow in her eyes increased in proportion to her desperation. A soft wind filled the room. Long strands of her silky hair rose up and floated about her as if she sat immersed in water. His gooseflesh had little to do with the coolness of the supernatural air. She looked glorious filled with frightening intensity. Suddenly, his

cock was very hard, even as he knew he was not going to like the end result of her actions.

Her small delicate hand rose up and she snapped her fingers. He felt a pressing weight against his supernatural senses. Tessa was using her power to keep him from removing her from room. Cringing, he saw it was obvious that no matter how harmless she looked, her reservoir of power was vast. He knew many demons, but none could do what she had done with a snap of their fingers. No wonder she was the heir and future Grand Mistress. How she rejected that much power was beyond his imagination.

The woman's fear made her power all that much more awesome and strong. Stopping the escalation of her terror was his only chance for escape. Choosing his words carefully, he made sure to speak in a quiet but confident tone. "Lady Tessa, you need to understand why I'm here. That man would have killed you. We need to insure your safety. Release me from your power and I will make sure you are safe."

He could see that his words hadn't helped at all. She'd tucked her body up into a ball and lay shivering, her fear still fueling her power. Sighing, he pulled the plush comforter off the bed, wrapping it around her slight form. Sitting down on the bed he watched her as the shock slowly

began to wear off. When she sat up and looked up at him, he could see that she was coming around because her eyes were no longer wide and frightened.

"I won't go back. I just want my freedom. I'm sorry, but I'm not what you think I am. I choose to be human, and I won't go live in Other World ever again. My sisters might accept that parody of an existence, but not me. I want to live with other humans." Her soft voice was like a caress.

Gritting his teeth, he managed to keep his anger in check. It was her freedom or his species. Trying to sound understanding, he hid his urgency.

"I know you want to think you're human, but you're not. A human tried to kill you tonight. That should tell you something about what you are. A human wouldn't have the sort of power you do, either. I'm taking you home. I'm sorry; but you'll thank me when you're alive in the morning."

She stood. He was at least a foot taller, but she glared up at him anyway. "I'm not going anywhere."

He could feel that her lockdown on the room had weakened her; vampires were very sensitive to the energy of other beings. If he was lucky she would fall asleep and her magic would fade enough for him to leave with her before daylight. He glanced at the body by his feet.

"I think our guest might start to smell after awhile, don't you?"

Tiredly, she sighed, and she snapped her fingers again.

He glanced down, alarmed. "What did you do with him?"

"His body is at the bottom of the lake, buried ten feet under the ground. No one's going to find him; so don't worry." Tessa sighed again, and Gideon could feel her energy levels dropping more quickly than they should.

Her body sagged abruptly.

Gideon rushed to catch her before her head hit the hard floor. Only his unnatural speed kept her from having a headache when she woke. The future Grand Mistress was in his arms and deeply unconscious. Unable to stop himself he inhaled her scent. She smelled delicious, and her shampoo gave off a fresh floral scent that made his cock instantly hard. He gritted his teeth, feeling his fangs lengthen and cut into his bottom lip. *This is going to be harder than I thought*, he decided, annoyed.

She looked so soft and innocent. Gideon was not a gentle creature, yet he found himself holding her as though she were delicate glass. Like a precious treasure, he laid her on the bed and stood back. An image of her lying under

him as he sank his fangs in her neck and his cock in her pussy made him groan. Turning away from her, he took a deep breath to regain his control. *What magic is she working on me?* he wondered.

Closing his eyes, Gideon felt the energy of her magical lockdown. Annoyingly, it felt stronger, not weaker, than before. With a sigh, he looked at the window. Dawn was less than an hour away.

He closed the heavy drapes. If he'd had any idea he would be in the human realm in daylight he would have brought supplies. He was safe in Other World, but on this side of the boundary daylight would weaken him drastically, and too much sun could kill him. Sitting in a chair as far from the window as he could, Gideon crossed his arms over his chest and watched the girl sleep.

CHAPTER 4

December 24th

Groggily, Tessa sat up. Seeing the man sleeping in the chair across from her bed she gasped. The memories of how he'd come to be in her room came rushing back and brought her anger to the surface. Her father had sent a vampire after her. He hated vampires; just the act of sending one showed her how little he thought of her. She had nothing against the species, herself, but for Victor to send an errand boy after her was too much. Granted, vampire movies in the human world got it mostly wrong, but not the blood drinking. Tessa cringed. Blood. Icky and gross, and being only half demon, she was human enough to be drinkable. Rubbing her neck, she was relieved to find smooth, uninjured skin. He hadn't drunk from her.

Sitting back in relief, she looked at the sleeping vampire. If he'd been born human, he could have been a male model or Hollywood actor. Long blond hair fell over his forehead. It had been too dark to be sure what color his eyes were.

Muscular and tall, the man oozed masculinity. She felt her pussy tingle with awareness. Disturbed by the reaction, she quietly got up and tiptoed to the bathroom,

locking the door. It had been a long time since she'd felt what she was feeling about a man. A vampire from Other World was the last male she wanted to be attracted to.

Realizing it was Christmas Eve, an acute sense of loss filled her. Grumbling, Tessa thought, *how does Victor manage to ruin everything?* It would be hard to be merry without her sisters. Rolling her eyes, she slid down the heavy wooden door and moaned. Her next thought made her grin in self-deprecation. *It could be worse; at least I'm trapped with a hottie and not a troll.* Gritting her teeth, she reminded herself that her father could have sent a real troll; Other World was full of them.

Her suitcase sat in the corner of the bathroom where she had left it after unpacking her toiletries. Standing up, she picked out the clothing she wanted to wear and grabbed a few towels and a washcloth in preparation for a shower.

Adjusting the temperature of the water she stepped into the tub and pulled the curtain. The hot spray of the shower invigorated her. Tessa forgot herself in the relaxing bliss and began to sing.

* * * *

Gideon was startled awake by the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. Singing; beautiful, light singing that caused him to feel a strange sense of bliss. His mind

was still foggy with sleep and he tried to remember where he was. He felt so lethargic. Disturbed by his unusual weakness, a picture of the night's events formed in his mind. He was on the wrong side of the boundary and it was daylight. Groaning, he tried to stand and fell down. Too weak even to pull himself back up, he lay on the carpet wishing that he were home. It had been a while since he had visited this side of the boundary, and he'd forgotten vampires needed to feed more regularly here to avoid becoming incapacitated during the day.

* * * *

A loud thud made Tessa jump involuntarily. She turned off the water. Stepping out onto the plush bathmat, she grabbed one of the large towels and wrapped it around herself. Worried, she quickly dressed and cautiously opened the door. Peeking out around the corner she saw that the vampire lay helplessly on the carpet. Tessa hurried to see if he was hurt. Other World vampire or not, she wouldn't stand by and let the man suffer. He mumbled something unintelligible as she tried to lift him up onto the bed. He weighed a ton. Finally, she managed to maneuver him onto the bed.

Geez, what are vampires eating these days, sumo wrestlers or something? How much does this guy weigh?

Her grouchy thoughts didn't make him any lighter.

Glancing at her watch, she realized that she had slept a good portion of the day away, but there were still hours before sunset. Looking down at the vampire, she wondered if he was going to be alright. Just as she tried to step away, he grabbed her arm. "Blood. I... need... blood," he whispered hoarsely

Tessa highly doubted that room service offered any. She tugged her arm free and spoke quietly. "Sorry, buddy, the blood bank is closed. As soon as it's dark I'll send you home and you can get all the blood you need."

"No... danger."

"I'll be fine. Just rest, ok? I'll send you right home when it's safe." As much as she hated Other World, she didn't like to see people in pain more.

His faint groan sounded like the word no. This was one stubborn vamp. The power she was using to keep them in the room was having some kind of effect on him. Seeing how quickly he'd weakened made her feel guilty until she remembered she'd begged him to let her go and he'd shown her no mercy. Tessa sat down on the large plush sofa. Normally, her Christmas Eve day would be spent with her sisters at Aspen, not babysitting ill vamps. Picking up the Kindle she'd left by the bed last night, she sat down to read

the book she'd started. After a few sentences, her gaze drifted away from the page and to the bed. She tried again. After ten minutes of reading the same page, she turned off the device in aggravation. If the thing had been a paperback she would have tossed it across the room. Instead, she set it down on the table, frowning.

* * * *

Weak, hungry, and in severe pain Gideon came awake miserably. He tried to sit up but could only moan. A light touch on his arm startled him. His eyes blinked open; even with the curtains drawn the sunlight burned his eyes, making them dry and sore.

The woman was watching him warily. She looked too beautifully angelic to be a demon. His pain intensified, and he let out a long tortured groan. Obviously the sound upset her because she gasped and came closer to him.

"Are you alright? Can I do anything to help you? I know your species can't handle daytime on this side of border. What can I do? I've tried to send you home twice, but I'm unable to. I can't even take away my protective lock around the room. I tried. I'm so sorry for your pain."

Her words were genuine and it made his heart flip. He had no idea why she'd care about a vampire. She moved to step back, but he grabbed her arm and she whimpered in

fear. His voice cracked as he made a desperate request. He'd never make it until sundown; the curtains just weren't providing enough protection from the sun.

"Blood... I must have... blood."

When she came closer, her actions surprised him. Holding out her arm so that the inside of her wrist was close to his lip, she whispered, "Since you are one of my father's goons, I don't owe you anything, but I don't want you to die if I can help you. Go ahead, just don't kill me."

He looked up at her face through sore eyes. He could see Tessa had her face all scrunched up and her shoulders hunched as if waiting for something horrible. She mustn't know how good being bitten by a vampire felt to a human, orgasmic. It was even more sensual for a demon. Being half of each, she would probably come for him the moment his fangs sank into her flesh. It made him hard even as he lay close to death.

Contrary to human belief, vampires were very much alive; and he was very much a man. His cock twitched as he thought about that lyrical voice crying out his name as he sank his fangs and cock inside of her. Yes, vampires could kill a human, but it was rare, and only a vamp with no self-control would actually murder. He had iron control, but in this state he did worry about taking too much. What

would the Grand Master do if he brought his daughter home with bite marks? Pushing her arm away, he grumbled weakly.

"No, I will... be fine."

"You won't. Just do it, alright? Merry Christmas; It's my good deed for the holiday."

She scrunched up her face again and he couldn't stop his weak chuckle. Quickly, her eyes popped open, and she looked angry. Even with the red fire in her big eyes she was beautiful.

"Just do it you stubborn vamp! I don't like it any better than you do!"

Her scent was delicious, and the adrenaline in her blood added a delicate spice. He could smell the mango-based soap she had used recently on her skin. Intoxicated with need he felt himself losing the will to resist her offer. Tessa was a conundrum and a beauty. She intrigued him far more than what was safe for either of them. *Oh, hell. Her father kills me or the sun kills me, I'm dead either way. I might as well die happy!* With his decision made, he gently took her arm and brought her wrist to his lips. He placed a soft kiss on the vein and she gasped, then he sank his fangs into her skin and felt the blood rush into his mouth.

* * * *

Tessa cried out as a sharp pain radiated up her arm. The sensation became a pleasure unlike any she'd ever felt before. Her knees gave out, and buckling, she found herself sitting on the edge of his bed. She felt the most intense desire of her life. Tessa was a modern girl yet sexually inexperienced. Whatever he was doing to her made her feel unlike anything any man ever had. Arching her back and crying out, she felt herself grow wet and needy. All she wanted for Christmas was for the vampire to fuck her. She didn't even know his name, but she wanted him immediately.

When he released her she was horrified to hear the sound of her disappointment echoing in the room. His chuckle sounded warm and much stronger. Tessa opened her eyes and looked at him. His eyes were a deep sapphire blue; entrancing. She licked her lower lip and he moaned. Before she realized his intentions, he pulled her to him. His strong, large hands pulled her shirt off. Wiggling a bit, she assisted him in removing it. He'd already seen her all but naked, so she didn't feel the shyness she should at being naked in front of him. She began to undo his buttons. It was only a moment before she had his shirt open. His hard muscular chest displayed only a sprinkling of dark golden hair.

Tessa splayed her fingers across his broad shoulders and she felt his hands working the clasp on her bra. It popped open, and the cool air in the room had her nipples peaked to hard points in seconds. His eyes darkened when he saw them. Tessa pushed his shirt over his arms and he moved just enough for her to remove it. Her demon nature sensed that sunset was approaching; her power always magnified with the darkness. All of Tessa's hungers increased after nightfall, even lust. With human men she'd have to hold back, but with Gideon she could be herself completely.

He pulled her to him, and his large hand tangled in her hair as he brought her lips to meet his. She could taste the metallic flavor of her own blood, and instead of repulsing her, she felt turned on. His growl let her know that he guessed her thoughts. She'd grown up hearing all sorts of untruths about vamps. It appeared that the whole bite equals sex myth was the truth. She couldn't remember if they could read minds or not. His soft chuckle told her that he could, and Tessa realized it was probably because he'd drunk her blood.

She thought hard about him removing his pants, hoping he would get the hint. When he forcefully flipped her onto her back so that he hovered above her, she noticed

that his hands were at his belt. *Yep, he got the hint*, Tessa decided. It was her turn to chuckle.

When Gideon slipped out of his black jeans she noticed that he wasn't wearing any underwear. *Oh yummy, commando. I love it!* she thought. His long thick cock was very erect and fleetingly Tessa wondered if all vampires could claim to be as hung as he was, or if he was just special. When his hands found the buttons on her fly he growled low and menacingly as he struggled with the row of buttons. Achieving victory over the Levis, he soon pulled the denim down her legs, and she heard the swish of her jeans joining the rest of the clothing on the floor. He looped his fingers in the sides of her panties next, and slowly he slid the bit of fabric off her body. Both of them were completely naked.

Tessa felt the sun set and the room darkened just a bit more. Using what little demon magic she could muster after locking the room down, she managed to light the candles on the dresser and in the sconces on the wall. Warm soft light filled the room and Tessa noticed her vampire looked even more handsome in the subtle light.

"I'm at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Gideon, I'm Gideon Duke, lovely Tessa."

"It doesn't fit you."

He snorted, a sound of mirth, and she decided he was too easily amused. Soon her annoyance was forgotten when his lips found her jutting nipple. He drew on it hard and she arched her back and hissed with pleasure. His sharp fangs only heightened her pleasure as just a little pain mixed with the sensation. Oh, he was good, very good. Closing her eyes, she reveled in the joy of sensation.

Normally she'd have been shy, guarded; but with Gideon she felt able to express her desire unhindered by her own lack of confidence. She'd never been with a non-human before, but she'd heard her sisters talk. They hadn't been exaggerating about the difference. He responded in kind, and she knew he was as consumed with need as she was. The feeling of his fingers rolling her other nipple while his mouth teased the first made her very wet.

Wonder bought heat to her already wet, needy pussy. Tessa wanted him to slam his cock inside her, but she was so consumed by lust that words were beyond her. His chuckle let her know he was still in her head. Normally, it would have pissed her off, but as she felt two of his long fingers enter her body and stroke her she was glad he knew her need. He removed his fingers, and she felt a moment of bereavement; her body had been inching

toward orgasm. Then he began to stroke her clit.

As the tension built inside of her, each of his touches brought little gasps of pleasure from her lips. His skilled fingers rolled and pinched her clit. Tessa clutched Gideon's shoulders, her long French-manicured fingernails digging into his flesh. She arched her back, and all the feelings broke free as she came for him.

Screaming his name, a name she'd just learned; Tessa experienced the most intense orgasm of her life. Normally her orgasms were like wonderful little ripples in a pond, but this was a waterfall. Sensation went on and on. It didn't end quickly, but flowed and ebbed as he worked her into a frenzy. Fuzzy with lust, she looked into his eyes and knew he relished her pleasure. Flipping over in her chest, her heart seemed in harmony with his. In that moment, their eyes meet and held. A strange connection passed between them. Deeper than anything she had ever encountered with another man, the experience felt surreal.

Crying out, she felt his eyes on her as she writhed under his talented fingers. It felt so right, so wonderful. In the back of her mind, she reminded herself he was a complete stranger, a vampire. But it felt so right to be with him. Shaking the thought from her mind, she reminded herself that this was just hot sex. Giving into the sensations

was her Christmas present to herself...

When nothing but the ripples of her pleasure remained, Tessa looked up into his handsome face filled with delirious bliss. It must be a crime that any being should be so attractive. Maybe it was vampire glamour, and he was old and ugly, but if he could make her come like that again, she didn't care if he was a hunchback too!

"No, lovely, I'm not a hunchback. I'm glad that you enjoyed yourself, but I'm not done with you. Lie down; let me give you your Christmas present. You are definitely on my nice list right now." His deep whisper was like brandy or velvet, sinful and soothing all at the same time.

She felt his large hand slid under her bottom and he squeezed the cheeks firmly. His hands slid to her thighs, and she felt him opening her legs as wide as they would go. His body settled between the "V", and his lips found her clit. He kissed her there once, tenderly, before he began to suck the little nub. She cried out as the pleasure began to build again.

Tessa had always felt she was a giving lover. She tried to make sure that she attended to the man in her bed and gave him a memorable encounter; but somehow it felt right just to let Gideon pleasure her. After all, he was trying to take away her freedom; he owed her a big apology.

His snort reminded her that her thoughts were not private, and she opened her eyes to look down at him. His blond head bobbed between her pale thighs, and the sight only increased her desire. Darkness had fallen and she could feel his growing power. It frightened her a little, even as she enjoyed his power over her body. Unable to control herself, her hips bucked a bit. He raised his head and his thumb began to make lazy, wonderful circles where his mouth had been.

"Easy, lovely, we have all night. I want this to be your best Christmas ever."

She had no doubt that it would be. Gideon smiled, and his fangs flashed in the darkness. Suddenly, he lunged at her inner thigh and she felt his fangs sink in. His thumb never stopped moving on her clit. Hissing, she came for him again; and it felt amazing. Her pussy throbbed, and the spasms left it tight and wanting. If he didn't stop it, he would need the 'jaws of life' to get his cock inside of her. Bucking on the bed, Tessa cried out in a keening wail. She had never made such an animalistic noise, but in the glory of pure desire she didn't care how it sounded at all. Gideon was making her crazy with his bite and his touch.

She pulled at him, desperate for him to be inside of her. He knew it too. It irritated her, even as her pleasure

kept coming. When he pulled his mouth away she felt his tongue lap at the little wounds his fangs had left on her sensitive, pale skin.

She felt his cock on her leg, and the wetness of his pre-cum let her know he was not immune to the pleasure growing between them. Groaning, she opened her mouth to beg for him, but his fingers on her lips stopped her. She could taste herself on his fingers, but instead of repulsing her, it just added to the oddly erotic moment. His deep whisper kept her silent.

"Never beg my lovely one. Never beg for anything, my Tessa. Your sweet lips deserve more than pleas."

His kissed her then, and she felt him slide his arms behind her back and head and pull her to him with a ferocity that both surprised and delighted her. Clinging to him helplessly, she allowed him to crush her in a punishing kiss that made her light-headed. His tongue danced in her mouth and she returned the action. Tongue kissing had never been her favorite until that moment. What she had been missing not kissing the man made her regret not laying one on him the moment he'd stepped into her life to save it. Pure magic seemed to flow from his firm, masculine lips into her wanting mouth.

Tessa relished his talent and skill. Obviously,

someone had been keeping secrets about the magic of vampire sex. No wonder there were so many vampires in the underground sex trade of Other World. Gideon would certainly make a stellar gigolo. He pulled back, snorting out a belly laugh at her thoughts. Scowling at him, she felt unable to help the rush of emotion as he kissed her furrowed brow.

"Never scowl, my sweet," he whispered in his magical voice. "For you, I will be a gigolo or anything that you desire tonight. For you, lovely one, I will give the best performance of my life. Let me make you scream my name again. I want to hear your sweet song as you come for me."

His words were as sensual as his actions, and Tessa wondered how many women had come just hearing him speak. If it wasn't some kind of vampire glamour the guy should get himself an infomercial, because a woman could believe anything that came out of that delectable mouth. He restrained his amusement, but Tessa could see the sparkle in his beautiful eyes. It was obvious from his reaction that he enjoyed the way she thought. Definitely a first for her in the male companionship department; a guy who liked her thought process. Gideon was one in a million.

When she tried to move, ready to start showing him her appreciation, he gently held her back. "No, lovely, this

is all for you. Enjoy it. I will enjoy putting my cock in you soon enough. I just want to give you this night. Let me love you, sweet."

Tessa felt a little odd, but she lay back, allowing him to pleasure her. Soon the tension left her body as she felt his hands roving, touching her in places that she had never considered sensual, but that suddenly felt erogenous. He brought her to the edge, and she was desperate for him to join her in another orgasm. He must have read her mind because she felt the bed dip as he pulled her to him.

Using his hands, he raised her up and slipped just the head of his cock inside her pussy. Hissing with pleasure, Tessa closed her eyes and moaned. His fingers found her clit and he began to play with it; pinching, tweaking, and caressing until she felt her orgasm push her over the edge again. Tessa screamed his name. Gideon continued to rub her clit as he used his large, strong hand to pull her to his cock. She was so tight that when his large cock worked its way to the base the pleasure was so strong it was almost painful. Tessa cried out, and the sensation felt so intense that her eyes watered. Never in her life had she felt anything like what Gideon was doing to her. He moved forward and began to slam his cock in and out of her body until she was screaming uncontrollably.

Her face flushed with the exertion of her pleasure, and when she opened her eyes he was looking at her intensely. Never in her life had anyone looked at her the way Gideon was looking at her. She could feel the aftershocks of her orgasm against his cock where it was buried deep inside her body. Gideon never stopped giving attention to her clit. Tessa was delightfully surprised when she felt herself begin another orgasm.

Gideon began to slam into her body again. His hips moved so that his cock did something amazing in her body. No other man had ever been so skilled at wringing pleasure out of her. Tessa felt like she'd died just a little bit. In making her feel like she did, she wanted him to never stop! His deep masculine growl told her that he too felt the pure perfection of the sex. Coming for him again, she barely noticed when he joined her in orgasm. They lay panting after the last of the moment had slipped away.

Tessa wondered if it was just the magic of the vampire bite or something more; something purely Gideon that had caused her to experience the sex so deeply. It had been the best Christmas present ever. Stretching and feeling pliable and languid she stood up, shaking from her muscles being so weak with relaxation. It was the most perfect sex of her life. Determined to protect her heart she reminded

herself it was only sex.

"We must go back. I have to take you home as soon as possible." His statement surprised her. She felt used. Did he think great sex would change her mind about staying away from Victor's world?

"I'm not going back." Ignoring his dark look she got up quickly. She wanted to get away from him and the bathroom was as far as her spell would allow. Tessa slipped into the bathroom to take a shower.

Stepping under the warm water, she reveled in the sensation until the moment of Zen suddenly shattered with his rude interruption.

Gideon stood naked, still looking angry. Without words, he hauled her soapy body out of the shower and she felt his growing power. Angry, she realized he was using her relaxed state to break her protective spell. Clamping down on her power she strengthened the barrier, but after losing blood and not eating all day her body gave out, and she found herself in his arms, blinking up at his wrathful face. Softly, she whispered, "Why is it so important to you to destroy my life?"

"The fate of my people depends on your safe return. Your father will kill every female of my kind if I don't bring you home." His words made her heart drop.

Tessa immediately wanted to cry. What kind of a monster would make such a threat? As much as she detested Other World, she didn't want to see its creatures suffer for her freedom. She didn't want to live trapped in Other World; but if Gideon was speaking the truth, she must return. Looking deeply into his eyes she felt the honesty in his expression. With a shallow cry, she pushed away from him.

"Let me take my shower and get dressed. Alone. I'll return with you, but only for the sake of your people — not for you or my father!" He looked conflicted, as if he might not trust her. She knew her eyes flashed red at him. She could see the moment he decided to trust her because his expression changed. He backed out of the door, and she slammed it in his face, deciding to make the most of her shower. Granted, great sex did not exactly award her his loyalty, but the fate of his kind was at stake. It was frustrating; knowing he had as little choice as she did. Sighing, she finished her shower and dressed.

Taking her time just to irritate him, she finally packed her things and left the bathroom. He was dressed and ready. Setting down her suitcase she stretched her arms out wide, releasing her magical hold over the resort. Within seconds she knew that her protection was gone, and she

found herself at Gideon's mercy.

For a moment, she thought she might have seen regret on his face before he took her hand and she teleported them to the other side of the barrier. She could see the human world, and desperately she tried to step through the barrier, but as she suspected it had been a one-way trip. Her father had removed her magical visa. There was no going home. Unable to help herself she crumpled in front of the barrier but Gideon caught her before she hit the ground.

Exhausted and sad she wept softly. Tessa couldn't look him in the eyes; she felt too embarrassed by her reaction. Somehow, losing her ability to cross freely felt a little bit like losing her mother all over again. She felt depleted, and Tessa closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 5

December 25th

It was just after midnight and now Christmas morning. She'd only had enough strength to get them to the boundary between the worlds. Gideon carried Tessa and her single suitcase with ease. She was very small, and her fragile state frightened him. This confused him because although enjoyed drinking from virtual strangers—a vampire's bite often ended with sex, although he was more selective than most—usually he didn't think much of their care after he'd bitten them.

Strangely, he felt an overwhelming need to protect the woman. Her father was known to be a hard man, and he feared what her father might do to her in his effort to force her compliance to his wishes. When he'd seen her true grief over losing her privilege to cross the border between worlds he felt like someone had kicked him in the ribs. He knew his people depended on her return but seeing the result of his deed made him ill. The Grand Master must really be a monster if his own child had such a strong aversion to returning home.

Upon arriving at the castle Gideon was ushered directly to the Grand Master's office. The demon looked

like he'd not had a moment of sleep since he'd sent Gideon on his mission. A guard of troll descent tried to take Tessa from his arms. Gideon growled at the man and he backed off. The Grand Master rushed around his desk and looked down at his daughter. He glared at Gideon and spoke.

"What have you done to her? She's so pale! How dare you harm my child?"

Watching the horns grow on the man's head and seeing the red haze cover his normally black eyes, Gideon felt a moment of fear. "She's just exhausted. She was using her magic continually, and it's my guess she doesn't practice it much. She just needs rest."

The Grand Master beckoned for the guard to take Tessa; but Gideon refused to back away. He saw anger in the ruler's eyes.

"I'm not leaving until she's awake. I'll not leave her helpless and at the mercy of your troll." He wanted to say "you" but he knew better. Holding her tightly, he waited for a reply.

Levelly, the Grand Master glowered at him. Gideon stared back without flinching. With a nod, the demon sat back down at his desk; returning to paperwork. He could feel the older man's concern, but he could also see that Victor was trying to hide it. When he spoke, Gideon was

surprised.

"Take her to the family room. I will send my physician to look at her. You can stay, but under guard, until she opens her eyes." He motioned to the troll. "KruX, go with them. Make sure the vampire doesn't hurt any of the royal family."

The troll grunted, and Gideon followed him to a small sitting room off the great room. There was a television and a pool table, and it felt very informal. He wondered why they didn't just take her to a bedroom. When he questioned the troll about it the answer surprised him.

Snorting the troll replied, "She doesn't have a bedroom here, she hates it here. She refuses to sleep here; she's never spent a night since she turned eighteen. She always stays at a motel this side of the boundary and just comes back and forth when she visits. Girl is whacked; says the place gives her nightmares." He ended with another derisive snort, as if he couldn't believe the castle could scare anyone.

Gideon felt worse about his part in her imprisonment. Why would a child born and raised in Other World feel so alienated? "Why does she feel like that?"

The troll grunted again, a curiously pitying look in his eyes as he looked at the girl. "Girl's mom was human.

She didn't know the old man was a demon until after all the girls had been born. He'd 'magicked' her to see him as human. She was a fox." He watched the vampire's reaction for a moment before continuing. "The Grand Master thought she loved him and showed his 'true self.' The lady took off; just left the kids with her friend and ran. She didn't want anything to do with demons, not even the kids.

Tessa's father really cared about his lady. He kept her unaware for years. The glamour he used made her just kind of ignore how weird everything got. I was one of her bodyguards for a few years. The Grand Master kept her comfortable, but I don't think he really understood how human families work. Demons tend to reproduce and that's the end of it for them. Humans raise their kids. This one was seven or eight when they came to live here and she never knew her mom left.

I heard that those kids never met him until the night he brought them here. Had to be strange, finding out about this place after living in the human world with their mother. The Grand Master told them their mother died; didn't want to break their little hearts I guess. He's a fierce motherfucker; but when it comes to those girls, he's a big old softy. That's why he let this one live like a human. He hates it; but he just can't put his foot down.

I've been a house guard for years I've seen all the drama myself. She really hates her old man. Only reason I'm telling you this stuff is I like Tessa, she's a good kid. I see how you're looking at her, —damn, don't let the Grand Master see that look— and if you care about her you need to understand how fucked up it's all gotten"

Gideon mulled the revelation over. The troll had a big mouth; he was obviously not going to make employee of the month. No wonder Tessa felt like she did about Other World. He wondered if her mother was still alive; if she cared about the little girls she had abandoned.

When the doctor arrived Gideon was nervous. All the physical bite marks would have healed without a trace; but would the doctor be able to ascertain he'd taken a pint of her blood? After a quick inspection, the man left with Gideon still nervous about the man's findings. He didn't care for the last glance the doctor had given him.

A few minutes later the Grand Master entered the room. Both Gideon and the guard jumped, and the guard stood at attention; giving him a salute. When he looked at the guard with his fiery eyes the troll shriveled. Gideon remained seated next to Tessa.

"Go see a room is made ready for her. Have one of the women make it as *human* as possible," the Grand

Master ordered the troll.

Bobbing his head wildly, the guard rushed off to see to the order. Gideon found himself alone in the room with the most dangerous man in all of Other World.

"She's a handful. Thank you for bringing her home. Did you have any trouble?" When he spoke he sounded tired; and the slip of his control surprised Gideon. His head snapped up to look at the feared leader.

"I had to kill a human demon hunter. Tessa buried his body at the bottom of a lake. Your girl is scary-talented with power. If she builds some stamina up, I can't imagine how much she could do."

The Grand Master sighed, and he sounded like a tired old man. "She is talented, but I can't risk her. I won't let her go back there again. Does she know she can't cross? Did she try?"

"She tried; that's why she came home like this. Your daughter threw everything she had left into the attempt."

He sighed again. "I'd rather have her hate me than she die. Your people are safe; and as a 'thank you,' I vow to never threaten them in such a way again. You have my word."

Gideon nodded.

Both men sat in silence until Tessa stirred. When

she opened her eyes, Gideon was the first one she saw, and she smiled a little before she closed her eyes again.

Glancing at the Grand Master, Gideon saw the man rake him with a look of pure hatred and realized that Tessa not hating him like she did everyone else Other World might not be such a good thing.

Tessa opened her eyes again, and when she saw her father she squeaked in surprise. "What do you want, Victor? I'm alive and I'm here. Let Gideon go; he's done his dirty deed. I hate that you would keep me here against my will again." Her expression was definitely not happy and her voice bitter.

Tessa obviously hated her father; but she appeared to be safe, so he decided to leave. There wasn't much he could do for her at this point.

"You are welcome to Christmas dinner. You saved her life and brought her home. Please be our guest." The Grand Master's words made Gideon frown in bafflement. Why would he invite a vampire to come back?

Gideon looked at Tessa, and she looked back. With a grimace and an exasperated noise in the back of his throat, he nodded briskly and then left.

* * * *

Tessa had lost her Christmas spirit. Her father had given her the curse of eternal damnation. Old age and death wouldn't even save her from the place; she wouldn't age here in Other World. Her younger sisters tried to get her to sing, tease, and joke with them as she usually did. She just couldn't muster enough spirit even to fake it. Ebenezer Scrooge had nothing on her for the 'bah, humbugs!'

The thought of seeing Gideon again left her nervous and agitated. Gideon had been invited, but coming from her father it really was more of an order. He wouldn't be coming to see *her* if he showed up. The man had done what vampires do; enjoyed promiscuous sex and nothing more. She meant nothing to him. If it hadn't been for the threat she would never have come back so easily. When she thought about him, her emotions were all muddled and twisted. Keeping his part in her imprisonment at the forefront of her mind would serve her best if he did actually show up for Christmas dinner. He had saved her life, and for that she at least owed him dinner; although her return had spared his species' extinction. Did that make them even?

Tessa questioned her strange connection to the man while she helped her sisters decorate and bake; they hadn't

done any of it before her return. Tabitha had insisted they wait, because "*without Tessa Christmas lost its meaning.*" She was touched, but annoyed. If she'd had her way, she'd just have found a nice quiet spot to sulk.

Tessa was helping Tonia string popcorn and cranberries when Victor walked into the room. He stopped and just watched Tessa for a long moment before he continued on his way. His attitude irritated her. She was the one being punished; if he didn't want her there he could easily let her leave. Joy and happiness would fill her heart as she skipped away from Other World for good.

A little green woman with big pink eyes came into the room holding a tray of hot chocolate. Tessa took a cup and thanked her quietly. She just wanted to go home, to what felt normal.

Dear Santa, All I want for Christmas is reality!

Sipping her chocolate, she let the bitter thought fade.

A tall, thin reed of a woman came in. From her pointed ears it was obvious that she was a were-creature of some type; probably a panther judging from her shiny black hair. Tessa knew her father trusted weres and employed them often. When the woman spoke, the rolled r's confirmed her race.

"Come with me; your father commands it."

Tessa resisted the urge to stick out her tongue at the woman and mimic her words. She knew she was scowling at the woman, and she tried to rein in her anger. It wasn't this woman's fault that her father was forcing her to remain. However, the wording used couldn't have been worse. Dragging her feet, Tessa got up and trudged behind the woman. Whatever he wanted, she was sure she wouldn't like it.

When they got to the top of the stairs, the woman opened a door for Tessa. "This is your room. The Grand Master arranged it especially to your liking. It's very... human. Your suitcase is here already." The woman then left; closing the door behind her.

Tessa stood in the large bedroom, fuming. She might be a prisoner in Other World; but that didn't mean she would be living in the castle. There were plenty of apartments for rent and jobs she was qualified to do. Stomping toward the door she stopped when something caught her eye.

Slowly, she walked to the dresser where there was a photo she'd never seen. It was a picture of her mother, but it looked... wrong. Squinting, she picked up the photo and studied it closely. Her mother looked far too old; much

older than she had been when she died. Tessa touched the face in the picture through the glass tenderly before setting the photo back down on the dresser. The gilded frame had been sitting on a piece of paper. She picked up the age-yellowed paper. What she read on it made her ill and she had to sit down on the lavish king-sized bed.

Victor:

I cannot live with what you are. I know you hoped I would join you, but you were wrong. You have betrayed me in the worst possible way. You messed with my mind and I've been in love with an illusion. I gave birth to abominations. You are no better than a rapist. I want nothing to do with you or the children. My friend Lilith has agreed to take the girls and tell them that I am dead. Looking at them, knowing what they are, makes me sick. God forgive me, but I am leaving all of you. Don't look for me.

H

It was her mother's handwriting. Even after so many

years she was positive it was the same she had seen on her notes to school. Was her mother alive? Why had her father left such devastating news on her dresser? How did he have a picture that obviously didn't exist when she wrote the Dear John letter? The questions swirled in her brain, making her dizzy. Tears fell from her eyes and Tessa crumpled onto the carpet.

How could a mother leave six small daughters with a friend and abandon them, never to look back? Had Hannah even known Victor planned to take them the night he brought them to Other World? Did she know that they were in Other World? Did she care?

Slowly, the realization of the time shook her out of her misery. She rose from the floor and went to the ensuite bathroom to wash her face. Choosing her clothing, she became disgusted with herself when she realized she was dressing for Gideon. Putting the letter in her pocket, she left the room to find Victor.

As usual, he was in his study lost in concentration. Tessa stood for a moment, watching him. If she let her imagination run wild he looked almost like a normal father. She'd gotten her black hair from him. He wore a tailored suite. His human form was always pale, but when he was a demon his skin was a deep burgundy. He was tall and gaunt

in his human form, but when he morphed into the demon he was much bigger. Her step on a squeaky floorboard caused him to glance up in surprise. When a red flicker appeared in his eyes the illusion of normalcy faded. Tessa took the letter out of her pocket, and with a few angry strides she was before his desk, slamming the paper in front of him.

"What the hell is this all about? You told us our mother was dead! She left us, and you just let her? Why tell me now? She has to be at least forty-five in that picture! How did you get it?"

He was silent for a moment. "Sit!"

She complied.

"You have been holding on to some idealized version of the woman. I never had the heart to tell you the truth, but if I don't you'll get yourself killed. You, more than your sisters, love her. You remember a life without Other World. I want you to be happy, but that requires you to be alive."

Tessa didn't know what to say. Her father had never opened up to her like this before.

"I know I failed you. You needed a human softness that I don't possess; but I love you as my kind loves, Tessa. You have always challenged me more, and maybe that is why you are so special to me.

"I will never be human, but I am your father. I could have left the lot of you with that human who thought your father was just a talented psychic. Believe me, the first few weeks I considered returning you all; but I couldn't do it. Even when you looked at me with those big scared blue eyes, I wanted you here. I loved your mother so much that I fooled myself into believing her feelings were deeper than the glamour I used on her.

You have suffered because I was wrong. It was wrong to trick her and also to lie to you. The human had already told you that she died; I honestly believe she loved you; after all, she didn't want you to know she was leaving by choice. I just let the lie stand because none of you ever asked me if she was alive. Now, the truth must come out. The human who tried to kill you was not the first, and the reason they know what you are is because your mother told them. There has always been an organization of humans that know about Other World and want to destroy it, destroy us; and your mother joined those people. She wants to see you dead. I think she has actually gone mad."

Her mother loved her. She was dead. He had to be wrong. Tessa refused to let the moisture in her eyes become tears. Staring at his blurry form, she continued to listen.

"I only saw her one more time. Hannah wanted to

know if I had you. I told her I did and she muttered something about it being harder to kill you now. She never asked if you were happy or how you had been, and my love for her died that day. She told me she would spend her life seeing my kind dead; even my abominations, as she called the six of you.

I had the picture taken so that your bodyguards would know to protect you from her. I never wanted you to know any of this, but you are hell bent on living as a human. You need to know the full truth in order to make good decisions. I want you to stay in Other World; at least until I can get this threat under control. Too many years I ignored it because they can't cross into Other World; but as they grow in power, their threat grows too.

I know holding onto being human has been like holding onto your mother, but it is time you let her go."

His plea made Tessa hiccup on her caged tears. Could any of it be true? "You lie! I don't know why it's so important that you keep me here, keep me miserable!"

"Tessa, child; I'm not lying to you. I hate the pain your mother has caused you; but I can't change the past. I've hoped you would come to want this life on your own. Embrace the world that you have rejected, use your compassion and gentleness to help make it a better place.

You are my heir and you are the future of Other World and I am sorry my secrets have caused you this anguish."

For a moment she just sat looking at her demon father. All of the new information was too much. "Do you want me to tell your sisters about your mother?"

Without thinking she answered, "Not on Christmas."

He nodded. "Now you understand the dilemma I have lived with for the past twenty-two years, there's always an excuse." Victor's quiet words made her see him in a new light.

Nodding, she pulled herself up by her pride and stood, then turned to leave. Glancing back at her father from the door, he appeared to have returned to his work; but she caught sight of his hand tenderly rubbing against the letter. Obviously, he still felt something for its author; even after the horrible rejection. Quietly, she closed the door and went to find her sisters.

Christmas dinner was in less than an hour. Everything was beautiful; and guilt over her lack of assistance didn't dim the wonder of gazing at her sisters' hard work. They enveloped her in a warm loving hug.

Something inside of her cracked and she wept as she shed some of the hatred in her heart. They all held each other and no one spoke until Talia began to laugh. "Hurry, get Tessa to my room. We have to make her pretty for her boyfriend."

Huffing, she protested Talia's statement. They rushed her up the stairs to Talia's room. Her sisters attacked her with cosmetics. Helpless against the onslaught she let them work. Giggling, Tara handed her a mirror. They'd done excellent work. Trista laughed as she teased her sister.

"You are going look so cute kissing that vampire under the mistletoe."

"Stop it! I should hate him. Because of him, I'm stuck here." *So why don't I?* she thought to herself. Why does he draw me so?

Tabitha pouted when she replied, "If it wasn't for him we wouldn't have you for Christmas. He's our hero! Is it so bad being here with us?"

Hugging the younger woman, Tessa spoke comfortingly. "It is wonderful being with you, just not being here. You'll be seeing so much of me you're going to get sick of it. Now, let's go eat; I'm starving." It was a lie. She doubted she'd ever get her appetite back; but she decided to make her loving sisters happy. Just because her

Christmas was ruined didn't mean theirs had to be.

The joviality and life immediately return to them. Smiling through her pain she gave them her best happy act so as not to spoil their Christmas. With her concentration focused on making her sisters happy she forgot about Gideon until she reached the bottom of the stairs and looked across the room. Standing casually near the fireplace, he looked so delicious it took her breath away.

Suddenly, she was very hungry... for him. His grin let her know that he knew exactly what she was thinking. Blushing, she grinned back. Her sisters rounded on him, and Tessa didn't need to be a mind reader to read his terror. No man —demon, human, or vampire— wanted a pack of curious sisters surrounding him and issuing probing questions.

When Victor entered the room, they all took their seats. Gideon sat between Tessa and Victor. Smiling, Tessa remembered the saying about a rock and a hard place. Victor gave him numerous dark looks throughout the meal, and she had to wonder why her father had invited the vampire if he didn't want him there.

* * * *

Every time Gideon tried to put a bite into his mouth, one of the sisters would interrupt him. Contrary to human

mythology, vampires ate; but they required fresh blood daily in addition to normal food. Other World doctors called the condition dietary anemia. He had fed the night before on Tessa, but he knew he needed blood again soon. Gideon had known he should feed before coming, but he only wanted Tessa. He also knew he couldn't feed on her again. Even if she wasn't a well guarded daughter of the Grand Master, she was still part human. Feeding on her again so soon wouldn't be good for her. She couldn't die, but he didn't want to weaken her. He'd taken more than he should have already; but she'd been so responsive that he'd been unable to resist a second bite. Judging from the looks the Grand Master was giving him, he felt reasonably sure the doctor had reported the suspected blood loss.

Tessa looked beautiful; but her glowing smiles were all an act. Thanks to the blood link he felt her emotions. When he gazed into her thoughts —something he usually didn't do, but with Tessa, he found he couldn't help his curiosity— he saw that Victor had dropped a bomb on her.

Merry Fucking Christmas. How in the hell does the man sleep at night? His irritation with the Grand Master grew.

Opening his senses up a bit more to the emotional residue that vampires couldn't help but feel, it surprised

him that he couldn't even accidentally glean emotion from the man. Unusual. Even the most powerful usually let things slip now and then. He obviously worked very hard to keep his every thought and feeling private. Considering his position it made sense. Whatever secrets the Grand Master hid, Gideon was sure they were important. He didn't try to invade the man's mind; he knew that with barriers that rigid the man would feel any attempted invasion.

His daughters all exuded their feelings like waterfalls gushing them out at him. They held nothing back. Tessa was the most guarded of the bunch, and her mental barriers were all a natural result of her aloof personality.

All of Tessa's sisters hoped for something to spark between him and their sister so that she would be around more often. It made him smile. He hoped for something more than one fabulous sexual encounter too.

Of all the women he'd enjoyed, Tessa had been the most delightful and surprising. He felt her freedom when they were together, and he knew she relished his body and welcomed anything he wanted to do with her. It made him hard just imagining the possibilities. If she allowed him to be with her again he had very definite ideas of what he would like to do with her. She seemed to be a bit vanilla in

her tastes, and the idea of opening her sexually to a bit of kink made aroused him so much he had to bite his lip to keep a groan from escaping.

He could just see her now; bound with black silk scarves and waiting for him, the black silk against her milky pale flesh. Her wide eyes taking in his body as he readied himself to take a bite of her; Tessa would scream his name as he gave her orgasm after orgasm. Quickly, he brought his thoughts away from her body and what he wanted to do with it. This was certainly not the time and place to get hard.

The meal was delicious; he had expected no less dining with the ruling family. After they ate and the dishes had been cleared, the tall plump girl — he'd forgotten her name— began to beg her sister to sing.

"Please sing for us, Tessa. I look forward to hearing your carols all year. Please; Tonia can play the piano while you sing."

Tessa blushed and glanced at him. Finally, after the rest began to beg too, she stood and went over to the piano. She whispered to Tonia, the tall plump girl, and music began to flow from the piano. Gideon glanced at the stoic Grand Master, and he noticed a subtle softening in his face when Tessa began to sing.

Softly, she began on a classic, "Winter Wonderland." As she sang, Gideon felt her magic. Even her voice held the magic and he knew she didn't even realize it. Somehow, that fact charmed him even as she entranced him. She sang a few more songs before she and her accompanist sat back down at the table.

Someone suggested games, and he followed the family from the table. It surprised him when the Grand Master sat down across from one of his daughters and started to deal a deck of cards. This was a side of the man he doubted very many had ever seen; it made the fearfully powerful man seem almost approachable, until he remembered what he'd been told about the Grand Master being different only with his family.

While the family was distracted choosing activities, Tessa approached him slyly. She took his hand and all but ran with him from the room; yanking him out the door. When she finally stopped dragging him he noticed that she had taken him into a beautiful atrium. It held so many plants it looked like a forest. The room was almost entirely composed of glass, and with the subtle lighting it felt as if they were walking in a summer garden.

Looking out a window at the snow made a striking contrast. The snow in Other World wasn't like the snow in

the human world; it was less soft and fluffy, yet as she glanced out the glass with a wistful expression, he could tell it made her homesick. When Tessa turned to him and spoke, he had to clench his hands into fists to keep from grabbing her and taking her right in the middle of the room.

* * * *

Tessa brought Gideon to the atrium because she wanted to talk to him without her entire family present.

"I just wanted to let you know that I've not told my sisters or my father what happened between us. It was just one of those things that happen in the heat of the moment."

He didn't speak, and worse; he looked like he was upset. He clenched his fists tightly.

Blushing, Tessa tried to correct her blunder. "I didn't want to make you feel awkward." She turned to leave, but he grabbed her arm. Looking up into his face, she found his expression was unreadable. Biting her lip, she didn't know what to say or do, so she just stood there mutely, feeling foolish.

Gideon pulled her to the side and took her cheek tenderly in his palm. "Look up, Tessa." His voice was hoarse when he spoke.

She did; and found mistletoe hanging over their

heads. Mistletoe was one of her favorite parts of Christmas and standing there, with Gideon, felt simply perfect. She saw his eyes change, filling with lust, but also something else; something they might be able to build into a real relationship. He seemed to feel the moment as strongly as she did. When he made a move toward her his actions spoke to her, and she liked what she was hearing.

Gideon leaned down and claimed her lips with a rough passion that stole her breath. Her pussy was wet just from his kiss. His breathing was ragged when he pulled back. "Tessa, you mean something to me, and I know I mean something to you. Please, Tessa, tell me the truth. I don't want to steal it from your head; I want you to tell me."

"I want you more than I have ever wanted another man. I don't even care that you're from this place, that you're a vampire. I don't know what it is I feel, but it's certainly not hate."

Growling, he pulled her to him; and Tessa let him kiss her until she couldn't breathe. The sound of footsteps startled her, and they both turned. To her horror, Victor stood in the doorway. He didn't look happy. She stepped in front of Gideon, trying to shield him from her father's ire.

"Vampire, if you plan on spending any time with my daughter casually, you'd better request my permission!"

Tessa wasn't sure which of them felt more surprised by his words, her or Gideon.

"Grand Master, I would like to request your permission to spend time with your daughter."

"Tessa, do you want this vampire to court you?"

She didn't know how to answer that. Her heart told her that Gideon was perfect, but her head told her he was a vampire. If Victor won and she was forced to stay in his world, she couldn't imagine being without Gideon. Finally, she found her voice again, because ultimately the answer was easy. "Yes, Father."

"I want you to stay with the family in this house, and if this... man... makes you happy, then I will allow him to remain also."

Tessa was shocked. She hated anyone trying to dictate her life, but as she lived trapped in Other World until further notice, she knew she was stuck with her father too. Gritting her teeth, she replied, "I do want to see Gideon. But I plan on getting my own apartment and a job, and I don't want your goons stalking me. No humans can hurt me here, and I doubt any Other Worlder would be stupid enough to mess with me. So if you will give me a little bit of rope, I promise not to hang myself with it."

Victor's eyes glowed red and she could see how

close to losing control he was, but something stopped him. She wondered if he was as sick of fighting as she was. He seemed to calm, the red left his eyes and as he left the atrium Tessa was sure she heard him muttering something about vampires and mistletoe.

Gideon looked at her and grinned. "What kind of a job do you plan to get? I hear you've got a good chance at future Grand Mistress."

"I'm stuck here for now. You're right; I'm going to need to do something if I don't want to be under Victor's thumb. But I don't ever plan to be the Grand Mistress. I could open my own store; specializing in very human products. Talia suggested it once, and I think the novelty of it would be a big hit here."

Gideon laughed. "As you're under lockdown and can't get to those human products, how do you plan to stock your shelves?"

"I know this vampire who has no problem going back and forth. I thought I might ask him."

"Lovely, are you trying to get me killed? Your father already hates me. Supplying you with contraband might be hazardous to my health."

"Oh, I hear vampires are a very healthy lot. I think you'll be alright."

"Sweet Tessa, if you pay me in kisses, I'll work night and day to bring you everything you need."

Laughing, Tessa leaned toward him and kissed him. Soon, they were both mindless and lost in the kiss. When she finally pulled back, Tessa looked into his face, searching for the truth of his feelings.

"You're the best Christmas present I've ever gotten."

Suddenly, her new residency didn't look so bad after all. The look in his beautiful eyes made Tessa hot. If Other World had Gideon, maybe it wasn't all bad. Feeling lighter than she had in days, she knew she had more questions about her mother that she wanted answered, but for the rest of the day it was still Christmas, and she wanted to unwrap her present and play with him.

Gideon followed her, and she knew he was reading her mind. He looked both worried and delighted by her train of thought. Smiling, Tessa put her arm around his waist and looked up at him. He was beautiful, and she felt very confident that he was hers. This was definitely her best Christmas ever, after all.

* * * *

Watching from a nearby alcove, the Grand Master allowed a slight smile to twitch at his lips, content in the knowledge he'd finally found a Christmas present that

would make her happy.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashlynn Monroe is a busy wife and mom. She's been writing since she was a teenager for her own pleasure, but in her thirties, she decided it was time to share her stories.

She enjoys writing about anything and everything paranormal or fantasy-related while maintaining a career as a full time customer service professional. When she is not lovingly raising her young family, she is dreaming up her next tale of romance.

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