



Bewitched Before Christmas

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Description: Christmas is a time to spend with family, but Lola's don't seem to want her back. Instead, she's stuck in the wilds of Scotland under the protection of Lachlan MacNair, a blood-sucking monster, who's determined to make sure she has the sorriest Christmas ever. Things go from bad to much, much worse when Lola sees a vision of herself kissing Lachlan, under the mistletoe. Lola is a powerful witch and her visions of the future always come true. Until now. Because this one... Never. Going. To. Happen.

Total Pages (Source): 31

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Chapter One

The snow started to fall as Lachlan crossed the courtyard. Tiny flakes that swirled in the icy air. Beside him, Sean, his second-in-command was humming under his breath.

Goddamn Jingle Bells.

Again.

Everywhere he turned someone was singing a Christmas carol.

And he knew exactly who to blame for that.

He gritted his teeth and shoved his hands in his pockets. Goddamn Christmas.

“You’re going alone?” Sean asked as they stopped beside the Porsche.

About to climb in, Lachlan paused. Sean had been with him a long time. Long enough to know not to question his decisions. “Yeah, I’m going alone.” What was the alternative? Listening to fucking Jingle Bells all night long? “You have a problem with that?”

Sean pursed his lips. “You know the guys reckon you have a death wish?”

Pretty difficult considering he was already dead. Had been for nearly three hundred years. He opened his coat to show Sean the two Glockes at his hips. He wasn’t worried about a rabble of disorganized werewolves. Even if they had killed his predecessor.

That was why he was here as the Council's representative and had been for three long months. Because, the stupid fucker who had been here before him had allowed a pack of dogs to take him down. Otherwise, Lachlan would have happily never set foot on Scottish soil for the rest of eternity.

Lachlan wasn't part of the Council, but Darius, his sire was, and he'd asked Lachlan to step in and cover until someone else could be appointed. The Council had been in disarray at the time, recovering from some sort of internal coup. And Lachlan wasn't able to deny a request from his sire. However much he wanted to.

He climbed into the car, was about to shut the door when Sean leaned down and spoke again. "Lola asked if she can go into town. It's Christmas Eve. She wants to go to the carol service."

He didn't even think about it. "No."

"She won't be happy."

Like he gave a fuck. "Our job is to keep her safe. Not happy. Lock her in the goddamn dungeon if you have to."

The snow fell faster as he drove out over the drawbridge. Thick, heavy flakes, that splatted against the windscreen, cutting off the view. For a second, he considered going back. Changing the vehicle for something more appropriate—the Porsche was hardly suitable for extreme weather conditions. But only for a second.

It was seven in the evening, but he had already been up for hours. In some ways Scotland was the perfect environment for his kind. At this time of year, the days were short and the nights long.

But it was cold. And when it wasn't raining, it was snowing.

Christ, he hated Scotland and not only for the bad memories.

The wheels slipped on the icy road, and he fought for control, skidding to a halt, then pulling away again. It wasn't as though the crash would kill him. Though it would make him late for his meeting.

Scotland was bad enough, but then two months ago, Darius had asked a second favor, and if Lachlan had known what it involved, he would have said a categorical no. But he hadn't, and so Lola Morgan had landed on his doorstep.

How could someone so small cause so much havoc?

She'd wrapped his men around her little finger. A bunch of the baddest-ass vampires in the world, and she just had to smile and wrinkle her cute little nose to have them all falling over themselves to do her goddamn bidding.

An image flashed in his mind. A glossy cap of black hair, pointed face, red lips. And witch's eyes, silver rimmed with black, that could no doubt see into a man's soul, and rip it out.

Truth. He wanted her. Had from the moment he first set eyes on her. It was unexpected and undesired. But he wanted to fuck her and feed from her and lock her in that dungeon for his own personal dark pleasures. But that wasn't going to happen because...he made a mental list of all the reasons why:

She was too young. Only twenty. A baby. Even he didn't mess with babies. Actually, he hadn't messed with anyone in a long time.

She was a witch, and everyone knew that witches were evil creatures and not to be trusted.

She was Darius's sister-in-law, and Lachlan was supposed to protect her. To keep her safe.

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Finally, she didn't even know he existed. He might as well have been invisible for all the notice she took of him.

So the fucking and feeding thing—bad idea. All the same, his fangs ached, and his dick twitched every time he caught a glimpse of her or thought about her or...

He'd almost welcomed Darius's third request just to take his mind from the little witch. Two nights ago, Darius had been in contact again. Change in Council policy. After years of being downgraded to animal status, the werewolves were being brought into the fold. Darius didn't say why, and Lachlan hadn't asked. But he was to arrange a preliminary meeting. Bring them to the table. And not as food. Pity—wereblood was tasty stuff.

Up ahead, lights flickered in the darkness, and he checked the GPS. This was it. Pulling the car over to the side of the road, he slid to a stop and switched off the engine. Then sat for a minute.

He tried to feel a little enthusiasm for his task. And failed. Darius had promised him, do this and he could head back to New York in the new year. Away from Scotland and the cold, and the snow, and the memories, and the hot little witches.

But even that failed to raise his dark mood.

Maybe he'd lived...or died...for too long.

Eventually someone tapped on the window, and he sighed, pushed open the door, and climbed out of the Porsche. Two men stood close, too close, and he snarled, showing

the tip of one fang.

They stepped back. Good.

One of the men waved a hand into the dark shadows of the forest that edged the road. He walked beneath the trees; the snow thinner here, blocked by the canopy of branches overhead. A man stood in a clearing, flanked by three others. He was dressed in black, a mask hiding most of his face. Fucking poser. Lachlan came to a halt in front of him and breathed in the sharp feral scent of werewolf, and under that the sweet smell of fresh blood. His hunger rose.

“Rumor has it you’re from these parts,” the man said. There was a thick Scottish burr to the voice. Familiar from long ago. A local.

“Does it matter where I’m from?”

“Lachlan MacNair? Och aye, you have a clan name, but you sound like a fucking Sassenach.”

It had taken a hundred years or so for the brogue to fade from his voice. He shrugged. “I bring you a message from the Council. An invitation. There will be a meeting in two days’ time. Seven in the evening.”

“And why would we want to join this council?”

Lachlan smiled, revealing the tip of one fang. “You’re mistaking me for someone who gives a fuck. I’m merely the messenger.”

“You’re just a wee messenger boy then?” As the man took a step forward, Lachlan opened his coat and drew the Glock from his right hip, aimed it at the other man’s chest. Behind the mask, his eyes narrowed. “You need a gun?”

“I like guns.”

He shrugged. “Maybe we’ll be at your meeting. Or maybe we’ll send you a message of our own.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” Not. Lachlan’s phone beeped. He pulled it out of his pocket and read the caller ID. Sean. “What is it?” he asked.

“She’s given us the slip, boss.”

Jesus.

“I think she used magic, boss. Should we go after her?”

“No. I’ll go.”

Two more days. That’s all he needed. Keep his dick in his pants and his fangs in his mouth.

And what could go wrong?

Chapter Two

Lola Morgan’s eyesight wavered, and she experienced the strange flickering at the edges of her brain that always preceded her visions. Her lids fluttered closed and, flashing up on the screen of her mind, she caught a brief glimpse of the future.

When she came back to herself, she was on her hands and knees in the snow. Wet soaking through her mittens and the knees of her jeans.

Her mind screamed in denial.

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Maybe it hadn't been a vision. Maybe it was nothing but a figment of a deluded and deranged brain.

But she knew that wasn't the case. She'd had visions all her life. It was part of what she was. And her visions always came true.

Up to now.

But this one...

Never going to happen.

Not if she had any say in it.

A whimper from beside her pulled her thoughts back from the future to the present. A warm, wet tongue licked her face, and she swiped it away. Another whimper and she opened her eyes. A huge dog sat beside her. Blond fur and golden eyes, pink tongue hanging out of his mouth.

"Sorry, boy." She patted his head. "I'm okay." She'd met her new friend shortly after she'd arrived two months ago. She'd snuck out to go explore the moor and found him with his leg caught in a hunter's trap. She'd freed him, and they'd been friends ever since. She'd always wanted a puppy. But her sister Regan had two Hell hounds and they would have no doubt eaten it.

Or it would have run away and abandoned her like everyone else did.

Her mother had dumped her when she was no more than a few days old. Handed her over to her sister, Regan, like she was an unwanted kitten to be given away—maybe she should be glad her mother hadn't just drowned her.

She didn't even know who her father was.

And while Regan loved her, her sister had always been a little distracted, and now she'd fallen in love and was totally distracted. And she'd sent her away. To the end of the world or what might well have been. For her own protection. Hah.

But that was two months ago, and the danger was over now, and they still didn't want her back.

Instead they expected her to stay with a bloodsucking, cold-hearted monster.

A shiver ran through her that had nothing to do with the cold.

The dog rubbed against her, and she rested her hand on his back and pushed herself to her feet. He came almost to her shoulder, the biggest dog she had ever seen. Though a total cutie, without an aggressive bone in his body.

She pulled her phone from her pocket. No signal. What a surprise. The snow was falling thick and fast, and the night was dark and cold.

She magicked up a flame of witch-light. That was about all the magic she was allowed to do as yet—little tricks and glamors. Though Regan had promised to start her proper training as soon as she got home. If she ever got home.

She looked around and then headed up to a small knoll, climbing to the top, raising her phone above her head and eventually managed to get two bars. She punched in the number and waited. They probably wouldn't even answer. Obviously, they had

abandoned her. Probably forgotten she even existed.

Finally, someone picked up. “Catrin Morgan, speaking.”

“Catrin. It’s Lola. I need to come home. Now.” She hated to beg, but really. “It’s Christmas. Christmas is for families, right? And I want to come home.”

“It’s not really... convenient right now.”

Notconvenient? She was nothing but aninconvenience? That hurt. But she had to convince Catrin.

“I had a vision,” she said.

“A good one?”

“No, not a good one,” she snapped. “A really, really, never-going-to-happen-in-a-million-years bad vision.”

“But your visions always come true.”

“Not this time.”

Catrin was silent for a moment. “What did you see?”

She took a deep breath. “I saw me. Kissing Lachlan MacNair. Under the mistletoe.”

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“Lachlan the vampire?”

“Yes,” she hissed. “The cold-hearted, bloodsucking monster vampire was kissing your sister under the goddamn mistletoe.”

“Oh, dear.”

Totally inadequate response. “Your innocent baby sister. There was tongue, and if it had lasted any longer, there would probably have been teeth.”

“You’re hardly a baby. You were born old.”

Grr. “Hah. So I’m not old enough to stay and help fight demons. But I am old enough to be slaughtered and probably much, much worse by a bloodsucking monster.”

“Well... Um...Put like that...”

She pushed her advantage. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Let me talk to Regan. We’ll get back to you.”

And the line went dead. Lola stared at the phone for a few seconds, then punched in the number again. It came up with a continuous buzz.

She did not want to kiss Lachlan MacNair under the mistletoe. Or anywhere else for that matter. Never. He scared her. He was so cold. Devoid of any of the nicer emotions. Those green eyes looked straight through her as though he didn’t even

know she existed. Except sometimes, he'd look at her as though he hated her. And other times, she'd catch a look in his eyes. Hunger. And she knew he was contemplating sucking her dry. And probably tossing her drained corpse into the snow.

“Woof.”

She turned to her friend. “You always knew I wanted to go home. I can't stay here forever.”

“Woof?”

“Because I have a family.” Even if they didn't want her. She sighed. “Come on, let's go sing some carols. Get in the spirit of Christmas.”

Lachlan had apparently refused to allow her to decorate the castle. Not that he'd told her in person, because that would have actually involved talking to her. Which he would never lower himself to do. But Sean had passed on the message.

At least one good thing came from that—no decorations meant no mistletoe and consequently no kissing under the mistletoe.

All the same, she wasn't sticking around. She'd go to her carol service, then back to the castle, pack a bag and she was off. She would walk back to England if she had to.

As they headed down off the moor, the lights of the village came into sight. The snow had eased off, and the sky above was a blanket of stars. The church bells rang out.

She smiled. She loved Christmas. When she was little, she would sneak out, go into town, and peer through all the windows at the decorations and presents. Her family didn't really celebrate Christmas as such.

As they approached the church, her steps slowed. A sleek black Porsche was parked off to the right. She stopped as a man straightened from where he had been leaning against the wall of the church.

In his long leather coat, with his dark red hair, and not least the sense of menace emanating from his long, lean figure, he was unmistakable.

She had a flashback to the feel of his firm lips on hers. His tongue in her mouth, his hands on her breasts. Her skin tingled, her nipples tightened, and she had to remind herself...

Never going to happen.

She closed her eyes for a moment to give herself strength. If she could, she would open a portal to...anywhere. And disappear.

But she couldn't.

So suck it up.

Taking a deep breath, she shoved her shaking hands in her pocket. She wasn't doing anything wrong. He had no right to keep her a prisoner. Sean had mentioned the dungeon comment.

Show no fear.

Chapter Three

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The locals had all disappeared inside, though Lachlan had received some strange looks as they passed him. A couple had even crossed themselves.

The witch came strolling down the hill from the moors, dressed in jeans and boots, some sort of bulky coat and a red bobble hat. Red and green Christmas trees dangled from her ears. She was accompanied by a huge golden...dog.

His eyes narrowed as she got closer and his nostrils filled with the wild, musky scent of...werewolf. A low growl rumbled in the back of his throat and the 'dog' pushed closer against her.

His heart rate kicked up. He almost didn't recognize the emotion that gripped him. Fear? Vampires didn't do fear, but the thing was big enough to chew off her head. Had she no sense?

He held himself still as they came to a halt in front of him. Werewolves could be skittish. He didn't want to trigger the thing off. Her hand rested on its head, and she scratched its ears almost absently. It leaned in against her and watched him insolently out of golden eyes. She's mine, it seemed to say, and the growl trickled out of Lachlan's throat.

"Move away from the werewolf," he said slowly. "Right now," he added when she failed to respond.

Her brows drew together as though he was speaking a foreign language, then she peered around her as if searching for something. Christ, she had no fucking clue.

Breathing slowly, he tried to calm himself. But his fangs were elongating, and he could sense the darkness rising inside him.

He saw the moment she worked it out. Her eyes widened. She looked from the wolf to him and back. “Really? You’re a werewolf?”

It took Lachlan a second to realize she was talking to the thing.

“Woof.” And it was answering.

“Wow.” She sounded impressed.

He was going to lose it. Any moment now. The wolf must have sensed something similar because with one last disdainful look at Lachlan, it trotted away. Tail wagging.

She watched it go and then turned to look at him, her expression wary. Like she expected him to totally lose his fucking cool because she’d crept out of the castle, where he was supposed to be keeping her safe, to meet up with a goddamn werewolf.

His rage was rising again, and she took a step back. “Did you know that your eyes have gone red. Is that normal?”

“Only when I get really, really angry,” he said. Or when he ate. Or got sexually stimulated. But he wasn’t going there. Though actually, he was already there, his dick hard in his pants.

“I thought you were always angry.” She glanced back to where the wolf had disappeared. “Is he really a werewolf?”

“Clueless,” he muttered to himself. “No wonder they don’t want you back.” He’d

asked Darius enough times when he could return her to where she belonged. “You’re a fucking liability.”

A hurt look flashed across her face. And he felt instantly guilty. Something else he couldn’t remember feeling in a long time. Centuries. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He needed to get her safely back to the castle, lock her in that dungeon, and get as far away as he could. “Come,” he said. “I’ll drive you back to the castle.”

“I’m going to the carol service.”

“No. You’re. Not.” He said it slowly, because she was obviously not too bright.

She gritted her teeth, then her eyes narrowed. She dashed past him before he realized what she meant to do. Hauling the big wooden door to the church open, she slipped inside, but then turned to face him. “Don’t vampires spontaneously combust if they go onto holy ground?” she asked. And she disappeared inside.

He stared after her. How could something so small cause so much mayhem?

Did vampires burst into flame in churches? He had no clue—he’d had no urge to test the theory since he’d been changed. General opinion was no. Like garlic and holy water, it was a legend with no basis in fact. But he wasn’t absolutely sure.

What he was, was angry enough to risk it. And part of him had always wanted to know. Was he evil?

Maybe he would spontaneously combust.

Would it matter?

He strode to the door, flung it open and...hesitated. He spotted her on the outside of a pew at the back of the church. As if sensing him, she turned around and blinked, her eyes widening. He stepped inside, every muscle tensing, a band tightening around his chest.

But no flames.

As he strode toward her, all around the church, the candle's flickered and died. The singing faltered. The place went silent.

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He stopped beside her. There was a shuffling and stamping of feet as the congregation turned to see what was happening, then turned back just as quickly.

He held out his hand.

She looked at it, then shoved her own hands in her pockets, but she did edge her way out of the pew and stomp toward the door. He followed. The tightness around his chest loosened as he stepped outside the church.

“Did you know you wouldn’t burn?” she asked.

“No.”

“Are you crazy?” She shook her head, and studied him, her brows drawn together. “That was interesting though. The candle thing.”

He looked down at her. “How do you know it wasn’t you?”

“Me?”

He shrugged. “Everyone knows witches are evil creatures.”

“Hah.” They came to a halt beside the Porsche. “Really? A sports car? In this weather.”

“Get in.”

“Can I drive?” she asked.

He shuddered. “Not a chance in hell.”

“Jesus,” she mumbled not quite under her breath. “Who’s a grumpy vampire?”

He unlocked the doors, and she climbed in. He got in beside her. Then went still. In the closed space, he could smell her blood, sweet and hot. Could hear it pumping in her veins. His gums ached with the need to feed, and he licked his lips. Maybe he could take a little drink and wipe her memory? Except he was in no way sure he could. He knew nothing about witches, except he didn’t trust them. Besides, he sensed a little drink would not be enough.

Control had never been an issue with him, now he found himself struggling, fighting to overcome the need that had been building for two months. Because he hadn’t fed in all that time. Had no urge, except from this one source. That he couldn’t have.

“Are we waiting for something?” she asked.

He gave himself a shake and started the car. It purred to life, and he pulled away. The snow had started to fall again while they were in the church, a thick almost impenetrable curtain of white. He drove quickly, need pushing him on. He’d drop her off and then he’d go feed. There were always willing volunteers who hung around the castle. Any one of them would be more than happy to feed the boss.

“Do you want to slow down?” she asked.

“No.”

He cast her a quick, sideways glance, her hands were grasping the sides of the seat, her fingers white, her face set.

He put his foot on the brake. Turned his attention back to the way ahead. Too late. Something was stretched out across the road. The tires hit, and they were spinning out of control.

Chapter Four

Someone was screaming, and Lola realized it was her. The car skidded as Lachlan fought for control. But they could get no traction on the icy road. They were sliding, huge dark shadowy shapes on either side.

She was going to die. And he wouldn't because he was already dead. And that was so not fair.

Then everything stopped. A loud bang shattered her ear drums, and something punched her in the face. She couldn't breathe and panic welled up inside her. Her arms flailed, trying to find a way out.

Beside her, the door was wrenched open, cold air hit her body, as a hand grabbed her arm and dragged her out. She was lying in the snow, flakes landing on her upturned face. Lachlan appeared above her.

"Move," he shouted.

She shook her head, trying to get her brain to work.

"Move!" Without giving her a second to respond, he hauled her over his shoulder, turned, and—

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Behind them the car exploded. They were hurled forward, flying through the air, and crashing into a snowbank. Lachlan landed on top of her, hard, so the air left her lungs in awwhoosh.

Once again, she struggled to breathe, and she shoved at him. He didn't move. Had he passed out? Did vampires pass out? She changed tactics and jabbed him in the side with her finger. He was like rock. Cold, hard, unfeeling rock.

As if she'd ever kiss him under the mistletoe.

If she ever decided to fall in love—and it was a huge if—then it would be with someone...nice. And reliable. Someone she could trust to not dump her the moment things got difficult. Or inconvenient. Or they fell in love with someone else.

An emotionally retarded vampire was the last person she would kiss.

Ever.

She couldn't believe he'd made that comment about her family not wanting her back. Bastard. She jabbed him again and this time he shifted a little and the pressure eased, and she drew a big breath of air into her lungs.

Somewhere close by the car was burning. The heat of the flames was close enough to play across her skin, and in the flickering light, she could make out his face above her. No expression. But when did he ever have an expression, unless it was angry? She'd never once seen him smile. But then most of the time he avoided her like the plague. She had seen him turn around in mid-stride and head the other way to avoid

having to actually interact with her.

So why didn't he get off her now? She wriggled, getting her hands between them and shoving hard. With no reaction whatsoever. Except maybe a slight flicker of something in his eyes. She stared into his face, so close. In the light from the fire, they glowed...crimson.

She had a funny idea that was not a good sign. Was he really, really angry? Again. But he didn't look angry. His nostrils flared as though he scented something, and he licked his lips. A shudder ran through her. Not fear, something she wasn't willing to analyze right then. She tried to slither out from under him, but his lower body pushed against her. Something hard—even harder than the rest of him—pressed against her belly through the layers of clothing.

Not good. Hopefully, just a vampire thing.

Except warmth was pooling in the base of her belly. Maybe she'd caught on fire.

She shifted again, and he growled low in his throat. "Don't move."

She went instantly still, for one second, and then she was pushing and shoving and trying to wriggle out from under him, and he wasn't moving at all, just lying there. An immovable object. Finally, she gave up and lay still, breathing hard.

He closed his eyes, his hips pressing the length of his erection against her, and then his weight was gone, and she was free. She should get up and run or something. Instead, she lay staring up at the sky. After a minute, she rolled her head so she could look at Lachlan. He lay beside her, on his back, eyes still closed. As if sensing her focus, he blinked and sat up.

She did the same.

“You don’t have to worry. I’m not going to eat you.”

“I’m not worried.” And it was true. In a weird way she trusted him. He would keep her safe. Because Darius had asked him to. And Darius was his sire. She knew that much about vampires.

“And I’m not going to rape you.”

“It never even occurred to me.”

Hah. Liar. Seduce her maybe. Not that she was in any way seducible.

“You have a very bad effect on me,” he said.

She did? “I do?”

“Whenever I am near you, I have this urge to fuck you and feed from you. Preferably at the same time.”

The words were spoken totally without emotion and for a moment, they didn’t quite make sense. Then heat washed through her, pooling in her breasts and belly. Which was totally unacceptable. And unprecedented. She was still trying to formulate a response, when he continued, “It’s inconvenient. But that’s all it is. A minor inconvenience. And you need not be worried in my presence. I am in control.”

“Bully, for you,” she muttered under her breath. So, he wanted to fuck her and feed from her, but not that much. She was just an inconvenience. But then hadn’t her sister said the same. Must be true.

She sniffed.

Time to get out of here. It was Christmas Eve, maybe there would be something good on the TV. Take her mind off the fact that she was all alone, had no presents, and no one wanted her. And Lachlan thought she was inconvenient.

Though he did want to fuck her.

Don't even think about it.

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She pushed herself to her feet and stood for a minute, taking stock. But there was no real damage. Only her pride. Inconvenient? Beside her, Lachlan was also on his feet. His long leather coat was open, and she couldn't resist a quick glance down. She couldn't see anything interesting. She raised her gaze to find him watching her through narrowed eyes. But at least the red thing seemed to have gone, and they were back to a pure, clear green. Beautiful eyes.

In fact, while she was loath to admit it, he was beautiful all over. All long and lean. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail, showing off high cheekbones and firm lips, a big bony nose. He looked young...maybe not much more than her own age. Though she knew that he was hundreds of years old; he must have been young when he was changed.

"You're staring," he murmured.

She sniffed and turned away. Beautiful is as beautiful does.

The car was nothing but a smoldering pile of metal, and a shiver ran through her. She could have died. If he hadn't pulled her out, she would have died. She wasn't ready to die. Then again, she wouldn't have even been in the car if he hadn't come after her. It was his fault.

"You should have let me drive," she said.

He snorted and moved past her. After circling the car slowly, he walked back to the road and crouched down, examining something on the ground. "Look at this," he said. "A stinger."

She moved forward and hunkered down. A strip of metal, with spikes at intervals, was laid across the road. “That’s why we crashed?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. So someone wants you dead? Why am I not surprised?”

“I’m already dead. It would have been an…”

“Inconvenience?” she suggested. “You have a lot of those in your life, don’t you? Poor thing. It must be hard.”

He ignored her comment. “You, on the other hand, would have been very dead. Had I not saved you. So maybe this”—he waved a hand at the road and the spikes and the burned out car—“was meant for you.”

She frowned. “Why would anyone want me dead?”

He raised an eyebrow, folded his arms across his chest, but didn’t answer.

“Hah.” She might have been dumped by a lot of people in her short life, but she didn’t think anyone actually hated her enough to try and kill her. She was likable. People always liked her. Except for Lachlan.

“Don’t move,” he said, his gaze fixed on something behind her.

God, he was always giving orders. She turned around, peered into the trees. At first she couldn’t see anything. Then something shifted in the shadows. Black on black. Fear unfurled in her stomach. She stared harder and made out eyes glowing in the darkness. A huge black wolf separated from the shadows. All round them, the forest moved. She swallowed as her mouth flooded with saliva. “What the—”

Lachlan grabbed her hand. “Run!”

Chapter Five

Lachlan’s fingers tightened around her small hand and, ignoring her squeak of alarm, he hauled her around and ran.

The wolves were closing in, forming a trap, and he hurled himself forward, dragging Lola behind him. He kept to the road. Out in the open he could move faster than the wolves. In the trees, he would have no chance.

The wolves made no sound as they raced after him, but he could sense them, feel their intent bearing down on him.

So the trap had been for him. And he was an idiot. He should have been on his guard. Except he’d been distracted.

The witch was a weakness. And she was slowing him down. Maybe he should let her go. But he couldn’t leave her.

He’d promised Darius he would keep her safe. That was why. The only reason. Nothing to do with the fact that he couldn’t bear the thought of what a pack of werewolves would do to her.

Now he could hear the panting of their breaths. Without slowing, he hauled her over his shoulder and ran faster. Alone, he would have turned and fought. But she was vulnerable. Her small hands clutched at his back, and he held her tighter. And ran.

The snow was still falling, a curtain of white.

If they ever got back to the castle, she was going straight in that dungeon. Then he

was going back out, and he was hunting down the wolves. He'd feast on their blood. Maybe there would be a few left alive to join the Council at the end of the night. Right now he didn't give a—

Something slammed into him from the side, and they crashed to the ground. He was up in a second. Shoving Lola behind him, he drew a pistol in each hand. The night was dark, but he could sense them all around, smell their fetid breath. They circled, fluid, so he couldn't tell one from the other. So many. Too many.

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It was him they wanted. Maybe he could negotiate a safe passage for her. His life for hers. He shot above their heads as a warning and to let them know he was armed. He'd take as many with him as he could. But if there was any way to save her, he would do it.

Suddenly, they stopped their circling and sat on their haunches as though waiting. But for what? Behind him, Lola gripped onto his coat and pulled herself to her feet, pressing up against him, her breathing fast and ragged. "Are we going to die?" she asked.

"Hopefully not." He thought for a moment, and right now, he wasn't too proud to ask for help. "You're a witch. Can't you do some sort of spell?" He had no clue what witches did. They were shrouded in mystery. Though it was believed they possessed powerful magic.

"Sorry," she said. "I don't know any spells. I haven't actually learned any yet."

Great.

He looked around, searching for anything that might give them an advantage, a little cover. A few feet away, a huge boulder stood by the edge of the road. Holding the pistols in front of him, he backed up slowly. The wolves behind him stayed put. He fired a couple of shots over their heads, and they parted. At least Lola would have some protection and they wouldn't be able to come at her from behind.

A ripple ran through the waiting wolves, and directly in front of him, they parted. A man strode through. All in black, a mask covering half his face, though Lachlan

recognized him from the meeting earlier. Now he also wore a sword at his back, the jeweled hilt visible above his left shoulder.

He stopped a couple of feet away. “You care for the wee lassie?” He waved a hand in Lola’s direction. “Drop the guns, and we’ll let her live.”

Lola’s fingers tightened on his coat.

“Shoot me,” the man continued, “and they’ll rip her to pieces before your eyes. There are too many of us.”

The wolves inched closer. The circle around them was three deep. He hadn’t realized the pack was so big. Would he have been more careful if he’d known? Probably not. Perhaps Sean was right, and he had a death wish. If it was only himself, he would have fought. But he couldn’t protect her against so many.

He lowered his arms and let the pistols fall to the snow.

The man smiled. “Sensible.”

“Why?” Lachlan asked.

He shrugged. “Like all your kind, you underestimate us. Maybe we have no wish to join your Council.”

“You could have just said no.”

“But this is so much more fun.”

The man was a dick. “You said you’d let her go.”

“Actually, I said we would let her live.” He smiled. “Not really the same thing.”

Lachlan gritted his teeth. “What do you want? I presume if you wanted us dead then we wouldn’t be having this conversation. So get the fuck on with it.”

The man studied him, head cocked to one side. “You know, you really don’t sound like you come from here at all. Tell me, was it easy to turn your back on your home, your friends, your family?”

What the hell was he going on about? “I have no friends and no family. They’re all dead.”

“Convenient for you.”

“What do you want?”

“Trey here”—he waved a hand at a golden wolf who sat close by—“has taken a liking to your little friend. I promised him he could have her.”

The golden wolf sat back on its haunches, a big happy grin on its goofy face.

Lachlan would kill the fucker if he got the chance.

The man in black leaned closer. “After I’ve had my fill, of course. New wolves are always offered to the alpha.”

Rage filled him. His vision blurred to crimson and his fangs elongated. Fucker better not touch her.

“Lachlan, you’re scaring me.”

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Her soft voice brought him back from the edge. He forced his rage down. Or she would die.

Shaking off her hold, he stepped forward. “You think I care about her, but you’re wrong. She was sent here for safety. I’m her protector—nothing more. She’s the sister-in-law of the second-in-command of the Council. Harm her, and they will destroy you.”

“Really?” His eyes flicked to where Lola stood at his side. So small. Lachlan glanced down at her. Her face was pale, and that hurt look was back in her eyes. He had a sudden urge to tell her he hadn’t meant it. That he did care. But it wasn’t true. Was it?

“So if I wanted an insurance policy to ensure the Council won’t destroy us, she would be perfect.” He grinned beneath the mask. “Come here, wee bonnie lassie. I won’t say this isn’t going to hurt, but it will hurt more if you fight it. Come here, Sassenach.”

She tugged on Lachlan’s coat. “I don’t want to be a werewolf. Now would be the time to do some super-cool vampire shit.”

There was no cool vampire shit that would get them both out of there alive. Maybe he should let them change her. At least she would live.

“Of course, there’s a risk she won’t survive. Not everyone does. But she looks strong enough, if a little scrawny. We’ll just have to keep our fingers crossed.”

The man was playing with him. For some reason this was personal. And that was something he was going to have to think about, because he hadn’t been in Scotland

for nearly three hundred years, so how the hell had he managed to piss off the locals?

But it would have to wait. Because the news that Lola might not survive a werewolf bite, changed everything. Lachlan looked down at her, and she gave him a wobbly smile. He wanted to say something meaningful—she was too young to die—but had no clue what. “Stay behind me,” he said, and she gave a small nod.

They’d die together.

But he’d take out a few stinking werewolves before he went.

The wolves were inching closer. One leaped for him, and he moved fast, ripping out the animal’s throat so it crashed to the ground at his feet. Another came, and he whirled, kicking out so it flew through the air. He glanced over his shoulder. Behind him, Lola crouched against the boulder, eyes wide. Two came at him, and he put her from his mind, concentrated on staying alive, because if he went down, then she was finished. He lost track of time, whirling, kicking, slicing. He knew he’d been injured but didn’t feel the pain. His nostrils filled with the sweet metallic scent of blood, and the darkness rose.

There was a lull. No more coming. He stood still, breathing hard, blood dripping from his shoulder where teeth had savaged him. The man in black approached. He drew the sword from the sheath at his back, and it glinted in the dim light.

“Do you recognize the blade?” he asked.

Something flickered at the edges of Lachlan’s mind, but he shook his head.

“Maybe this will refresh your memory.” He swung the sword up, holding it poised, a small smile on his lips.

This was it. Lachlan's muscles tensed, and he made to leap for the man.

A word screamed out behind him.

Lola.

Even as he turned, the air around him shimmered and pulsed.

In front of him the man went still.

Then the whole world stopped.

Chapter Six

What in the Goddess' name had she done?

The word had come out of nowhere. Hadn't it?

One second she'd been staring in horror as the huge sword had swung toward Lachlan. He was going to lose his head. He'd die for real. And she'd be turned into a werewolf.

Not happening!

A sense of powerlessness had risen inside her, quickly overtaken by rage. The next second she'd been screaming. A word. In a language she didn't recognize or understand.

Then the world had stopped.

Really stopped.

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All around them the wolves were frozen in place. Two, who had been in mid leap, were actually suspended in the air. The rest were set in whatever position they'd been in when she'd spoken the word or spell or whatever it was. Snarling, claws outstretched, mouths gaping. Her blonde "friend" lay on the floor, blood streaming from a vicious wound in his shoulder. She tried to feel sorry, but he'd been spying on her. Setting her up. He wanted to turn her into a werewolf.

Her sister Regan was a werewolf. As far as Lola had seen, it hadn't been an improvement. Though maybe a pack would be nice. Except this one was obviously full of assholes, so maybe not.

Even the snow was unmoving. Reaching out, she touched her fingertip to a flake in front of her nose. It moved out of the way.

Lola pushed herself to her feet and stumbled to where the man in the mask stood in front of Lachlan, sword raised. She prodded him with her finger. No response.

"What the hell just happened?"

She almost jumped out of her skin as Lachlan spoke from behind her. She whirled around. "You're not..." She waved a hand at the others, frozen in place.

"Obviously not."

One arm was clenched at his side, blood dripping to the white snow. She'd never seen anything like him fighting. He'd moved so fast, spinning and kicking, like a dancer, so graceful. But he'd clearly taken a lot of damage. He swayed slightly as though in

an invisible wind.

She stepped closer.

He flinched and moved back out of her reach as though he didn't want her to touch him. His expression was...wary. "You said you couldn't do magic?"

"I shouldn't be able to." It was slowly dawning on her that she had somehow dredged up a word of power. She had used the Earth magic. "Oh, this is so bad," she muttered. "So very, very bad."

What had she done? And what would the price be? Because there was always a price for using the Earth magic. Whether you did it by accident or design—it didn't matter—you had to pay.

But they were alive. For now. Concentrate on that. "We have to get away from here," she said. "I don't know how long they'll be..." She searched for a word, but had no clue what they were, what she had done. "Out. They could come around at any moment. And you don't look too good." In fact, he looked terrible. If the wolves awoke, she didn't hold out much hope of their chances.

He appeared dazed, his gaze fixed on the man in the mask, and she snapped her fingers under his nose. "Lachlan. We have to move. We have to go."

A shudder ran through him, and his eyes cleared. Thank God. He was back in the land of the living. Or maybe not. But at least he was paying attention. He nodded, but then just stood there. Perhaps delayed reaction and he'd frozen as well? She so did not need this.

She had no clue where to go. And the snow had soaked through her clothes. She was icy cold and soggy. And she had a horrible suspicion that Lachlan was dying. Could

vampires die from loss of blood? And even if she hated him and had zero desire to kiss him under the mistletoe, she still didn't want him to die.

After all, they might be the only two people left alive. For all eternity. A whimper of denial rose up inside her, and she swallowed it down. Worry about that later.

She took his arm, gave him a shake. He felt cold, so cold. She looped her arm through his and sort of tugged. At first he resisted, then he stumbled, nearly bringing them both down. Lola braced her legs and managed to stay upright. For now.

"Which way?" she asked. "Come on, Lachlan. I need you. Remember, you told Darius you would protect me. Not doing such a good job, tonight. Time to step up. So which way?"

For a moment she thought he wouldn't answer, that he was too far gone, then he raised an arm and waved off to the left, into the forest.

She didn't want to go into the forest. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "That way there's shelter. You need shelter."

He was right. She was shivering, the cold seeping down to her bones. Wrapping her arm around his waist, she set off. There was a strange, eerie light, just enough for her to see the way between the trees.

They passed an owl on a branch. Frozen in place. A fox unmoving on the track in front of her, so she had to maneuver the vampire around it. She saw nothing moving.

The Earth magic was powerful. That was why there were so many rules. Why young witches weren't allowed to learn until they had a measure of control. Because if you didn't know what you were doing, you could do something really bad. Like stopping

the entire world and everything in it.

Lachlan had been vaguely steering them, but his movements were becoming jerkier, more uncoordinated.

Finally, he stopped, a shudder ran through him, and he crashed to his knees, dragging her with him. Then to the ground, landing half on top of her. She pulled herself free and knelt beside him. His eyes were closed. His face as cold and pale as death, and her heart hitched, skipping a beat. He couldn't be dead. He was a vampire. She shook his arm, then slapped his face. "Lachlan, wake up." Nothing.

Damn, damn, damn.

She sat back on her heels. What was she supposed to do? She had no clue where she was, and she could wander around in these woods all night and never find shelter. Besides, she couldn't leave him. What if she lost him and somehow, by some miracle, the world hadn't completely stopped, and the sun came up and he was out here? He'd fry to a crisp.

Breathe.

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There must be something she could do.

His hair had come loose from its ponytail in the fight, dark red, almost the color of blood. She stroked it away, revealing the clean lines of his face. High cheekbones, a sharp jaw. She trailed her finger down his big, beaky nose. Unconscious, he appeared so young. She'd never have dared touch him like this if he was awake. The thought made her feel guilty, and she snatched her hand away. Her gaze strayed to his throat. Did he have a pulse? Did vampires ever have a pulse?

"Please wake up, Lachlan. Please. I'll do what I'm told. You can lock me in the dungeon. I'll never sneak out again. Just wake up."

He didn't move. Not at all. Tears pricked her eyes and she sniffed. He was perhaps the only other being awake in the whole world. He might not be...nice, and likely if he did wake up, he would just dump her at some point in the not too distant future, but right now he was all she had. And she couldn't do this alone.

Think.

He'd clearly lost a lot of blood. He needed to replace it. And what did vampires drink? Blood.

She had blood.

She could surely spare a little.

And it wasn't as though she had a lot of other bright ideas.

She bit her lip, then glanced around. How did she even do this? Why had she never asked? Her sister Gina would have told her. Gina knew all about feeding vampires. She was married to one. Was actually a vampire herself. But Lola had never asked.

How hard could it be? She stripped off her gloves and pushed up her sleeve and stared at her wrist with the tracery of blue veins so close to the surface. “So near and yet so far.”

Could she bite through the skin? Ugh. She needed a knife. Or if not a knife then something sharp. Slipping her hands under Lachlan’s coat, she patted him down. He was hard, and he didn’t have a knife that she could find. He did have a belt, with a shiny silver buckle and she unfastened it with fumbling, freezing fingers, tugged it free and then scraped the buckle across her wrist. “Ow, ow, ow.” Finally, the skin broke open, and a minuscule amount of blood welled from the tiny wound. She had an idea it wasn’t going to be enough. Gritting her teeth, she pressed harder, until her blood dripped onto the snow. What a waste.

She leaned in closer to Lachlan. “Think of this as an early Christmas present,” she said and pressed her cut wrist against his lips.

Nothing happened. It wasn’t going to work. “Come on, Lachlan. It’s blood. Lovely delicious, virgin blood. Yummy.”

Suddenly, his eyes flashed open, and his hand grasped her wrist in an immovable grip. His mouth opened and his teeth sank into her skin. She gave a little yelp of shock. Then closed her eyes and breathed.

“Okay, okay. This is good.” This is what she wanted.

Wasn’t it?

Then his whole body shifted. His mouth released her wrist, and relief flooded her system. For one second. Then somehow, she was on her back, and Lachlan was looming over her, huge, eyes crimson, her blood dripping from the biggest pair of fangs she had ever seen—and she seen some pretty big fangs tonight.

She opened her mouth to scream as he buried his face in her throat. His fangs sank into her flesh. She waited for pain. Instead a sense of peace washed through her, and she went still as he started to feed.

A deep rhythmic tugging pulled at places deep inside her. Her body relaxed; warmth spread through her where there had been only cold. She arched her back, her arms going around him to pull him closer. Shouldn't she be pushing him away? But it felt so good. Nothing had ever felt this good. Tingles radiated out from the center of her body. Her nipples ached; her sex was drenched. The pleasure was building and building until she shuddered beneath him. Pleasure like she'd never known existed exploded, shattering her into a thousand pieces. And still he drank. Her vision was dimming, going dark at the edges.

Her last thought as the darkness took her—if she was going to die, then this was as good a way as any.

And...would he be sorry?

Chapter Seven

Lachlan could sense the life force filling him. There was nothing like it. That moment when you took the last drop of blood and the life was yours.

Not happening.

Somehow he found the strength, broke his hold, and jerked away, every fiber in his

body screaming to finish this.

No!

That wasn't who he was. His whole body shuddered. Wrapping his arms around his knees, he waited until he had control. He felt disorientated. Dizzy with the power flowing through him.

Where the hell was he? What had happened?

He'd fed. And he'd never tasted anything like it. Rich and sweet and full of magic.

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His gaze shifted back to the woman in the snow. Lola.

Shit.

He leaped to his feet and closed the small space between them, dropped to his knees. She lay sprawled in the snow. So small and still, he was sure she must be dead, and panic swamped him. Her skin was pale, her eyes closed. A ragged wound was torn in her throat; he hadn't been gentle. Her sleeve was pushed up and there was a second wound at her wrist. She'd offered herself to him.

Don't let her be dead.

His fingers searched for a pulse and he found it, weak and thready. He'd nearly drained her dry. But instinct had taken over. The need to survive. He'd lost so much blood. Now his wounds were all but healed. He'd never known blood so powerful.

Had he taken too much?

He had to get her out of the cold. Get her some food, some drink. Maybe a blood transfusion. He pulled out his cell and tried the castle, but there was no signal. Nothing. Then he remembered. She'd stopped the goddamn world. Saved his life not once but twice.

He couldn't let her die.

Scooping her up out of the snow, he held her cradled against his chest. So small.

Then he ran. He hadn't been in these forests for nearly three hundred years. He'd kept away since he'd returned, but long ago, he'd called this place home. After his father had been killed by the redcoats, they'd moved here with his mother and sisters and Gabe, the foster brother he had loved like kin. He'd known the forests intimately. Had hidden and hunted here. Then the English had come, slaughtered the last of his family. After that there had been only Gabe, who had died at Culloden, saving Lachlan's worthless life. A pointless act of bravery as it turned out. He had only put off the killing blow.

Now he ran through the trees, not thinking, leaving it to memory. Still he skidded to a stop, shock holding him immobile as the cottage came into sight. Maybe he'd expected it to be nothing more than a tumbled down ruin. Or at least the dark, cold place of his memory. They'd been fugitives and fires had been a dangerous luxury. The winters long and cold. They'd slept, huddled together for warmth. One of his sisters had died the first winter. She'd been a weak and sickly little thing. Not strong enough to withstand the cold. It had broken what was left of his mother's heart.

But the cottage was nothing like he remembered. There was a garden out the front—surrounded by a picket fence—covered with snow, but he could make out a path from the wooden gate to the bright red front door.

Did someone live here?

It didn't matter, he had to get Lola to safety. He pushed open the gate with his hip, carried her down the path, then shifted her in his arms so he was able to try the door. It opened to his touch. Inside was total darkness, but he was used to the night and made his way unerringly to the sitting room. Found the sofa and lay her down. He moved to the edge of the room, located the light switch. At first he thought he was out of luck, nothing happened, then somewhere he heard the hum of a generator starting up and the lights flickered on.

He hurried back to Lola and sat on the huge brown leather sofa beside her. Took her hand; it was icy cold. Felt for her pulse with fumbling fingers. Still there. Her clothes were damp. He hesitated a moment, then stripped her down to her black bra and panties. They were dry. He shrugged out of his coat and covered her with it, while he went and searched the house. He found the bedroom and snatched the duvet from the bed, ran back, and wrapped it around her, tucking it in so only her pale face showed.

Then he sat back for a moment and blew out his breath. The place was nothing like he remembered. The cottage of his childhood had been a cold, damp, miserable place. With a dirt floor, bare stone walls, and windows shuttered with rough wood, the gaps stuffed with straw to keep out the drafts. Now the floors were polished wood, with thick rugs, the walls cream, dark red curtains at the windows. A Christmas tree stood in the corner, decorated in red and silver and a holly wreath hung from the door. A leather chair sat across from the sofa and on it lay a sleeping ginger cat. He smiled. His mother had owned an almost identical animal. It hadn't moved since they entered, presumably frozen in place by Lola's spell.

A fire had been set in the fireplace, and he went across, found the matches and lit the kindling.

He gave Lola one last look—her eyes were still closed—and left the room in search of food and drink. The kitchen was off a small hallway. His mother had cooked over an open fire when they could risk it. Most of the time they'd eaten their food cold and often raw. When they had food to eat.

The fridge was well stocked, and he found cooked chicken, some sort of pie, cheese, and piled them all on a plate. Added bananas from a dish on the big scrubbed wooden table. He picked up a bottle of water, then spotted a wine-rack, selected a bottle of red and added that to his pile.

When he got back, Lola was still unconscious.

He couldn't let her die. He was going to make sure she lived, and then he was going to get the hell away from her. He was the kiss of death. Everyone he had ever cared about had been taken from him. After Culloden, he had sworn never again. He would send her back to her family whether they liked it or not. Unless they were also frozen in time.

How far had Lola's spell spread? Could the whole world be affected? It seemed inconceivable. Maybe when she woke, she could tell him more. The room was warm now, and he added wood to the fire, then got a couple of glasses from the cabinet. He poured wine into one, then sat beside her, wrapped his arm around her and shifted her so she was lying against him.

"Lola, wake up."

Nothing. He put the glass to her lips. The first mouthful ran down her chin. He tried again, and this time she swallowed convulsively, then coughed and her eyes flashed open. Panic flared on her face, and she flailed but was wrapped too tightly in the duvet to do much.

"What? Where are...?" She searched around her frantically.

"We're safe," he said.

For a moment, he thought she wouldn't or couldn't believe him, then she slumped down. "I thought I was dead. I thought you—" Her eyes widened. "You drank my blood."

"You offered it."

"Not all of it," she snapped.

The tight band around his chest, eased a little. She was fighting back. She would live.

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She freed her arms and then peered under the duvet. “You took my clothes off.”

“Not all of them.” That could be remedied. Then he couldn’t believe he had thought that. He’d already decided she was going far, far away. As soon as possible. He handed her the glass and she looked at it suspiciously.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“Possibly. But you need to drink—replace fluids. And eat.” He got up and got the plate of food from the table, placed it on her lap. “Eat. Drink.”

She scowled. “I wondered how long it would be until you started giving orders again.” But she took a sip of wine. Then a nibble of chicken.

He prowled around the room. Searching for anything familiar. Then into the hall and to the back door. Opening it, he stared out into the darkness. Then took a step, unable to stop himself. Down the dark, shadowy path, just out of sight of the cottage, he found the place.

He and Gabe had dug the graves. At the time they’d had nothing to mark the site. But now someone had built a fancy fence around the small plot, and stones had been placed at the head of the five graves. Shrouded in snow, but he pushed through the small gate and ran his fingers along the engraved names, picturing each one in his mind.

Who had done this?

There had been no one left.

He turned away and headed back to the cottage. The plate was empty and so was the bottle. Some of the color had returned to her face. Clearly, she had a resilience that was more than human. And was quite capable of protecting herself. And him. Despite her lack of stature.

Suddenly, he was curious as to what she was. Witches had always kept to themselves, been cloaked in secrecy. He went into the kitchen to grab another bottle of wine, came back, and poured them both a glass. Picking up the cat, he moved it to the floor and sat down.

“What are you?” he asked.

“I’m a witch.”

“And what is a witch?”

“We’re the daughters of the Morrigan. The Goddess of war and pestilence.”

“Your mother was a goddess?” Of war and pestilence? That didn’t sound good.

She sniffed. “Still is somewhere. She dumped me on my sisters when I was only a few days old, and I haven’t seen her since.”

“Your father?”

“No clue. I didn’t exactly have a birth certificate.” She sounded a little bitter.

“So what do witches do?”

She sniffed again. “Well, I don’t do a lot. I told you we’re not allowed to use magic until we are trained, and we aren’t trained until we’re twenty-one. But after that, I’ll be able to do lots.” She smiled. “Witches guide the souls of the dead from this world to the Shadowlands and then beyond. We also have the power to open other gates. We could open the gates to Hell if we wanted to.”

A shiver ran through him at her words. “Anything else?”

“We have power over the sun and moon. We can extinguish the light and turn the world to darkness forever.”

A deep sense of foreboding washed through him at her words. She was telling the truth—he could hear it in her voice—and the idea of so much power made the muscles of his stomach clench. But then he’d seen the evidence of what she could do. “And stop the world?” he asked.

She took a huge swig of wine, looked away and then back. “Maybe. But that should not have happened.” Another swig. “I’ll think about it later. Soon—when I’m stronger. Just not quite yet.” She emptied her glass. “I also have visions.”

“Visions?”

“Sometimes of the past, mostly of the future. And they always come true.” She gave him a dark look. “Well, up to now. That’s changing though, because some visions are not meant to be.”

“And can you use these visions and tell us what’s going to happen?” Like would the world start up again.

“Unfortunately not. They just come...” She blinked. “Speaking of which...” Her eyes fluttered closed, and the glass crashed to the floor.

Lachlan jumped to his feet and was beside her in a moment. He grabbed her hand...

And present day disappeared.

Chapter Eight

Christmas Past...

For a moment, Lola tried to fight the vision. She wanted to stay. But as always, she had no choice and her world shimmered and darkened and was gone.

And she was cold, so cold.

She was in a stone room, with an earth floor and it was dark, the only light from the stub of a candle, that guttered and smoked so the air was hard to breathe. At a guess, the past not the future.

A woman sat on a cot bed, her arm around two young girls. Two more sat beside her, blankets wrapped around their shoulders. A dark-haired boy squatted on the floor; arms wrapped around his knees.

“Can we light a fire, ma?” one of the girls asked.

“Don’t be stupid,” another replied. “There are patrols about.”

“Is it really Christmas tomorrow?” the first asked.

“It is, darling.”

“Like we used to have. When da was with us, and there were presents and lots to eat and fires everywhere.”

A look of sadness flashed across the woman’s face but was quickly gone. “Just the same,” she said. “All you need is a little imagination. Close your eyes and picture the tree. Red and silver—it’s in the corner almost as tall as the ceiling. A holly wreath on the door. And there’s a log fire in the grate. Red velvet curtains keeping out the draft. Thick rugs on the floor.”

The door banged open, and they all jumped.

A boy rushed in. He looked to be about eight years old, with dark red hair and clear green eyes and a too-thin face. His expression both fierce and scared.

“There are patrols around the castle,” he said. “But I got past them. The Sassenachs canna catch me.” He’d been holding his hand behind his back now he drew it forward with a flourish revealing two dead rabbits. “Happy Christmas.”

Lola blinked her eyes open. Lachlan was on his knees beside her, his hand gripping hers.

“I saw it,” he said. His tone held a sense of wonder.

Well, that had never happened before. Could it be a side effect of him drinking her blood? She wished she knew more.

She looked into his clear green eyes. “That boy? It was you?”

He nodded. “And my ma and sisters.” His lips curved up. The first smile she had seen on his face. But his eyes were sad. “Morag, Maidie, Katrine, and Jessie.”

And for the first time she heard a faint Scottish burr in his voice. The wonder had faded, replaced by a melancholy.

“And your brother?” she asked, remembering the dark haired boy, sitting on the floor.

“Gabe was my foster brother. His family all caught the pox and died when we were four, and my da took him in.”

“What happened to them?” She had a feeling it was nothing good.

He got to his feet, thrust his hands into his pockets. Why did she think this wasn’t going to have a happy ending?

“It was Christmas. We...I was sure there wouldn’t be another patrol.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “The next morning—Christmas day—ma lit a fire to cook the rabbits. The redcoats came. I was out hunting with Gabe—two rabbits wasn’t a lot to feed seven of us. When we got back, the soldiers were already gone. They’d killed them all. Ma still had da’s old musket in her hand. My sisters were children, the youngest was three years old. And they killed them anyway. Bastards.”

She sniffed, her eyes pricking. His memories made her childhood seem wonderful. She would never moan again.

“What happened to you both?”

“We stuck around for a while. It was easier just feeding the two of us. Then we joined one of the clan armies. Gabe’s da had been a Macleod.” He shrugged. “We survived. Many did not.” He gave another shrug of his shoulder. “Hey, it was hundreds of years ago. It’s the past. What does it matter?”

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“It matters. It’s not that we die—everyone dies, even the immortals among us. It’s how we meet that end that counts.”

“Maybe. If that’s the case, then it was a shit end.”

“That’s why you don’t like Christmas,” she said. It was so sad.

“Who said I don’t like Christmas?”

She snorted. “You wouldn’t let me decorate the castle. Not even my room. And I wanted to cook Christmas dinner—”

“We’re goddamn vampires. We don’t eat turkey.” He gave her a speculative look, his gaze dropping. “Unless there was something else on the menu.”

Her hand went automatically to her throat. The wound was already healing. She’d been trying not to think about it, but now she had a flashback to the feel of his mouth on her. Her nipples tightened, tingles shooting down to her sex. It had been amazing. She’d had an actual orgasm. More than one. Gina had kept that to herself. Heat flushed her skin at the memory, and she resisted the urge to fan herself.

When she looked back at him, he was watching her, his nostrils flared. His eyes had bled to crimson. For a moment, she leaned toward him, her whole body yearning. Then she snapped back.

Get a grip.

He was a vampire. He was emotionally retarded. And while she now had some idea as to why, it made no difference. He would still love her and leave her, like everyone else.

And she had the idea that this time would hurt more than the rest put together.

Oh, but she wanted him. Like she'd never wanted anything in her life before. But that was probably because she was feeling weak. Not enough blood and too much booze.

"No more blood," she snapped. "You've had enough."

"There are other things we could do. No blood involved."

He was the devil tempting her.

She pressed her thighs together, trying to ease the ache. Her body felt like it didn't belong to her. Her mind was saying no, but the rest of her wasn't in agreement. If he pushed a little harder, she would melt. How to stop him?

She raised a hand to her forehead and swayed slightly. "I feel weak. I think I might be going to faint."

Alarm flared in his eyes. He disappeared and came back a moment later with a glass of water. "Thank you," she murmured.

She watched him over the rim of her glass as he sank down onto the chair opposite, a brooding expression on his face.

"You don't have to worry," he said. "I won't touch you."

"You won't?" That was good. Wasn't it?

He leaned back, resting his head against the leather, stared into space. “I’d be mad to touch you. You’re a witch—everyone knows witches are evil creatures and not to be trusted.”

That was news to her. “Who’s everyone?”

He ignored her question. “And you’re too young and too immature.”

She frowned as she realized he was listing out all the reasons why he shouldn’t touch her. It sounded like he’d given the subject a lot of thought.

“And you’re impetuous. And I’m supposed to protect you. You’re my sire’s sister-in-law.”

“Does that make us related?”

“No. And you’re needy.”

That was it. “I am not needy.”

“Yes, you are. You want somebody to love you. And that’s not going to be me.”

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She gritted her teeth. He was so annoying. Thought he knew everything about her. Well, she knew a few things about him as well.

“You know,” she said. “I don’t actually want you to touch me.”

He frowned. Hah, that had got him thinking. “You don’t?”

“I mean. You did give me an orgasm. I’m not going to deny it. If someone had told me some skanky, Scottish dead guy sucking my blood would make me come, I would have said—hell no. But it happened. Big deal. You know what? I could do the same with my vibrator and without all the drama.”

“Drama?”

“Come on. Car crashes, werewolves... Not to mention the fact that you’re a blood-sucking monster.” No answer. She picked up her empty wine glass. “Is there any more wine? This talking about feelings stuff is hard work.”

She sat back as he disappeared and returned a minute later with another bottle. He poured her a glass and sat down, took a mouthful straight from the bottle. “Go on.”

“Well, you’re Scottish. And you’ve obviously got a huge chip on your shoulder.”

His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t speak, just raised the bottle to his mouth again. Christ, he was gorgeous—she wouldn’t mention that bit. Just remember—not happening.

“And you think you don’t need anybody.” Could she say this next bit? Yes. Tough love. “Because obviously, it must seem like everybody you ever needed died and left you. And that’s hard. I sympathize. Really, I do. But I don’t need a man with that sort of baggage.”

“You don’t?”

“No.” She curved her lips up into what she hoped was a sappy smile. “I want a nice man. An uncomplicated man. A...teacher or a doctor. Someone...normal. Someone I can watch the sun rise with and not worry about him spontaneously combusting.”

“That’s...nice. I’m sure you’ll be very happy with Mr. Normal.” He raised the bottle to his lips and swallowed.

“Hey, don’t hog all the wine.” She thrust out her glass. Lachlan leaned across and filled it. Their fingers brushed and a tingle of electricity shot through her. She snatched back her hand. Swallowed the wine. Took a deep breath.

“All I’m trying to say here is—you’re right. We’re obviously, totally wrong for each other.”

At his silence, she peered across at him. He was slumped in the chair, and her gaze wandered up over the long, lean length of him, finally landing on his face. His expression was pensive, sort of sad and alone. Was he thinking about his ma and sisters? And maybe all the empty, lonely Christmases in between.

He caught her gaze, and his eyes narrowed, gleaming green from beneath a fringe of dark lashes. He slowly swiped his tongue across his lower lip, and a frisson ran through her from her toes to the top of her head.

Two could play at that game. She loosened her grip on the duvet, let it drop a

smidgen, revealing the upper curves of her breasts. She nipped her lower lip, then flicked her tongue across it. His eyes flashed. Hah.

“So,” he murmured in a dark smoky voice, “obviously, we’re totally and completely wrong for each other.” The bottle was empty, and he tossed it away. “But have you considered that perhaps we’re the only two people left alive on the planet? No more Mr. Normal? Just you and me.” He rose to his feet. Took the two steps between them and stood over her.

Heat flowed through her like molten lava.

Was he right? Was it just her and Lachlan together for eternity?

She wanted him. She hadn’t realized she could want something this much. Way more than a puppy.

But that wasn’t what made her put down her glass and get to her feet, drop the duvet so she stood only inches from him in nothing but her underwear. It was that sad look she’d caught in his eyes. And the sudden urge to give him a memory of Christmas to wipe away the earlier pain.

She was totally out of her depth. He was centuries older than her. She was, in fact, way too young. But maybe that’s what he needed. He’d never had the chance to be young. He’d lost his whole family by the time he was eight. He’d lost everything else on the battlefield when he was barely older than she was now. Her chest ached when she thought about everything he had been through, everything he had lost.

“Just you and me,” she murmured and took a step closer, rested her palm on his cool chest. “I just showed you the worst Christmas you ever had.” Another step closer so they were almost touching, and her nostrils filled with the cool musky scent of him. “Let me make it up to you. What do you want for Christmas, Lachlan? Anything.

Anything you desire.”

He stared down at her, hands at his side. “Not fair,” he murmured.

“I’m a witch. I never said I would be fair.”

Chapter Nine

Lachlan was lost. Totally lost.

He wasn’t sure when he’d relinquished control of the situation. Maybe when she’d stood up and dropped the duvet, and she was all but naked. Perfection in miniature, all sexy curves and black underwear. Or maybe when she’d listed all the reasons why he was wrong for her, while staring out of those hungry silver eyes. Witch’s eyes.

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Or perhaps when she'd looked so sad as he'd regaled her with his miserable crappy childhood. Like she really cared. Or she pitied him—even that didn't matter now.

Perhaps he'd never stood a chance.

He remembered the first moment he'd set eyes on her. And he'd known he was in big trouble, because she reached something deep inside him. Something he'd locked away so long ago it was almost forgotten.

Now, the reasons didn't matter. Maybe this was the end of the world. And they were all the other had. And right now, she was enough. More than enough. Everything he had ever dreamed about, before even his dreams were snatched away.

Vampires didn't sleep, they died, and they never dreamed.

He reached out and cupped her cheek, her skin was silky soft under his touch. "Anything I desire?"

Did she realize what she was offering? Because he desired everything. Every last atom, every drop of her blood, every tingle of desire. His. Only his.

He tilted her face up to his, lowered his head and took her lips. She tasted of warm wine, and desire, and a sweetness he'd never encountered before. He held himself in check, because she was young and this was going to happen—she'd offered herself to him, and she wouldn't stop him now. But more than anything he needed this to be good for her. He wasn't totally altruistic. If she ever found her Mr. Normal, she would remember this night.

He sank to his knees, gripped his hands at her waist and pressed his lips to the soft curve of her belly. She had a tattoo above her right hip. A raven in flight. As he stroked his tongue over the lines, he gently pushed her back so she sprawled onto the sofa behind her. He moved quickly, spreading her thighs, nipping the mound beneath her black lace panties. It wasn't enough, and he ripped them from her, then sat back on his heels.

She was beautiful. Black curls and dark red lips glistening with desire. She wanted him, and that was the last piece needed to fuel his own desire.

He glanced up the line of her body. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted. A pulse throbbed in her throat and his gums ached.

Lowering his head, his fangs grazed her upper thighs, the spot where the blood pulsed close to the surface. He could make her come with just a tiny sip. But another time. Instead, he kissed her gently, felt her tense beneath him. His hands gripped her hips as his tongue snaked out to taste her, teasing between her pouting lips. Stroking her, drinking in the sweetness. As he pushed his tongue inside, she went totally still. He stroked up toward the little bundle of swollen nerves, circling it so her hips jerked and pushed up against him. He touched her lightly with the tip of his tongue and she moaned.

He was so hard now he thought he would burst, but he held himself in check, stroking his tongue over her, sucking the small bud into his mouth and biting gently. Her spine arched, and she pulsed against him. He kissed her again, held her hips as she came so sweetly for him.

His turn.

He rose to his feet, pulled his T-shirt over his head. Kicked off his boots. His hands went to his waist, then his gaze dropped, she was watching him out of hungry eyes.

His movements slowed, and he flicked open the button on his jeans and deliberately lowered the zipper. Her gaze dropped, and she watched as he pushed his jeans down over his thighs, and then off, to stand before her naked.

He fisted his cock as he took a step toward her. He wanted this to last, but knew it was unlikely. He had an idea this was her first time. It was none of his business, except he needed to slow things down.

He could see the rapid rise and fall of her breasts, still beneath the black bra. He reached behind her, unfastened the clasp and peeled the material away, baring her breasts. They were small, but full, the nipples tight, dark red peaks. He trailed a finger over them, and her skin puckered. Lowering his head, he took one in his mouth then suckled. She tasted so good, and his dick twitched and jerked.

He needed her. Now. He needed to be inside her. She shifted so she lay stretched out on the sofa, then raised her arms to him. He sank down onto her, holding his weight on his elbows. He was big and she was small.

As he lowered himself, her thighs opened for him. He pushed inside, and her legs wrapped around him. For a moment, he lay, his face pressed against her throat, breathing in the sweet scent of her. His fangs ached, but he ignored the sensation.

Slowly, he pulled out and her legs tightened around him, drawing him back.

He ground his hips against her, rubbing circles, and she moaned in his ear.

Out and then in, the exquisite sensations building inside him. In his balls, his dick. He raised himself up so he could stare down into her face. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips parted, eyes dazed.

“Don’t stop.”

He had no intention of stopping.

Cupping her face, he held her gaze as he increased his speed. She was moving with him. He ground against her and saw the moment she came apart for him. Her eyes widening, her spine arching, her mouth parting in surprise.

And he released the last of his control.

He pushed into her hard and fast, closing his eyes and concentrating on the sensations that flooded his body.

Nothing had ever felt like this. And then he was flying. The pleasure ran through his cock, through his body, bathing him in fire. He hadn't realized how cold he had been.

On and on. He'd think it was over, then she twitched her hips, tightened her thighs, and he was coming again.

Finally, he collapsed, burying his head against her breasts.

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A hand stroked his hair, and he closed his eyes.

“Happy Christmas,” she murmured.

Chapter Ten

He was heavy.

Had he passed out? Was he asleep? Did vampires sleep? Didn't they just die?Ugh.

She had a dead body on top of her.

She shoved hard, and he groaned, then rolled off, and she managed to scramble out from under him. She was naked and sticky and moreUgh.

Except it had been magical.

She grabbed the duvet from the floor and wrapped it around herself, then sat on the chair opposite and studied him.

She could feel herself softening again. How did he do that? She hardened her heart. It was no good sitting here, thinking sappy thoughts about happily ever after. She wasn't sure such a thing existed. And she was convinced Lachlan didn't believe in love. And if he did, he'd made it very clear that she was everything he did not want in a woman. Except for sex.

Needy!

She sniffed.

She was so not needy. Well, maybe she was a little bit needy, but she did not need him. He was, in fact, everything she did not need.

But she had wanted him. Desperately. Just once, before he found a way to rid himself of her entirely. She blamed it on the vision of them kissing under the mistletoe. It had fixated her brain on the very thing it should have warned her about.

And there was no point in going all soppy and pretending she'd given herself as some sort of Christmas present.

Besides, it wasn't Christmas.

And maybe it never would be.

How long had it been since she'd stopped the world? Hours. Midnight would have passed, and it should be Christmas day. But it wasn't, because she had used the Earth magic and stopped the world. If Christmas never came, then that would be down to her. Because she had no clue how to start it up again. Santa Claus was probably frozen in time, stuck forever, halfway down someone's chimney.

That was sad.

She needed something to wear. Lachlan had dropped her clothes in a pile where he had stripped her. She shuffled over. They were still damp—he was so undomesticated. So was she; another reason they would never suit. One person per couple had to be housebroken. She picked them up, shook them out and lay them on the back of the chair to dry before putting another log on the fire.

He was still lying, unmoving on the sofa. Naked and beautiful, like a marble statue.

Though he wasn't perfect; he had scars. A slash across his chest. A puckered hole in his shoulder. Had they been made before he was changed? He'd had such a hard life. She remembered the little boy from the vision. Too thin and terrified, yet trying to pretend he wasn't so his sisters wouldn't be scared. Providing for his family when he was only eight. She sniffed again.

She'd had too much wine; it was making her emotional.

She shuffled out of the room into a hallway. An open door at one end led to the kitchen. She went the other way and peered into a bedroom. The duvet was missing. A big dark wood wardrobe stood against the far wall, and she opened it. Men's clothes. A big man. She selected a black shirt. It felt like silk, and she dropped the duvet and pulled it on. It reached to her knees. She buttoned it up. Next, she went to the kitchen. She stared out of the window, but nothing moved. Red and silver lights twinkled on the trees lining the path from the wooden gate. She'd been in no position to notice when Lachlan had brought her in here. They were pretty.

Who lived here? A man obviously. A big man who liked Christmas decorations and good red wine. Maybe, if the world ever started again, she should introduce herself.

In the kitchen, she turned on the coffee maker. Found bread and peanut butter and made herself a sandwich, then wandered back into the sitting room. She came to a halt. He was awake. Standing by the window, peering out, he'd pulled on his jeans but was otherwise naked. He cast her a wary glance.

She swallowed. "Don't look so worried. I'm not going to ask you to marry me or anything."

He raked his hair back from his face. "Good." But he didn't sound happy. His gaze dropped down over her, lingering on her breasts under the thin silk and her nipples tightened. Again.

She hurried across, sat down and pulled the shirt over her knees. Took another bite and chewed while Lachlan paced the room, all half-naked pent-up energy. A...sulky expression on his face.

“How old were you when you were...changed?” she asked.

He stopped and turned to look at her. Hands shoved in his pockets. “Why?”

“Just curious.”

“Twenty-two.”

“So not much older than me.” And everyone knew boys matured slower than girls.

“That explains why you’re so emotionally stunted.”

His eyes narrowed. “It does?”

“Well, vampires don’t age after they’re changed. I mean you could still pass for twenty-two. Maybe you don’t mature emotionally either.”

“I’m emotionally mature.”

She snorted, but didn’t answer, just let a small smile play across her lips.

His mouth tightened, then he shook his head. He sat down opposite her, stretched out his long legs. “So tell me about this spell you cast. How long will it last?”

“I have no clue. I told you—I’m not supposed to do magic yet. I’m not supposed to even know spells. It just sort of...popped out.”

“Which means you have no idea how to reverse it?”

“None whatsoever.” She sighed. “On the bright side, you don’t have to worry about me trailing around after you like a love-sick witch.”

A smile flickered across his face. She had an idea he liked the thought. “Why is that?”

“Because there’s a good chance that my life is forfeit.”

“What?”

“The Earth magic always has a price. Something this big...usually a life. Maybe sometime, I’ll tell you the story of how my sister Gina became a vampire.”

He jumped to his feet. “Who will kill you? How?”

“I’ll probably be expected to sacrifice myself. Restore the balance.” Maybe that’s what she needed to do now. Maybe that was what would bring the world and Christmas back into being. But she didn’t want to die. And she certainly didn’t want to kill herself. Though she would find the strength if she had to because—as Regan always said—they had great power and great responsibilities.

“Don’t you dare kill yourself.”

Aw, he sounded as though he cared. Maybe now was not the time to suggest that Lachlan’s life might also be forfeit. She put down the rest of her sandwich, no longer hungry. Had she dragged Lachlan down with her? Saved his life, only to have him die as a consequence. Except he was already dead. Her head hurt.

He paced the room, casting her an occasional dark glance. He clearly wasn’t happy. But then he was supposed to protect her—Darius would no doubt be pissed. He’d failed.

Finally, he came to a halt in front of her, hands thrust in his pockets. He was so big. His shoulders broad, the muscles of his arms bulging. But with not an ounce of fat,

his belly lean, almost concave. Her gaze skimmed over the bulge in his pants, down to his bare feet, long narrow toes. Finally, she traced the route back up and found him watching her out of half-closed eyes.

“I’m hungry,” he growled.

“Oh.” She shifted on the chair as heat spread through her, settling low down in her body. She pressed her thighs together. “There’s peanut butter in the kitchen. It’s good.”

He gave a slow smile, then leaned down. Not touching her anywhere, just resting his hands on the arms of her chair, caging her in. “I don’t want peanut butter.”

She could feel his cool breath shivering against her hot skin. Her whole body was on fire. “Hey, if this is because you think I’m going to die and so won’t get the chance to be clingy. It’s not a done deal. One more orgasm, and I could get very clingy. I’m needy remember.”

“Right now, so am I.”

He lowered his head, kissed the side of her throat, and she sensed it down to her toes. A warm wetness flooded between her thighs, and he breathed in deeply as though he could smell her desire. So not cool. His tongue licked her skin, a slow stroke across her pulse point, and she was suddenly conscious of her blood thumping in her veins. The thud of her heart.

This could never go anywhere, but did that matter?

The world had stopped, her life was likely forfeit. It wouldn’t matter if he walked away, it might even make things easier. Her head tipped back to give him access and he gave a low chuckle.

He scooped her up in his arms. But as they tightened around her, she felt that faint flickering, like something tapping at her brain. Her vision dimmed, and the present faded to nothing...

Chapter Eleven

Christmas Future...

It was happening again. Lachlan tightened his arms around her as the room faded around them. His vision darkened, and he closed his eyes, expecting to be dragged back to that earlier time, the stone room, his mother and sisters, the cold that seeped into his bones, the hunger gnawing at his belly. Instead...

The castle. But there were decorations, a huge tree with a star on top that brushed the ceiling of the great hall. Candles twinkled and colored streamers festooned the walls. A Yule log burned in the open hearth. The sound of laughter and talking filled the room.

What was happening?

He didn't know these people. Except, there was Darius across the room, with a blond woman he didn't recognize. And then Lola stepped into sight. His mind scrambled to make sense of what he was seeing.

Could this be the future?

She'd survived. And something inside him relaxed. He'd been trying not to think about what she had said. That her life would be forfeit. He would not allow that to happen. But this was magic. He was out of his depth, and he had to save her but he had no clue how.

Yet here she was. And this certainly wasn't the past so it must be going to happen.

A lightness filled him. He hardly recognized the emotion—but that was happening a lot lately.

Hope.

Hope for the future.

Lola was looking straight at him, smiling, her expression radiant. Then she caught sight of something behind him and her expression faltered.

He turned slowly, then shock held him immobile. A man stood in the doorway. Tall, dressed in black, with black hair pulled back in a ponytail, stubble shadowing his cheeks, a scar ran down the left side of his face, through his eyebrow, across his cheekbone, to his upper lip, tugging it into a permanent sneer.

As Lachlan stepped toward him, the vision wavered.

“No!”

He tried to hold on, but it was slipping away, faster and faster. And then it was gone...

And he was back in the present. Lola was still in his arms, and he lowered her to the floor. She squeezed his arm. “You saw?”

He glanced down, shook his head to clear the vision. She had a worried frown between her eyes. “Yes, I fucking saw.” He ran a hand through his hair. It wasn't possible. Not fucking possible.

“What is it, Lachlan?”

He turned away, paced the room. Drew back his fist and punched the wall.

“Ouch,” she muttered behind him. “The man? The one in the doorway? Who is he?”

“You mean whowashe? That was my brother, Gabe.” Foster brother, but they had been closer than real brothers. Brought together by death and hardship and the struggle to survive.

She nibbled on her lower lip. “That doesn’t make sense. That was the future, not the past. He should be dead.”

“I saw him die. I saw him fall on the battlefield at Culloden. He took the blow meant for me. He saved my life, and he died. I know he died.”

He turned away, pressed his fingers to his forehead, forcing his mind to go back to that horrific day. The stench of blood and gun smoke. Death. He’d seen Gabe fall under the sword blow and had tried to fight his way through to him, over the bodies. He hadn’t seen the man who shot him. The musket ball had taken him in the shoulder, spun him around. The next thing he had known was Darius, looming over him, asking if he wanted to live forever. And he had said yes. So he could find Gabe, save Gabe. “I went back. As soon as I could. As soon as Darius would let me. But the body had vanished. So many disappeared, buried in mass graves. I came back here, but the place was deserted. He had to be dead. I would never have stopped looking if I’d thought there was any chance.”

He sank onto the sofa, his head in his hands. “We promised to always protect each other.”

“You tried. You did your best.”

“It wasn’t fucking enough.”

She sat beside him, placed a hand on his knee and a small measure of peace flowed through him. The fog cleared a little from his mind. “What happened? How did he survive? How could he still be alive in the future?”

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But he, more than any, knew there were ways.

“Could he have been changed as well?” Lola asked. “Some other vampire?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

He jumped to his feet, stood in the middle of the room, looking around. He remembered that earlier vision—his mother describing what could be, Gabe listening with wide eyes.

“All you need is a little imagination,” she’d said. “Close your eyes and picture the tree. Red and silver—it’s in the corner almost as tall as the ceiling. A holly wreath on the door. And there’s a log fire in the grate. Red velvet curtains keeping out the draft. Thick rugs on the floor.”

The room was exactly as she’d described. Running a hand over his face, he tried to make sense of his thoughts.

He hurried from the room, to the bedroom at the back of the house. Looked around, then headed for the dresser. His hand reached out and he picked up the small oval frame. Ran his fingers over the picture of a woman. Dark red hair. He glanced up; Lola stood in the doorway. “My ma,” Lachlan said.

She came to stand beside him. “She was beautiful.”

“This was a wedding present from my da to my ma,” he said. “She was only sixteen. We didn’t save much when we fled the castle the night my da was killed. But Gabe

went back for this. He knew my mother loved it.”

The fence and the gravestones? Had Gabe done that? While Lachlan had run from the country he’d loved and never looked back. He’d put Scotland from his mind, because he couldn’t bear to think about it and there was nothing left of his past. But he’d been so wrong.

Had Gabe been here all this time? Somehow he had survived Culloden. Somehow, he had survived for nearly three hundred years.

“Lachlan.”

He glanced up as Lola spoke his name. She held something up in her hand. A braided leather necklace and hanging from it a yellowed fang. Not a vampire fang. More like a canine, but bigger than any dog he had ever seen.

Werewolf.

Something clicked in his brain. And he headed for the door at a run.

Chapter Twelve

“Lachlan!” Lola called out to him, but he was beyond listening.

The front door slammed. Where was he going so fast? Clearly, he’d thought of something. She glanced at the necklace she held in her hand.

Ugh.

It wasn’t even a nice white fang but yellowed with age, or usage. She didn’t like to think of that.

And big. Big, like the werewolves who had growled and snarled and nearly ripped Lachlan's throat out last night.

She hurried back to the living room, grabbed Lachlan's long leather coat from the floor, and pulled on her boots.

Through the snow, the tracks were clear. And she ran after him, hugging the coat around her. Her knees were freezing, but she ignored the cold.

She passed the spot where her blood still stained the snow crimson. Then farther. Finally, she came upon Lachlan. He stood just outside the circle of werewolves. As though unwilling to enter. Nothing had changed. They were frozen in time.

Lachlan was still naked from the waist up, his feet bare, but he didn't appear to be affected by the cold. No doubt a vampire thing.

He was staring at the man in the mask. It covered his upper face but left his mouth clear and she could see the dark shadow of stubble on his cheek. He had thick black hair, pulled into a ponytail, and was dressed in black. Black jeans, a black silk shirt, a leather jacket. His arm was raised, the sword in his hand.

Was this the same man from the vision? It could be, but she'd only seen a brief glimpse. Not enough to be sure.

Lachlan took a step closer, then another. Lola followed. He came to a halt in front of the man, then reached up and stroked his finger along the edge of the blade. A bead of blood welled up. "My da's sword," he murmured. "Gabe got it at the same time as the picture. He got it for me. Risked his life. I said he should keep it. It was his most prized possession. God, he spent hours cleaning the blade. And I didn't even recognize it."

He licked the blood from his finger. Then took a deep breath and slipped the mask from the man's face.

He looked older than Lachlan, but maybe werewolves aged differently from vampires. And harder. Harsh lines bracketed his face. A scar ran down from his forehead, across his cheek to his upper lip. His eyes were blue, but cold as ice. His expression fierce.

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Lachlan touched a finger to the scar. “He got this in a brawl in a bar in Glasgow. Over a prostitute. When he was sixteen. He used to tell the lassies it was a war wound.” His hand dropped to his side. “Jesus. He was trying to kill me. We were closer than brothers. And now he hates me.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe it was just a...” She searched her mind for an explanation. But it certainly looked like he’d planned to kill Lachlan. The sword. The expression on his face. Probably planned to chop off Lachlan’s head. “...a misunderstanding. He likely didn’t even recognize you. It has been a long time.”

“He knew me. It makes sense now. The things he said.”

“Then maybe it’s a werewolf thing. Nasty, vicious lot.” Her sister Regan was a werewolf now—though Regan had always been pretty fierce. And Regan was in love with a werewolf—well half-werewolf. So they couldn’t all be bad. “And perhaps he doesn’t like vampires. Didn’t he kill the last head vampire? Isn’t that why you were here in the first place?”

“Yeah, but the guy was an asshole. I would have killed him if I’d had to live in the same country.” He pressed a finger to his forehead. “This thing tonight was a setup. Agreeing to the meeting. Just an excuse to get me out in the open. The stinger across the road. The car crash. Chasing us here. Close to where we grew up. Would he have told me before he killed me?”

She glanced at the man with the big sword. “From the look on his face, I don’t think he had conversation in mind.”

“You have to wake him up.”

She frowned. “So he can finish what he started? Do you have a death wish?”

“No. So I can say I’m sorry.”

“For what? It wasn’t your fault.”

“I should have said no to Darius. I chose eternal life and turned my back on the one man who loved me. My only family.”

“You thought he was dead.”

She might as well not have spoken for all the notice he took. “I chose to survive. I should have refused.”

“Except then you would have been dead as well. And no good to him at all.”

He threw her an annoyed glance. “You need to reverse the spell.”

“And I told you, I don’t know how. I don’t know how I did this. So how am I supposed to know how to make it go away.” And right now, that wasn’t a bad thing. The way Lachlan was behaving, he’d just stand there while the other guy chopped off his head. He needed to snap out of this funk and get a grip. For all she knew, they were stuck together for eternity. And this new, humble Lachlan was not an improvement. She wanted cocky, sexy Lachlan back. Even moody, scary Lachlan was better than this.

Suddenly she was tired and cold.

She left him standing, staring broodingly at his ‘brother’ and walked out of the circle

of wolves. Perching on a boulder, she hugged her arms around her knees, trying to keep warm.

She wanted to go home; except they were probably all frozen in time as well. And even if they weren't, no one at home wanted her.

And now, likely, no one ever would.

She'd be alone for eternity.

Lachlan stared at the man in front of him. Seeing the similarities and the changes. Gabe had always been the lighter of the two of them. The joker. Lachlan had been the serious one.

Now he looked hard, harsh lines furrowed his face. How had he lived over the centuries? Had he been in Scotland all this time? Living in the cottage, with the memories.

When had he found out that Lachlan was alive?

Had he been happy? If he had, then the feeling hadn't lasted.

Now he wanted him dead.

He turned around, felt a flash of panic as he realized Lola was no longer beside him. Then he caught sight of her, perched on the boulder, wrapped in his long leather coat. She looked small and cute and sexy as hell. But her expression was sad.

This wasn't her fault. She'd cast her spell to save his life and not thought of the cost.

And from what she had said, that cost would be high. He'd been right all along—he needed to keep his distance, because the moment he got close to anyone, they died.

Except Gabe. Obviously he hadn't died.

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He ran a hand through his hair, then with one last look at his brother—he wasn't going anywhere—he crossed the space between them and halted in front of Lola, unsure what to say. He wanted to apologize, but he wasn't sure what for. Just something to take the sadness from her face. "I'm sorry," he said. "I brought you to this. Your life is forfeit. Because of me."

"I'm not dead yet."

He ignored the comment, because he was on a roll now. "Everyone I care about dies—you're clearly not going to be any different. And it will be my fault. Just like I killed my family. Pride. I wanted to be the big man. Get them Christmas dinner. I probably alerted the redcoats and they came looking. My fault. And Gabe died protecting me."

"He isn't dead either," she said, hugging the coat tighter around herself.

Might as well be. "And I shouldn't have touched you. I was supposed to protect you."

She peered up at him, eyes narrowed. "No, probably you should have kept your hands and your teeth to yourself. But don't worry about it. If we're going to start bemoaning our lives, then it's my turn. Everyone leaves me." She sniffed.

"I grew up knowing I was different. Alone. My sisters did their best, but Regan was never what you might call maternal. All I wanted was something of my own who would love me unconditionally. I begged Regan for a puppy for Christmas. Every year. But Regan said her Hell hounds would eat it. Maybe she knew the puppy would run away. God, I'm pathetic." She lifted her chin and stared him in the face.

“Anyway, my point is, I don't expect you to be any different. You were right. I am needy. But I think I've learned my lesson now. And you know what? I don't need you. In fact, you're the last person I could ever need. Which means you're off the hook.”

She jumped to her feet.

“Where are you going?”

“I'm not sure. But away from here. Maybe this”—she waved a hand at the frozen bodies— “isn't everywhere. Perhaps I might find someone alive—or even better a cell signal—if I walk long enough.”

She started walking. He cast a last look at Gabe. Should he stay? In case he awoke. But Lola was disappearing down the road, his coat dragging in the snow. “Lola!”

She didn't stop or even slow her pace. And he hurried after her. Then something in the sky caught his attention. A movement where everything had been so still.

He stopped in his tracks. What in hell? “Is that...?”

Not happening.

“Lola,” he said. “Stop. It's Father fucking Christmas.”

Chapter Thirteen

Lola had decided to ignore him.

But really, that sort of comment was impossible to ignore.

She stared up at the sky and then stopped moving, her mouth dropping open. High

above them, a sleigh was racing across the night sky. Pulled by some very strange looking horses—they had eight legs—it was heading directly toward them. The jingling of bells filled the air. Soon she could make out two people, sitting side by side, and behind them a pile of brightly colored presents.

Father Christmas.

She glanced at Lachlan. He looked back and shrugged. “This seems a little...surreal.”

Had the world woken up? But the werewolves were still frozen in place. She backed up so she was close enough to touch Lachlan. Then stood staring up at the sky as the sleigh drew near, and she got a clearer view of the two occupants.

The man had long dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and a black velvet patch covering his left eye. He looked nothing like a traditional plump, genial Father Christmas. But the sleigh, the presents...

She turned her attention to the woman beside him. And went still, her mind blank. Then she edged a little closer to Lachlan.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I think it’s my mother.”

“You think?”

“I told you—she dumped me on my sister when I was a few days old, and I haven’t seen her since. But...” She had seen images of her mother. And Regan had described her. She was pretty sure that the woman sitting in the sleigh next to Father Christmas was her mother.

Had she come to ensure that Lola paid the price for using the Earth magic. Had she come to extract that price? And bummed a lift with Father Christmas to get here. “Definitely surreal.”

“Didn’t you say your ma was a goddess.”

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“Yeah. War and pestilence.” She took a deep breath. “Come meet my mom.”

The sleigh was landing now, tossing up a cloud of powdery snow, the four horses stamping and snorting white mist into the cold air.

Lola held herself very still as the woman climbed down from the sleigh. She was tall, slender, with long black hair threaded with crow’s feathers, and silver eyes rimmed with charcoal. Her skin was smooth and olive-toned, her face marked with curling runes radiating out from the corners of her eyes, and she wore a band studded with rubies around her upper arm.

“I can see the resemblance,” Lachlan murmured.

And she snorted.

Her mother was beautiful and terrifying. Not little and cute. She strolled toward them, her gaze flicking between her and Lachlan. She was half a foot taller than Lola—what had her father been—a dwarf?

“Daughter.”

“Mother.” She took a deep breath. Her heart hammering, because really while she’d accepted it, she didn’t want to die. She had things to do. But she forced the question out. “Is my life forfeit?”

“For what?”

She waved a hand toward the frozen werewolves and Lachlan's frozen brother. "I stopped the world."

"No, you didn't."

"I didn't?"

"No. I did. I saw a vision. And while I may not have played a huge part in your life..." Lola must have made some sort of expression of disbelief, because her eyes narrowed. "Be thankful I didn't try. Your sister did a much better job than I could ever do. Anyway, while I may have remained on the periphery of your life, I do try to be there when I'm needed. And clearly, in this instance, I was needed." She turned her attention to Lachlan and pursed her lips. "The vampire was supposed to protect you. And he was doing a crap job."

"He was...distracted."

"So I stepped in. Think of it as a Christmas present."

"Well, that will be a first," she muttered.

"Can you reverse it?" Lachlan asked from beside her.

Her mother's stare turned cold. Her gaze drifted down over the half-naked vampire, then back to Lola. Did her focus settle on the bite marks that were still visible on her throat? Lola resisted the urge to lift her hand, cover them up. "My daughters have the strangest taste in...men. I'm not sure where that comes from. Though I suppose he is pretty." She shrugged. "Come along. Our ride doesn't have all night. He has presents to deliver. Let me take you to your sisters. Your family are waiting for you at the castle."

Her family—that made her feel warm and fuzzy. They hadn't forgotten her or abandoned her.

Their 'ride' was leaning back in his seat, boots up on the front of the sleigh, smoking a cigarette, watching them out of his single eye.

She sidled closer to her mother. "Is he really Father Christmas?" she asked. "He doesn't look quite...what I expected."

Her mother smiled. "He used to be known as Odin, and he led the Wild Hunt across the skies at Yuletide, doling out presents to the deserving, and death to others. Then mankind decided to give him a revamp. It never quite took. But we've been friends a long time."

Lola had a horrible thought. Though he didn't look particularly short. "Good friends?"

"Not that good."

"I'm staying," Lachlan said.

Lola turned to look at him. He had a closed off expression, his mouth a firm line. She didn't want to leave him here. Not with a brother who hated him and had a big sword.

"Please Lachlan, come with us. Or I'll stay. But don't leave me. Everyone leaves me." She didn't care if she did sound needy. "Please. I lied. I do need you."

He stared straight ahead. "You should go. You don't need me. Your family is waiting for you. There's nothing for you here and I'm quite capable of looking after myself. I've been doing it for three hundred years."

He was right. And without her to look out for, she was sure he was more than a match for a pack of werewolves. But all the same, she had to swallow down the urge to beg. Because he was right. She'd known all along that Lachlan would never give her what she needed. That's why she'd been so shocked when she'd kissed him under the mistletoe in some unknown future that was never going to happen. Why she'd been determined to get away. Because it could never work. She couldn't make him care. The last hours had been nothing but time out. And now it was time to get back to real life. And her family were waiting—and they did care for her. Suddenly she had an overwhelming urge for her big sister, Regan, to hug her tight.

For a moment, she stood, unable to move, then she gave herself a shake. She searched the ground and found Lachlan's pistols where he'd dropped them in the snow. Picking them up, she went back to where he stood and pressed them into his hands.

“Don’t you dare die.”

Then turning her back on him, she walked away.

Lola climbed into the back of the sleigh, and her mother got in beside her and patted her arm. “You did well. There are other men out there. Best not to get too attached. The secret is that you must be the one to walk away. Or in this case...fly away.”

The crack of a whip sounded in the silent, snow muffled night, and they rose into the air, bells tinkling.

And then they were flying.

Below her, Lachlan grew smaller and smaller until finally he disappeared from sight.

Chapter Fourteen

Lachlan forced himself to stare straight ahead. Not to watch her go, because then he might beg her to stay.

She would if he asked, because she was that sort of person. Loyal. And sweet. And good. Too good for him. He clamped his lips closed to stop himself from calling after her.

She wasn’t going to die. And no matter what she’d said—she didn’t need him. He was the kiss of fucking death. She was better off without him. But his chest ached. Christ, for nearly three hundred years, he’d avoided all emotion, now he was

drowning.

Somewhere way off in the distance, he heard the chiming of bells from the village. The world was reawakening.

Christmas was coming.

Time to say happy fucking Christmas to his long lost brother.

He took up position in front of Gabe but out of the sword's range, raised the pistols.

A blue eye flickered. A tic jumped in his cheek. Then the sword was swinging in its downward arc. But Lachlan was too far away, and the stroke missed him by a foot.

He shot into the snow at Gabe's feet, making his brother jump back. Gabe stopped. Frowned. Looked around him. Reached up and touched his face. "What the hell?"

Lachlan stood, ignoring the growls and howls and whimpers that surrounded them, pistols aimed at the center of Gabe's chest. "Hello, Gabriel. Good to see you after all these years."

The arm with the sword dropped to his side. His gaze searched the area. "How? What?" He shook his head. "Where's the wee lassie?"

"Gone."

His eyes narrowed. "And where the fuck are your clothes?"

"Gone."

"What's going on here?"

“You can ask me that?” he growled. “You were going to kill me. With my own da’s sword. You know how fucked-up that is?”

“Don’t be so melodramatic. I wasn’t going to kill you, just give you a little cut. For old time’s sake.”

The wolves were creeping closer.

“Call off your dogs,” Lachlan snapped. “This is between you and me.”

“Really? You think you can take me?”

“Hell, I know I can. I always could.” And right in that moment, he wanted to try. He wanted to punch something. Break something. He’d sent her away. She’d asked him to go with her. Just about begged him. She could have been his. If he wasn’t so much of a coward.

Gabe shouted a word into the night and the wolves fell back, giving them space.

Lachlan tossed the guns down onto the snow and closed the space between them. He didn’t need guns. Gabe stood his ground, one eyebrow raised. A supercilious expression on his face.

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“Tell me one thing,” Lachlan said. “Why?”

Gabe’s expression hardened. “You left me. Left me for the wolves to feed on. I was dying. My guts fucking hanging out. And I saw you. You got up and you walked away and you didn’t look back.”

“I’d just been turned into a fucking vampire. I wasn’t feeling myself at the time. I came looking for you as soon as I could.”

Gabe shrugged. Asshole. Maybe this was exactly what he needed. To wipe away the memory of that hurt, disappointed expression. He was good at disappointing people.

But where the hell had Gabe been all these years? One thing was for sure—he hadn’t come looking for Lachlan.

Lachlan drew back his fist and punched him on the nose.

A very satisfying crunch. He punched him again, putting all his strength behind it, and Gabe flew back through the air, landing in a drift of snow. All around him the wolves howled. But no one moved. And Lachlan hurled himself after the other man. He landed on his chest and got in a couple of very enjoyable punches before Gabe pushed his knees between them and heaved Lachlan so he was thrown backward. He slammed into a tree, and the breath left him in awhoosh.

He straightened. Gabe was back on his feet. Lachlan rolled his shoulders to ease the tension, then holding the other man’s gaze, he raised his hand to his face and licked the blood from his knuckles.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” Gabe said and charged.

Lachlan roared, lowered his head, and they met in the middle. His forehead rammed into Gabe’s rock hard stomach driving them both backwards. Gabe’s arms wrapped around him but Lachlan wriggled free and lashed out with his foot, swiping Gabe’s legs from under him and they both crashed to the ground. And then they were rolling, first he was on top and he rained down punches, then somehow their positions were reversed, and Gabe’s fists were slamming into his face.

His nose broke and his vision blurred. The sharp scent of blood filled the air and his fangs elongated.

Gabe was incredibly strong. They were well matched. But Gabe was clearly finding it hard to get a grip on his blood-slick skin. Lachlan grabbed a hand in his brother’s jacket and shoved him away.

They both leaped to their feet.

Lachlan shook his head and blood sprayed onto the snow.

Then Gabe charged again, and they grappled. Once or twice, he knew he could have done serious damage with his fangs but something held him back. Finally, Gabe made one last wildly out-of-control punch in Lachlan’s direction and missed, but the momentum drove him to the ground, taking Lachlan with him.

“Enough,” Gabe muttered.

Lachlan lay in the snow, staring up at the sky, the flakes landing on his upturned face. Gabe lay beside him, breathing heavily.

She was gone. He’d done the right thing.

But everything hurt. Including his heart.

“Shit,” Gabe muttered. “I think you’ve broken every one of my ribs.”

“Good.”

“And my nose.”

“Stop being a pussy. You always were a whiny little bastard.”

“The hell I was.” Gabe was silent for a moment. “You want a drink?”

“Hell, yeah.”

#

Lachlan stood over the graves of his mother and sisters. Gabe appeared from behind him and handed him a bottle.

“They’re all dead.” Lachlan raised the bottle to his mouth and swallowed the Scotch. Single malt. Warm and peaty. He hadn’t drunk scotch since he’d left Scotland—it raised too many memories. When he’d left, he’d turned his back on everything that had reminded him of his homeland. It was the only way he had coped with the loss of everything that he loved. Everything that mattered to him. “They’re dead. I’m dead. Everyone’s dead.”

“I’m not dead,” Gabe said, taking a swig from his own bottle.

“That might not last.”

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“Hah. You couldn’t take me back then. You couldn’t now.”

“I probably could. If I could be bothered.”

“You know your problem,” Gabe said.

“I have a problem?”

“Yeah. You always did think the whole universe revolved around you. Everyone lost people back then. Stop thinking you’re so goddamn special.”

“You mean the world doesn’t revolve around me?”

“Hah.” Gabe took another swallow. “So the bonnie lassie from tonight. She vanished. Is she dead as well?”

“Nope. She’s a witch.”

“A witch? Are they even a thing? I thought they were like fairytale stuff.”

Lachlan studied his brother in amazement. Where had he been for the last three hundred years? “You’re a goddamn werewolf. I’m a fucking vampire. Why wouldn’t witches be a thing. Goddamn ignorant dogs.”

“Hey, just because we like to keep to ourselves doesn’t make us ignorant. Just particular about who we spend time with. So, the witch—you care about her?”

Lachlan gave him a sharp look. “Why would you ask that?”

“The sappy way you were looking at her. The fact that you were ready to give away your life for hers.” He studied him for a moment. “It won’t hurt to accept that you care about her.”

Lachlan swallowed the last of the scotch. He’d loosened his control and he could feel the alcohol like a buzz in his brain. “Might not hurt me. Probably kill her. I don’t have a good track record.”

“Jesus. Here we go again. Mr. Special. You’re just too much of a coward to take the chance.”

“And you’re happily married with a houseful of bairns are you?”

“No. But I haven’t found the right woman yet. I will. I’m not a closed off miserable bastard like you. I presume she saw that in you and told you to fuck off.”

“She asked me to go with her. She said she needed me.”

“And you did the honorable thing and told her to go. Stupid bastard.”

Was he a stupid bastard? He felt doubts coalescing into a big, hard lump. “Besides, I’m too old.”

Gabe looked him up and down. “You don’t look a day over twenty-two. It’s true. You haven’t aged at all. Mentally or physically. You need to grow up.”

Actually, he needed to change the subject. “What happened to you? At Culloden.”

“When the battle was over, the pack came. They feasted. I was close to death. I’d

already seen you walk away. They killed most of the dying but a few of us they kept alive. I didn't care at that point. Christ, it hurt. So fucking badly. Like I was on fire from inside." He shrugged. "The past. I'm over it."

"Except you don't like vampires."

"The wolf that changed me was an evil bastard. Used to pimp us out to the vampires. Sell our blood." He cast Lachlan a sideways glance. "I know vamps like wereblood so don't be getting any ideas."

Lachlan raised his upper lip to show the tip of his fang and licked his lips. Grinned.

"Never going to happen. Anyway I killed him in the end and took over the pack. Then killed the head vamp because he was an evil bastard as well."

"There's a darkness inside us." Lachlan shrugged. "It's closer to the surface in some. Will you join the Council?"

"I'll think about it."

"Good." That was all he could really ask.

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“Will you stop being a coward and go after your little witch? Or at least accept that you’re afraid for yourself not for her. Afraid you’ll lose her. Like you think you lost everyone else. You know she liked you as well. It was totally obvious.”

He had a flashback to the feel of her, warm, and soft, and giving. The taste of her—sweet, and the raw power in her blood. The look in her eyes when she’d told him she needed him.

In that moment he realized he didn’t want her to need him. He wanted her to love him.

And that was seriously scary stuff.

He’d never had a chance to grow up. She was right, he’d been emotionally stunted with no chance to evolve. His whole life had been about surviving, fighting, staying alive. Then he’d been changed, and he’d never thought love was an option.

Vampires didn’t do love.

Except his sire, Darius, had found love. With Lola’s sister.

God, he’d been so stupid. “I have to go find her,” he said.

“You should probably put some clothes on first. I’ve got just the thing. Time to turn back the clocks. Find the man you should have been. Make your ma proud of you.”

He wasn’t sure that was possible. She’d been a devout Christian; she was probably

turning in her grave. But he wasn't evil. Even a vampire could choose what he wanted to be.

He was going to show Lola that he could be the sort of man who wouldn't walk away. He was going to offer himself for Christmas.

But maybe he should take along something else to sweeten the deal.

"I need a puppy."

Chapter Fifteen

Christmas Present...

Lola sniveled and swiped her hand across the back of her face.

They were all at the castle. She couldn't believe it.

Regan and Caleb. Darius and Gina. Their daughter Raven and her husband Kael, the head of the Council. And Catrin.

They'd been planning to come all along. A big surprise.

And there was a tree in the great hall, that twinkled with lights and baubles. And streamers festooned the walls. A huge log burning in the grate.

"Do you really think we'd leave you alone for Christmas?" Regan asked. "We're your family. We love you."

She'd always known that. Sometimes they just weren't very good at showing it. But she'd been an idiot. Wallowing in self-pity because they'd abandoned her in the wilds

of Scotland. And terrified because she was fixating on a stupid miserable bloodsucking vampire who hardly knew she existed and saw her as nothing more than a duty—a painful one at that—and a quick fuck. And who was the least likely candidate for a kiss under the mistletoe she had ever come across.

Cold and cruel and unfeeling.

Except he wasn't. He was just screwed up. Like she was.

Scared of letting anyone close because then you might lose them.

And he'd lost so many.

She sniveled some more, and Regan frowned. "I thought you'd be...happier."

"I am. These are happy tears. I'm so pleased to see you all."

"Hmm." Regan took a step back and studied her. "What are you wearing?" Her eyes narrowed on Lola's throat. "And what's that mark on your neck?" She peered closer. "Jesus, no. Not the goddamn vampire. I knew it was a mistake sending you here. If he hurt you, I'll kill him."

"He hasn't hurt me." Just broken my heart. She'd realized something on the sleigh ride here—she didn't need him after all. She was quite strong enough on her own.

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But she wanted him desperately. And she suspected she loved him. Which was totally stupid.

“Come on, baby sister. Make my day. Tell me he bit you by force and you turned him into a toad.”

She shook her head.

“So where is he?” Regan asked. “I might turn him into a toad myself.”

“Don’t turn him into anything. And you don’t have to worry. He doesn’t want me. He told me to go home. He said he was the kiss of death.” She rubbed her eyes. Goddamn him for being such a coward. He wanted her. She knew he did. She’d seen it in his eyes.

But he’d lost so much.

Maybe she had to be brave enough for both of them.

“Sorry,” she said to Regan. “There’s something I need to do.” She ran toward the doors, threw them open and skidded to a halt. The mournful sound of bagpipes filled the air.

A man strode across the flag stoned floor. Tall, broad at the shoulder, a green and red plaid kilt swinging from his lean hips. His dark red hair pulled back in a ponytail, showing the lean handsome lines of his face.

She swooned.

Then she took a slow step forward. Maybe this was some sort of vision—a vision of Christmas present. What it could have been. He wasn't real.

But he looked real. As did the squirming animal in his arms. He had stopped as well. Eyes widening as he took in the room full of people behind her. Her family could be a little...intimidating. Then he stepped forward. He held out the puppy to her, and she took it from him. It was huge—she nearly went down under the weight—and gray and fluffy, with yellow eyes.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I wanted to get you a puppy, but he was all we could come up with quickly.”

“It's a wolf?”

“Yes, but a real one. Not a werewolf—you don't have to worry about it shifting or anything.” He sounded nervous. “He's an orphan, taken in by the pack.”

She placed the puppy gently on the floor, and he looked up at her out of yellow eyes then licked her fingers, and she fell in love. “He's beautiful. The best Christmas present ever.”

“I wanted to make your dreams come true.” He reached out and stroked her cheek. “And to tell you I was wrong. That you're not needy. You're one of the strongest people I've ever met. And that I'm scared. Scared I'll lose you. But I want to try.”

“I'm scared too. But I'm tough. And I'm hard to get rid of. And I want to make sure you have lots of wonderful Christmases in the future.”

“Together.”

“Yes.” She patted the puppies head. “All three of us. Happy Christmas, Lachlan.”

Epilogue

She slipped a piece of chicken under the table to Loki. The puppy licked her fingers.

They were all seated around the big banqueting table in the great hall, Lachlan at her side. Lachlan’s foster brother Gabe sat opposite. They had somehow made up.

He winked at her. She wasn’t sure how she felt about him. He had tried to chop off Lachlan’s head after all.

But she felt too good to worry right now. She was full up of wonderful food, and sleepy and looking forward to bed.

She had a horrible thought. “You don’t sleep in a coffin, do you?” she whispered. She planned to stay close tonight. She wasn’t letting him out of her sight, but if she was expected to sleep in a coffin, she needed to prepare herself.

He laughed. “Only if you want to.”

“Whew.”

Lachlan was sipping red wine, but not eating. That would take some getting used to. As would his only being awake during the night. She liked the sunshine. But somehow, they would make it work.

At the head of the table, Kael rose to his feet. He held up his glass.

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“To the Daughters of the Morrigan,” he said. “May they always protect us and keep us safe.” He took a sip, then grinned. “And perhaps try to refrain from anything that might actually bring about the end of the world. And to family, may we always be together at Christmas.”

They all drank. And she sighed. She’d never had a better Christmas. But there was one thing she needed to make it complete. Rising to her feet, she tugged at his arm. This was one vision she needed to come true.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Just come with me.”

She’d sneaked off earlier and prepared the site—she knew exactly what it should look like. Now, she led him into a corner of the room, around the back of the Christmas tree where they were out of sight. A sprig of mistletoe hung from one of the huge wooden beams. Standing on tip toes, she placed her hands on his shoulders and stared into his beautiful clear green eyes. “Lachlan, will you make all my Christmas dreams come true?”

“Anything, sweetheart.”

And he lowered his head and kissed her.

The End.