



Mummy Dearest

Author: *Dakota Rebel*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Horror

Description: As a little girl, I dreamed of being an archeologist. My hope was to one day discover my very own dinosaur. And today I am an archeologist, but my work has to do with very different kinds of monsters.

Now I've been called to the middle of Lake Huron to investigate the ruins of a temple found deep on an island reserved for supernatural creatures. The tomb inside holds the body of a mummy long since gone.

Or so I thought.

Every day I spend on the island, in that temple, the more I feel as if the being inside is not so much gone as trying desperately to return...to me.

Maybe all this time around monsters has finally made me lose my mind. Or maybe I haven't so much lost anything as found the only thing that ever really mattered.

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Prologue

~Victor Galt~

Isle Aux Monstres – 1840

I stood alone in the temple, alone on the island in the middle of nowhere, alone with my thoughts and the memories of Claire's screams of terror and pain echoing through my mind and my heart.

It should have been me.

It was supposed to be me.

That my mate, the love of my life, the woman with whom I'd shared but one kiss and a promise of an eternity together, had sacrificed herself to protect my worthless life was gut wrenchingly painful.

Such a waste.

It should have been me.

I stared at the sarcophagus that my men had constructed for me, my fingers lightly tracing the intricate lines carved into the wood. I'd asked for a simple oak box. But I should have known that they wouldn't be able to resist creating a more ornate resting place for me.

That my beloved had been reduced to ashes by a mob of mortals, and I would be lain to rest in a gilded tomb was just one more in a succession of injustices.

That I lived and she died...well, that would be taken care of soon enough. Or as close to it as I could accomplish on my own.

When my friends had brought word of Claire's fate, I'd begged for them to end my life as well. I'd run like a coward to safety, leaving her behind. I did not deserve to live.

But they could not.

Would not.

Claiming that her life had ended on her terms as she'd wanted it to.

To save me.

So a compromise was born.

I would retreat to my island. I would crawl into my coffin, and I would wither for eternity. My self-inflicted punishment would be to starve, to decay and to never again walk the Earth without Claire by my side.

Torpor was said to be agony for the vampires resigned to its fate.

Agony was no less than I deserved for allowing my mate to take the death that had been meant for me.

I lifted the lid of my sarcophagus and climbed inside. The rich velvet lining was warm against my skin, the padding provided by my men the softest down beneath my

back.

But I knew the comfort would soon be replaced by nothingness. The spells carved into the tomb by the witches who had been willing to help me would rip my soul from my body soon enough.

I would never again fully wake to a world without Claire beside me.

All that would remain for me was pain.

Which was no less than I deserved.

Pulling the lid closed over myself, I closed my eyes and waited for the darkness to consume me. The tears that slid down my cheeks were not for me. But for her.

Always for Claire.

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Chapter One

~Claire DuBois ~

“So, Mayor Steele,” I said, turning away from the water outside the ferry window to face him again. “What can you tell me about the temple?”

“Not much,” he admitted with a smile. “And please, call me Colton.”

“Very well,” I agreed. “Colton. You said that the storms on the island unearthed the ruins of a building, yes?”

“That’s right,” he said, nodding. “There are local legends about a sentient being—”

“Excuse me,” I interrupted. “I’m so sorry, but I prefer not to be influenced by legend and stories before I have a chance to inspect the area. I do my best to remain neutral and fact driven, but I’m not above influence.”

“Of course,” he said. “Thank you again for coming out so quickly.”

“It’s my pleasure,” I assured him.

And it was. Being a monster archeologist was just about the coolest job I could ever imagine, and the fact that I got to travel all over the world to do it was amazing.

It took a lot of trust on the part of the supernatural community to let me unearth their pasts and piece together their history for them, but after five years of research and

community building, it seemed that we were all on the same page. I respected them and in turn they respected me as well.

“So, the temple,” I repeated, anxious to dive into my newest mystery.

“Right,” Colton said, smiling softly at me. “There have been heavy storms battering the islands and it’s as if the ruins lifted themselves from beneath the ground. Prior to just appearing in the middle of the woods, there was no indication that any structures had existed there before. Then one day...bam, big stone temple.”

I nodded as he talked, as it wasn’t an unfamiliar story. Monsters were currently trying like hell to integrate with humans, or norms as they called us, but that had never been the case before Colton Steele had used the magic of his town to allow the monsters residing there to safely show themselves to the norms.

He was a case study in the incredible world of the paranormal, but unfortunately, that wasn’t what I’d been called to Michigan to deal with. One day, when the monsters were fully out all over the world, I hoped that I would be the one to write that story and share the history of our relationships to one another.

But for today, I had an old, scary temple to drive into. And that was just as exciting to me.

“Has anyone been inside?” I asked.

“No,” Colton said firmly. “Once it was discovered I spent some time inspecting the outside, and while it seems structurally sound, I didn’t want to risk disturbing anything inside.”

“Anything inside?” I asked, my tone teasing. “Like this legend you wanted to tell me about?”

“Indeed.” Colton grinned at me as he let out a small chuckle. “Once you’ve completed your inspection, perhaps we can discuss that story. It’s a good one.”

“That sounds like a plan,” I agreed.

The boat docked at the island shore, and we disembarked, the captain following behind with my bags.

“I’ll just run these up to the resort,” the captain said happily. “They’ll be at the desk for you when you’re ready to check in.”

“Thank you so much,” I said, smiling at the kind man before he turned and headed up the path toward the hotel.

“I assume you’ll be wanting to see the temple?” Colton asked, already taking steps toward the dense woods at the center of the island.

“Definitely,” I agreed, following behind him.

A massive crack of thunder rumbled through the air around us, making me jump. I looked to the sky and saw that the white, fluffy clouds and bright blue sky were gone, replaced by darkness in what seemed to have been an instant.

“What the hell?” I muttered, rubbing the gooseflesh that had broken out over my arms as a cool wind kicked up and blew across the island.

“Yeah,” Colton said, turning back to face me. “That legend you didn’t want to know about...”

“No,” I said slowly, disbelief clear in my tone. “Really?”

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It wouldn't be the first time a ghost or a spirit or a cursed land had affected weather patterns, but normally that sort of thing ended up on my radar far before my feet hit the ground of those places. I'd heard nothing about the island beyond the existence of the ruin.

"Let's head in," he said. "The storm is only going to get worse now that you're here."

I had no idea why my presence on the island would make the storms worse, but this was Colton's island, so I had no choice but to believe him and followed as he pushed on deeper into the woods.

Lightning lit up the sky overhead and more thunder crashed and cracked in the air around us as the darkness seemed to spread, enveloping us until it felt as if twilight had fallen.

"Well, this is ominous," I muttered as I struggled to keep up with Colton's long strides ahead of me.

"That's why we called you in," Colton agreed.

Another loud rumble of thunder shook the ground beneath us and then it was as if the sky split open and rain poured down in sheets, soaking me instantly even with the cover of trees overhead.

Yeah...maybe I needed to hear about that legend after all.

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Chapter Two

~Victor~

For the second time since I'd been interred, the presence of a human on my island had disturbed my rest.

The spells those witches had carved into my tomb hadn't done what they were supposed to. I'd expected to be as close to death as possible. And yet, it was more like I was trapped inside a decaying body, unable to move or feed or even fully wake.

My body was useless, probably wasted away from lack of blood, lack of movement. I had no idea how much time had passed since I'd given up on life, but I knew that it had been over a century at least.

Through the years my consciousness drifted, absorbing knowledge and the strange changing of language and technology. I knew that images were projected on screens, allowing moving pictures to be viewed inside every room of a home. I knew that something called cellular phones allowed constant contact around the world at the push of a button.

But I didn't actually understand it. I didn't know where it came from, or how it worked. I just accumulated the information while hunger clawed at my senses.

Hunger and anger. My only two constants.

And now, I let that anger flow from my mind, sending it out like a beacon, warning

all humans that they were not welcome on my island.

I could accept the monsters moving on, enjoying the beauty of this place I'd created. But not humans. They'd destroyed everything and I would not stand for them destroying this place, too.

The presence of the human seemed to draw closer to me, their vile stench permeating even through my sarcophagus, causing my rage to swell even more violently.

For the first time since I'd crawled into this coffin, I wished that I could rise again. That I could physically lash out and destroy the norm that dared to step foot on my island. I interred myself here to be away from everyone. They had no right to disturb my slumber.

Muted voices grew closer, the thunder created by my anger drowning out any words they were actually speaking. I could sense that one of them was a supernatural creature, a shifter of some kind.

And the other...

Had my heart been beating it would have stopped dead in my chest.

There was something familiar about this human. Like a distant memory long since forgotten, tugging at my consciousness as if begging to be remembered. But try as I might, I couldn't grasp it. Couldn't place it.

"Is it structurally sound, do you think?" a man's voice cut through the storms outside, obviously coming from the entrance of my tomb.

"It appears to be," the woman answered. "Honestly, I'll take my chances."

They were the first voices I'd heard in centuries, and had I been able to weep, I might have. Even knowing that one of them was a normal, this was the closest I'd been to anyone in so long, that I was overcome with emotions.

"Oh my," the woman whispered, her voice so close now that I knew without a doubt she was standing over my coffin.

"I'll be damned," the man responded, shock clear in his tone. "The legends were right."

"We don't know anything yet," the woman said.

My senses were suddenly completely overwhelmed, and every memory I'd ever held of my sweet Claire flooded through me. It was as if I'd suddenly stepped into the sun for the first time. Warmth and light and peace washed over me.

It wasn't possible. It couldn't be her. She was long dead. I'd watched it happen. And this woman, this person that was so close to me now she may as well have been touching the corpse that had held me dormant since my torpor began, was most definitely a human.

And yet it was if Claire were holding me in her arms once more.

It was too much. My consciousness screamed, the sound guttural and brutal as it echoed in my mind, unable to take actual voice through my body, until I had to shut down completely to block the pain and fear that swallowed everything that was left of me.

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Chapter Three

~Claire~

I stood with my hand on the sarcophagus, my fingers tracing the intricate spells carved into its lid as the storm outside seemed to fade away in an instant.

“That’s...different,” Colton said, turning to look at the mouth of the tomb.

It was still dark outside, but the rain had ceased, and I couldn’t hear even a distant rumble of thunder.

“I don’t recognize any of these markings,” I murmured, turning back to the coffin. “They’re clearly spells of some kind, but I’ve never seen anything like this before.” I blew out a frustrated sigh. “I should have brought my bags with me.”

“I can send for them,” Colton offered.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It would be safer to research first than to bust inside without knowing who or what may be interred.”

“Forgive my ignorance,” Colton said, walking back to me and staring down at the coffin. “But that is a sarcophagus, isn’t it?”

“I believe so,” I agreed.

“I wasn’t aware mummification was a common practice in Michigan.”

“Mummification was practiced by many cultures,” I said, walking around and continuing to trace the carvings in the wood. “Obviously Egyptian and Aztec are most well-known. But there have been many discoveries of mummies throughout Europe as well. And many different monster cultures adopted the practice as well.”

I rolled my lower lip between my teeth as I crouched down, studying the engraving across the side of the sarcophagus.

“This place doesn’t seem old enough for that, though.” I grabbed a flashlight from my pocket and shone it onto the side of the box. “And this is not spell work here.” I frowned as I moved closer. “I think it’s...French.” I looked up at Colton who had walked around to join me. “I don’t suppose you know French?”

“Unfortunately, I do not,” he admitted. “However, I know witches that may be able to help you with the spells. And I believe my brother-in-law is fluent in several languages. If you’ll agree, I can send for them to come and meet us here.”

“That would be incredibly helpful.” I straightened up and started to wander around the rest of the tomb. It had been carved into the bedrock that was probably original to the island. It was possible that over the years it had sunk into the ground and if it was unearthed by the storms, there was no real way to tell how long the tomb itself had existed without intense scientific study of the stones.

“Would you like to head over to the resort?” Colton asked.

I looked over at him to see that he’d moved back to the entrance, his hands roaming over his arms as if he were chilled.

“Is it freaking you out a little?” I teased.

“Miss DuBois...I am the mayor of a supernatural town. I assure you, I do not

getfreaked out.” He swallowed thickly as he stared at the coffin again. “I do, however, need to get back to work.”

“Never dealt with mummies before?” I guessed, following him back out into the woods.

“I have never even considered them,” he admitted. “Outside of episodes of Scooby-Doo with my children.”

The ground was thick with mud from the rain, but the storms had indeed passed, and the sun was shining through the canopy of leaves above us as we headed toward the resort.

“If it makes you feel any better,” I offered. “With everything I’ve seen and read before, I have never once heard a true story of a mummy returning from the dead.”

“I’m slightly ashamed to admit that it does, in fact, make me feel better.” Colton gave me a soft smile. “Mummies on Isle Aux Monstres.” He shook his head. “Not what I was expecting when I called you in.”

“Me, either,” I assured him. “And that’s part of why I don’t like to know the local legends before I visit a site. Because now I have two mysteries. Who or what is buried in that tomb...and what is causing your strange storms?”

“I wish you hadn’t reminded me of that, to be honest.” Colton chuckled. “You’re sure mummies don’t come back to life?”

“There’s a first time for everything,” I said, then laughed when he turned a horrified expression to me. “I’m sorry. But you’re making this incredibly easy for me.”

“You know,” he said, leading me up the steps to the resort and holding the door open

for me. “I think you’re going to get along with my family really well.”

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Chapter Four

~Victor~

I stared across the table at Claire, unable to believe that I was seeing her again. That we were home.

Except...we weren't home. And she wasn't really here.

Was I dreaming? I couldn't recall dreaming since I'd sank into my torpor. Perhaps this was a memory that was working its way back to me from the depths of my soul.

"Victor? Darling, whatever is the matter?" Claire asked, her gaze concerned as it raked over my face. "You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"I feel as though I have," I admitted sadly. "I miss you so much. Even after all this time, my ache for you consumes me."

"I'm right here," she insisted. "I've never left you. I could never leave you. We are a part of each other."

"We should be," I agreed. "Had I made you mine, I could have protected you. I thought that by turning you I was keeping you safe. But I made you a target instead. You're gone...and it's all my fault."

"No." Claire stood and seemed to float around the table toward me, her hand reaching out to gently stroke her delicate fingers over my jaw, small jolts of electricity

bouncing over our skin where it connected. “It was my duty to protect you. Always.”

Her face lowered toward mine and just before our lips could touch, her body burst into flame, skin crackling and turning to ash before my eyes, the embers raining gently down around me. Leaving me once again cold, alone and heartbroken.

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Chapter Five

~Claire~

“No!” I screamed, sitting up in bed and clutching the covers to my heaving chest. My heart was racing and for a moment I looked around in the dark, trying desperately to remember where I was.

I struggled to catch my breath, swiping tears from my cheeks as the dream quickly began to fade around the edges. There had been a candlelit room, a handsome man and then...pain.

“What the hell?” I whispered, forcing myself to inhale deeply as I blinked the tears away.

I glanced over at the clock and flopped back onto my pillow with a groan. Five in the morning. There was no way I was getting back to sleep. The sun would be up soon, and I was meeting Colton’s family at nine to inspect the tomb.

With a heavy sigh, I climbed out of bed and got into the shower. The hot water felt incredible, and I closed my eyes, leaning my forehead against the wall as I let the jets pound against my back.

The image of a man bathing beneath a waterfall flashed through my mind, like a scene from a long-forgotten movie or something. But it was crystal clear. I could see the water sluicing over his muscled torso, dripping from his dark hair and clinging to his thick eyelashes.

I opened my eyes and wondered if maybe I'd fallen asleep again. That was the last time I'd eat a Reuben at ten o'clock at night.

By six I was dressed, my backpack stuffed with tools strapped to my back, and downstairs, grabbing a coffee before heading out of the resort to explore the island.

Colton said they would all meet me at the tomb, so I figured that would give me a few hours to look around and see if there was anything else that maybe I'd missed during my cursory inspection the day before.

The sun was shining brightly overhead already, not a single cloud in the clear, blue sky and it was pleasantly warm. I wandered around the perimeter for a while, listening the waves of the lake lap against the shore.

It was beautiful and so peaceful. I could totally understand why the monsters had wanted someplace like this as a refuge.

Yes, more and more of them were interested in integrating with humans openly, but there was still mistrust amongst them, and I really couldn't blame them.

From the Salem Witch Trials, to the hunting of wolves for sport, to the general human obsession with the supernatural, it was far easier to fear us than to allow their truths to be known.

I was fortunate to be included in the trusted norms amongst them. I truly wanted to help them with their history, and they could obviously tell that I respected them, and they returned it to me in full.

Before I even realized where I was headed, I found myself deep into the woods once more, my feet seeming to carry me of their own volition toward the ruins I'd come to see.

I walked into the cave slowly, the light from outside bright enough now to see more than I'd been able to by flashlight. It was obvious that whoever had been laid to rest in this place, had been cared for.

In the back corner of the room sat a few chairs, where maybe someone had sat, watching over this person. A small oil lamp lay busted on the ground next to a toppled table.

There was a small wooden crate that I'd also missed on my last inspection on the other side of the cavern. I dropped my backpack to the floor as I lowered myself to the ground and turned the small brass key that was still sitting in the lock.

If this were an actual mummification, I would have expected to find canopic jars inside, containing the organs of the person interred. However, the box seemed to contain trinkets instead. Maybe things that were of importance to the person inside the coffin.

A lace handkerchief, yellowed with age, its edges frayed and worn. A piece of paper, that could have been a photograph, but was damaged beyond any recognition. The withered stem of a rose, its thorns brittle and sharp, sitting in the ashes that could only have come from the flower's former petals. And two gold bands, sitting side by side in the bottom of the trunk, haphazardly as if they'd been tossed there as an afterthought.

I picked them up gingerly, holding both bands in my palm as I turned them to watch them glitter in the light. There was something so achingly familiar about the weight of them, that tears pricked my eyes as I stared down them.

Outside a massive rumble of thunder sounded, though the sky hadn't seemed to have darkened at all.

“Stop that,” I hissed.

Gooseflesh prickled over my skin as the sounds outside ceased. For just a moment, it felt as though there was a presence inside the cave with me. I turned slowly to look toward the coffin, almost expecting to see its resident pushing the lid off and climbing out.

But I was alone.

“God, Claire,” I admonished myself. “Don’t be stupid.”

I returned the rings to the box and closed the lid, turning the key to lock it once more. Most likely I would be taking these things with me when I left the island to catalog them and store them, but it felt more respectful to leave things the way I’d found them for now.

I stood up and walked back to the sarcophagus, placing my palms flat on the lid and closing my eyes, listening intently as if I expected to hear someone inside, but there was only silence.

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“What happened to you?” I whispered. “Are you still in there? Or am I just a crazy person?”

The urge to pry the lid off the coffin was so strong, that I actually turned to get my backpack before I realized how incredibly stupid that was.

I had no idea what the spells on the coffin meant, and until I did I had to leave that thing alone. There could be any number of curses tied to it that could hurt me if I tried to open it.

The smart thing to do would have been to leave then and return once the witches were available to help. But I’ve never really been common sense kind of smart.

Instead, I grabbed my backpack and sat back down on the ground, retrieving my notebook and a pen before leaning against the coffin and making notes about the things I’d found so far in the room.

I rested my head against the wood, staring up at the ceiling before closing my eyes for a moment.

If there was someone laid to rest in there, what must it have been like for them? Had they died of natural causes, and been mummified to ensure their passage to the other side? Or perhaps to keep their body preserved for a future return?

Had the sarcophagus been placed here as a punishment? Perhaps the chairs were set there because someone had kept watch, ensuring that the person or creature inside could never come back.

Or maybe they'd put themselves there. Maybe they'd lost someone and couldn't bear to go on living without them, so they'd sealed themselves away where no one would ever disturb them again.

Tears pooled behind my eyelids as heartbreak washed over me. The sadness of that thought was so profound, that it truly felt as if I were experiencing the pain myself.

When I opened my eyes, I gasped, my heart leaping to my throat at the sight of a man standing before me.

It was the same man I'd imagined bathing in the waterfall.

And, I realized, the same man who'd been in my dream.

His hand stretched out toward me, and I lifted my own, desperate to reach out and touch him. But as our fingers were about to connect, I watched in horror as my hand burst into flames, my skin cracking and peeling, the exposed bone charring and turning to dust.

"Claire!"

I jumped, my eyes flying open to see Colton kneeling next to me, his hand on my shoulder and a look of concern on his face.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You were screaming."

"Oh my God!" I buried my face in my hands as heat raced up my throat and spread over my face. I was absolutely mortified. "I'm so sorry." I scrambled to my feet and brushed the dirt from my jeans. "I must have nodded off."

"You fell asleep in a creepy tomb?" a woman asked. "Jesus, Colton, how

uncomfortable are the rooms at the resort?”

I looked over to see three women standing near the opening of the cave. Two had dark hair and one had bright, fiery red locks that seemed to glow in the sunlight that filtered in through the woods behind her. They looked so similar in features, that I knew they had to be the LaFey triplets that Colton had told me about.

“How long have you been here?” Colton asked, apparently choosing to ignore the woman.

“Not long,” I lied, shaking my head as I got to my feet. “Thank you all for coming. I really appreciate it.”

Colton introduced me officially to his family. His wife Trudi, his sister-in-law Mindi and the red-haired sister whose name was Candi.

“My husband Booker will be over soon,” Mindi explained as they moved closer to the sarcophagus to start inspecting the spells carved into it. “He’s the French expert.”

Her sisters both snickered at her and Mindi’s cheeks turned slightly pink as she shot glares at both of them.

“This is very intricate work,” Trudi murmured as she leaned closer to the coffin. “Whoever invented this spell was a genius.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, stepping over to her and watching as she reached out to run a finger over one of the carvings.

“Well,” she explained. “It’s a collection of spells that are designed to work in tandem. This one here protects the body from overwhelming decay.”

“Overwhelming?” I wasn’t sure I understood that.

“I can’t tell you what you’ll find when you open this thing,” Trudi said softly. “But it seems like they intended for the body to be used again in the future.”

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So, unlike Egyptian mummification, whoever had carved these spells expected the person inside to return, rather than to need the body in the afterlife.

“Over here,” Candi said on my other side. “This allows the consciousness to roam until...” She trailed off as she pressed her palm to the sigil, closing her eyes for a minute before opening them again and smiling. “Until that which they seek is found once more.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, my brow furrowing.

“I have no idea,” she admitted. “If all of this worked, I think that it means the person inside has been able remain cognizant.”

“So it knows it’s trapped in there?” I was horrified at that thought. Being trapped, mentally alive but encased in a coffin for centuries?

“I don’t think so,” Mindi said. She was kneeling at one end of the coffin, her hand pressed to it the way Candi had done. “I mean, I don’t think they’re trapped. I think they wanted this.” She shook her head. “These spells are torpor spells. Meant to put a supernatural creature into a kind of stasis. Essentially suspending their life.”

“Why would anyone want to do that?” I asked, unable to imagine purposely doing something like that to myself.

“I’m not sure,” Mindi said. “But it almost seems like these spells were carved first, and then amendments were made to it later.” She motioned for me to come over to her. “Look at the lines of the carvings here. Definitely firm, sure strokes from some

kind of chisel.”

She grabbed my hand and pulled me over to stand between her sisters, pointing to the spells they’d been inspecting.

“But these show definite hesitation. Now, it’s possible that two different people carved the spells and that would explain the irregularities. But I get the feeling that these were added after whoever is inside subjected themselves, or were subjected to, the original torpor spell.”

My head was swimming with this information. I’d never come across anything like this before. And I had no idea what to make of any of it.

“So that mummy in there,” I said slowly, trying to work out a coherent thought through the jumble of things in my head. “Wanted to be in stasis, and someone decided to give them a loophole to come back?”

“That isn’t a mummy,” a man said from the opening of the cave. His deep, booming voice causing everyone inside to jump.

“Damnit Booker!” Mindi yelled, her palm pressed to her chest as she glared at her husband.

Chapter Six

~Victor~

I'd listened in anger and awe as the intruders that invaded my resting place discussed the additional spells the witches who'd assisted my burial had added to my tomb.

It made sense now that my torpor had never fully been complete, but it was irritating to know that they'd gone behind my back to change what would happen to me. Though I was grateful as well. Because of those spells, I might actually be able to return to my former greatness. A feat that I'd never believed possible.

The moment that vampire had stepped into my tomb, it had lit my mind like an oil lamp. Where moments before I'd been aware of the others, had heard their words like the ghost of a whisper in my mind, now it was as if my consciousness physically hovered in the cavern, unable to see, but feeling the presence of the vampire, the witches and that shifter that had come to...I wasn't sure what they were doing there, actually.

And Claire. My Claire. She was there as well. Returned to me at last. Though human again, as she had been the first time I'd met her all those years ago.

So close to me. To my body that was frozen in its coffin. But my mind was becoming clearer by the minute. I knew that she had come to set me free. That we were to be reunited once more thanks to the foresight of the witches that had come before.

And these people were going to help her.

I just didn't know how to get her to remember me. To remember what we once had. What we should still have to this day.

For one moment, I'd been able to push my power across the island, to invade her dreams and see her as she was now. But there was no control and I'd had to watch in her minds eye as she burned once more before me.

This woman was my soul mate. And now that I was so close to her, I would never let her be hurt again.

Chapter Seven

~Claire~

Tears pricked at my eyes as Booker read aloud from the carvings on the far side of the sarcophagus. The resting place of Victor Galt, a vampire who loved his mate so completely, that when she was ripped from him he gave up everything to avoid spending even a single day more without her by his side.

“And thus is the impetus,” Booker continued, his fingers following along as he finished this vampire’s tale. “Of my imprisonment for all time. I can only hope that my torpor will give way to true death, and that...”

Booker looked up at me, his eyes wide as he trailed off.

“What?” I asked, my brow furrowing as Mindi leaned over her husband to read where he had paused.

“Oh my God,” Mindi whispered, a smile pulling at her lips as she too turned to stare at me.

“What?” I asked again.

“I can only hope,” Booker repeated, turning back to the story. “That my torpor will give way to true death and that Claire DuBois and I will be reunited in the hereafter, so that I may offer my soul to her to replace the one ripped from her.”

I stared at Booker, my brain not willing to fully process what he'd said for a few moments. Then, as it sunk in that my name was Claire DuBois, I felt myself shaking my head violently.

"Obviously it's not me," I insisted. "I'm very much human. As are my parents and both sets of grandparents. Believe me, plenty of monsters have dug into my past, wanting to claim me as one of their own. It's just not true."

"Who were you named after?" Trudi asked softly. "A distant relative perhaps?"

I thought about her question, unable to recall anyone ever mentioning that I was named after someone at all. It wasn't as if Claire was an unusual name. It had to be just one of those freaky coincidences.

"This is crazy," I said finally. "Clearly it's just some kind of cosmic fluke that his soul mate and I share a name."

A rumble of thunder sounded outside the cave, and I shot a dirty look at the coffin as if it had personally offended me.

"Oh, shut up," I hissed, rolling my eyes. "Can we please focus on the actual situation?"

"Which is?" Colton asked, his tone thick with humor as he turned to raise an eyebrow at me.

"You have a centuries old vampire locked in torpor in the middle of your island," I reminded him. "One that, if the spells are to be believed, will stay that way until his soulmate returns." I looked between the people around the sarcophagus who just stared back at me. "What are we going to do with it?"

“Right,” Colton said, as if that hadn’t occurred to him until I spelled it out. “What do you suggest?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted. “We can transport everything to the Monster Museum in Dublin. It would remove the threat from your island, if this is in fact what is causing your storms. I’m leery of leaving it here, to be honest. I have no doubt your guests will be respectful, but a tomb in the middle of an island is too tempting to trust that someone won’t mess with the things in here.”

“Or,” Candi suggested, her eyes sparkling even in the dim light of the tomb. “We can open it and reunite him with you!”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Booker said, his tone a warning. “What we are definitely sure of is that inside this coffin is a vampire that has been laying in torpor for almost two hundred years. Whether or not Claire is some kind of reincarnation of his lost soul mate, we cannot risk waking him in the presence of a human.”

“Right,” Colton agreed. “Perhaps we should exercise a brand of caution that I feel is beyond the abilities of the LaFey triplets and leave things as they are for now.”

“Hey!” Candi yelled as Mindi and Trudi both stuck their tongues out at Colton.

“I agree,” I said. “I’d like to spend some time looking into the history of Victor Galt and the actual Claire DuBois. See if I can find any information about them.”

“An excellent idea,” Colton agreed. “We should head back to the resort, together. Claire, anything you need I will make available to you.”

“Thank you.” I gathered my stuff and slid my backpack over my shoulder before following the monster parade out of the tomb and back to the resort.

The moment I was back in my room, I dug out my laptop and started digging into the history of Victor Galt and Claire DuBois. I hadn't expected to find much publicly available, considering it had been so long ago, and monsters were quite adept at hiding even two hundred years ago.

Fortunately, I was able to find mentions of them both in old records of French-Canadian genealogy reports. From there, I was able to track down property ownerships and discover that Victor Galt was the original owner of Isle Aux Monstres. He was listed as Victor Galt VI, but as I dug deeper into the digitized records kept in the Monster Museum, it seemed that every few decades, Victor added a number, as if he were his own son. Which was a common practice for immortals and was sometimes still employed today.

There was not much on Claire at all, which probably just meant that she hadn't been of public importance as much as Victor had been. There was just a footnote in a newspaper clipping that Victor's bride-to-be had perished in a fire on his farm.

After firing off an email to the museum curator, requesting any further records that might not be available online, I glanced at the clock to see that I'd worked through dinner, and it was nearing midnight already.

Sleep felt more important than food, so I changed into my pajamas, crawled under the covers, and closed my eyes. Once I was deep into a mystery like this, it was easy for me to ignore things like food and sleep, but having slept so fitfully the night before, I knew that I'd feel better if I at least tried for a few hours.

Victor and Claire would still be waiting for me in the morning.

Chapter Eight

~Victor~

“I cannot believe you’re really here,” I whispered, staring at Claire as if she might be a ghost or just a memory. “I feel as though all of time has passed yet not a single grain of sand has dropped from an hourglass since last I saw your face.”

“I feel as if I’ve always been here,” she answered, pressing her palm over my heart as she blinked back tears. “You never forgot me. Never let me go.”

“You are the soul of me,” I promised her, covering her fingers with my hand. “As I go on, you went on. Always.”

“Come back to me, Victor,” she pleaded. “I am here yet you are lost. Come back to me.”

“I do not know how,” I admitted, my words choked over a sob that seemed stuck in my chest.

“Just wake.” She said it as if it were the most simple thing in the world. “Wake up. Wake up!”

Chapter Nine

~Claire~

I sat up in bed, sweat beading across my chest and face, the covers clutched to my breast with one hand, while the other remained outstretched in front of me, the echo of the heartbeat that had thrummed beneath it in my dream still pulsing against my skin.

It took me a moment to realize that my cell was ringing on the table next to me, and I snatched it up, answering before it could go to voicemail.

“This is Claire.”

“Claire, it’s Hugh,” the museum curator said brightly. “Goodness, are you okay?”

“Fine,” I lied, forcing myself to get my breathing under control. “The phone startled me.”

“Oh dear,” he said, his tone apologetic. “Are you in the states? I hadn’t factored the time difference.”

“I am, but it’s no trouble,” I assured him, flicking on the bedside light. “You know how I am with puzzles.”

“Indeed,” he answered with a chuckle. “And you’ve got quite a puzzle on your hands.”

My heart leapt in my chest, something very much like hope sparking at his response. I'd not been able to give Hugh much to go on in my message, but if he was calling back so quickly, I could only pray that he'd found something good.

"I assume you were able to locate the information I requested?" I asked.

"Well, Victor Galt was quite infamous in his time," Hugh said. "He was practically French vampire nobility or would have been if there were such a thing. He spent years cultivating a vampire community in Canada. I think their goal was similar to what Colton Steele has achieved in Fayshore. To integrate with the humans. However, it never actually happened."

No, of course it hadn't. Because the love of his life was murdered by a group of mortals, and he'd buried himself in a tomb on an island.

"And what of Claire DuBois?" I asked him.

"Yes," Hugh said slowly, the sound of pages turning sounding in the background on the receiver. "I would imagine you'd be curious about the woman who shared your name. Unfortunately, there is much less available about her. I have copies of letters sent from Galt to his family in France confirming that Claire had accepted his proposal of marriage, and then...they both disappeared."

"I suppose that makes sense," I said with a sigh. "I believe we've found Victor Galt's tomb."

"Is it on Isle Aux Monstres?" he asked, the papers shuffling again.

"It is." I waited for Hugh to continue, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming at him to hurry up.

“Okay,” he said finally. “I’ve got some journal entries from the LaFey family stating that they were going to the island to perform a ritual for Galt around the time of his disappearance. But I couldn’t find anything else of record, so I wasn’t sure it was accurate.”

“The LaFey family,” I repeated. “Does it say who made the entry? Is there anything about the ritual or how to reverse it?”

“I will scan the pages and email them over to you,” Hugh said with amusement in his tone. “As well as the rest of the documentation I have. I do hope you’ll keep me informed on the progress with the tomb. You know we are always available for storage and archiving, as well as anything else you might need.”

“I know,” I agreed. “Thank you so much for your assistance. I promise to let you know anything I found out on my end.”

“Try to get some rest, Claire,” Hugh said kindly. “It will take me hours to assemble everything and send it over. There’s no need to sit by your computer all night waiting.”

“You know me too well,” I grumbled, though I couldn’t help smiling.

“Good night, Claire.”

“Good night, Hugh.”

We hung up and I sat staring at my laptop, which was perched on the end of the bed where I’d left it when I’d decided to try to sleep. The urge to try to find more information on my own was overwhelming, but I knew that not much existed digitally about monsters dating back that far, so all I’d be doing is robbing myself of whatever little more sleep I could grab before dawn came.

But as I lay back down and closed my eyes, I realized I was afraid to sleep. Afraid that I would dream of Victor again. Scared that maybe it was true, and I was somehow the reincarnation of his soul mate...but also terrified that I might not be.

It was such a romantic story. Well, the burning alive of Claire notwithstanding. But the fact that Victor had loved her so completely that he couldn't bear the thought of life without her. That was some classic romance stuff right there.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:18 am

My entire world was my work. I'd never had a great love. No first date, no first kiss, no first anything with anyone. I had my degrees, the respect of monsters all over the world, and journals full of mysteries that I couldn't share with anyone outside of the supernatural community.

It had never bothered me before. Being alone meant that I could hop a plane across the world at a moments notice and spend months digging in the sand of a forgotten colony of preternatural creatures without having to worry about being missed.

I liked my life. I loved my work. So why the hell was this case making me question all of my decisions? It was just one more vampire in one more tomb on one more island.

It wasn't just that I shared my name with one of the key players in the story. Because I'd been dreaming of Victor since I'd arrived on the island. Long before I knew about the other Claire DuBois. There was something more going on here that I didn't understand...and it was scaring the hell out of me.

Despite Hugh's insistence that he wouldn't have the files available for me any time soon, I still fired up my laptop and opened my email. Of course, there was nothing waiting for me from the museum, but I still hit refresh a few times just to be sure.

After giving up the exercise in futility, I got up and took a shower. It was barely four in the morning, but there was no way I was going to get back to sleep, so I didn't figure there was any point in trying.

Plus, I was starving.

After getting dressed, I headed down to the lobby and approached the man at the front desk.

“Good morning, Ms. DuBois,” he said brightly. “How can I help you?”

“Actually, I was wondering if it would be possible to get something to eat this early?” I admitted.

“Good morning, Bruce!” Mindi said brightly as she walked up beside me and beamed at the man behind the counter. “I’ll just open up the café, if that’s alright with you.”

“Of course,” the man, Bruce apparently, agreed, smiling back at the dark-haired witch.

“We promise not to make a mess of your kitchen,” Candi added, sidling up to her sister.

“No worries,” Bruce assured her.

“Come on, Claire,” Trudi said, her voice behind me making me jump. They were so damned quiet.

I followed the sisters across the lobby and into the little restaurant, starting a pot of coffee while they wandered into the kitchen and started turning on lights.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Mindi asked with a soft smile.

“Not really,” I admitted. “Weird dreams.”

“Victor?” Candi suggested.

“I think so.” I lifted my shoulders in a shrug then shook my head. “I don’t know. All of this is very strange.”

“Welcome to Fayshore,” Trudi muttered as she whipped a whisk around a large metal bowl she’d cradled in one arm. “Strange happens a lot around here.”

“Why are you all awake so early?” I couldn’t help asking as I watched the sisters work together to make breakfast.

“Too quiet,” Mindi said with a giggle. “We’ve got seven kids between us, and they’re all on the mainland with Candi’s husband Lincoln. We decided to stay here in case you needed our help, but it’s weird without all those hands and feet banging around.”

Seven kids between three sisters? I’d never even stopped to consider how much work one child might be. It was incredible to imagine seven little ones.

“Four in the morning pancakes is a nice break,” Trudi said wistfully as she ladled batter onto the griddle. “As is digging around a two-hundred-year-old tomb to be honest.”

“Well, that happens to be my favorite thing,” I told her with a smile. “Though I have to admit that this one has me a little freaked out.”

“Because it’s the burial place of your soul mate?” Candi guessed.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” I asked, my tone incredulous.

“Actually, I do,” she said firmly. “It’s not the name, though that’s one hell of a coincidence. But if you’re dreaming about him, if he’s not pummeling the island with storms because you’re here, then I do believe there’s something deeper at work.”

“I don’t know that I believe in reincarnation,” I admitted.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:18 am

“Well, souls are a funny thing,” Trudi said, turning the pancakes as she rolled her lower lip between her teeth. “Not all souls get reincarnated. Not all souls have mates. But when two halves of a soul separate under unnatural circumstances, it’s believed that they’ll return to mend what was broken.”

“That’s quite romantic,” I said.

“She saw it on Quantum Leap,” Candi said, rolling her eyes at her sister.

We all cracked up, laughing hard at the absurdity of Candi’s comment. It felt good to spend time with women, to have fun. I spent a lot of time alone, so friendship was one more of those things I’d missed out on the over years.

“We’ll help you figure it out,” Mindi promised, taking a stack of finished pancakes and loading them onto a plate before bringing it to me at the counter. “The LaFeys are pretty powerful witches. We can do a lot.”

“That reminds me,” I said quickly, pulling out my phone to check for emails from Hugh. “I spoke with the curator of the Monster Museum in Dublin a little while ago, and he mentioned that there was a journal in his possession that belonged to the LaFey family.”

I almost cried in relief when I saw several messages, complete with attachments, filling the screen of my inbox.

“I don’t doubt it,” Candi said. “Our family is ancient.”

I clicked through the messages until I found the one containing the journal entries, then opened the files and turned my phone to the women who'd gathered behind the counter in front of me.

"Hugh said that the entry stated the LaFeys helped with the ritual at the tomb," I said, my pancakes forgotten as I watched the women scroll through the documents.

"I'll be damned," Trudi whispered as her gaze raked over my phone screen. "That's Grandma Judi's handwriting."

"And spelling," Candi said with a soft laugh. "The woman was a genius but good lord, it was like she'd never even heard of a dictionary."

"Looks like it's time to call in reinforcements," Mindi said, pulling out her own phone and tapping quickly over the screen. "Grandma Judi's gone, but two of her daughters are here. Let's see if we can get you some more information."

My heart leapt in my chest at the idea that I might actually be able to learn more soon, from people who were close to the situation. With a renewed sense of hope, I dug into my pancakes, my stomach reminding me that it had been far too long since I'd last eaten.

"We'll make sure they come out," Candi assured me, giving me a wide smile. "This is fun! It's like Scooby and the gang."

"You're the dog," Trudi and Mindi said together, turning their grins toward Candi.

She responded with two raised middle fingers, and I laughed around a mouthful of breakfast.

I knew I still had a long way to go, but somehow I also knew that my new friends

were going to help me solve the mystery of Victor Galt and Claire DuBois.

Chapter Ten

~Claire~

“This is incredible,” Becki LaFey said softly as she inspected the carvings on Victor’s sarcophagus. “I always thought Mama made the story up.”

“So did I,” Bonni agreed, staring wide eyed around the tomb. “I mean, she never told us their names, but I can’t count how many times we heard the tale of the vampire prince who loved his mate so much that when he lost her he gave up everything to avoid having to live without her.”

“How did the story end?” I asked.

“The way the great ones always do,” Becki answered with a shrug. “His soul mate returned, and the spell was fully broken with true love’s first kiss.”

“Well there you go!” Candi said happily. “Crack open this cold one and give your mummy a big old smooch.”

“I’m not kissing a mummy,” I hissed, rolling my eyes at her. “And Booker said it was dangerous to open the coffin to a vampire that hasn’t fed in two hundred years. Plus, we don’t know that I’m his soul mate returned.”

“There’s an easy way to find that out,” Bonni insisted. “We can do a past life regression hypnosis for you.”

“That could be dangerous, too,” Trudi warned.

“Why?” I asked. I wasn’t even sure I believed in hypnosis, but if we could learn the truth without me having to worry about swapping spit with an almost corpse, I wanted to at least hear about it.

“You could end up with two complete sets of memories,” Trudi explained. “Or more, if you’ve been reincarnated multiple times. That kind of regression can tear your mind apart.”

“Is there maybe a third option?” I asked, not at all liking the sound of going insane. “Like seal the tomb back up and move on to a less dangerous job? Perhaps shark diving or lion taming.”

“Oh, I always wanted to go shark diving,” Candi said. “They make it look so fun on Shark Week.” She turned to Mindi, her hands moving excitedly. “Do you remember the one where Dicky was laying on the raft shaped like a seal, and they dragged him behind the boat? That was awesome. That kid is crazy.”

“Can we focus, please?” Becki asked. “Claire, of course you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. But I’m an empath and I can assure you that if we go through with the hypnosis, I won’t allow any memories to hurt you. I can guide you gently enough to focus on the past we want, and if it’s not there, no harm will come from trying.”

“And if it is?” I asked cautiously.

“If it is, and you do find yourself with memories of now and then, they will be the memories from the same soul. It will not adversely affect your mind.” She walked over and put a gentle arm around my shoulders. “But it will be up to you. And whatever you decide, we will help you figure this out.”

So my options were hypnosis, kissing a mummy or letting the mystery go. None of those seemed like any fun at all, if I were completely honest. But I was stuck. If I continued to dream of Victor, I'd always wonder if they were actual memories fighting to come forward, or if it were all in my imagination. And would that drive me any less crazy than knowing the truth?

While we'd been waiting for Bonni and Becki to come to the island, I'd read through the rest of the messages from Hugh, and Victor seemed like he was a really great guy...or, vampire.

He helped mortals build businesses in Canada, offering loans and labor to assist them. Everything ever written about him, from human or monster perspective was nothing but reverent and appreciative. Even though the normals hadn't even realized that Victor was a vampire. At least, I guess, until the end.

The last email had contained a drawing of Victor Galt, and I couldn't even say I was surprised when I opened it to see the man who had been in my dreams since I'd arrived at Isle Aux Monstres.

I was struggling with the fact that deep down...I wanted to be his soul mate. And if that wasn't how this story was to end for us, I wasn't sure I was ready for it to end at all.

"Why don't you sleep on it?" Bonni suggested. "None of us is going anywhere, so we've all the time in the world to decide."

"I'm not sure Colton—"

"Colton will do whatever Trudi tells him to do," Candi interrupted me, shaking her head.

While that was probably true about a lot of things, I wasn't sure it extended to paying me to sit around and think about my own involvement with the island tomb.

Colton had hired me to excavate and investigate. Not to insert myself into some weird love story.

The smart thing to do would be to move everything in the tomb to Dublin and let Colton have his island back without the threat of a supernatural monster wreaking havoc with the weather.

"I think you'll find that my husband is just as much of a sucker for a good love story as anyone else," Trudi added with a bemused smile. "I'm quite sure he'd be willing to build you a home and let you move to the island indefinitely if you wanted him to."

"I highly doubt that will be necessary," I said. Then, before I could chicken out..."Let's do the hypnosis."

Becki insisted that we go back to the resort to do the hypnosis, saying that she wasn't sure what might happen if we tried inside the tomb. We could only guess that Victor's consciousness was out there somewhere as the witches had planned, and we knew he could control the weather, but were unsure what else he was able to manipulate with his mind.

"How does this work?" I asked once we were alone in my room. "Count backward from ten or something, right?"

"No, it's not even anything as complicated as that," Becki assured me. "Lay down on the bed and close your eyes."

I did as she asked, feeling incredibly foolish about the entire situation. I didn't even believe in past lives, so what the hell was I doing here?

Chasing a mystery, I answered for myself. This was exactly what I'd done my whole life. I'd traipsed the Earth in search of information, and this was just one more story I desperately needed an ending to.

"Relax," Becki whispered. "Just let your mind wander. I'll be chanting over you, encouraging things locked away in your soul-mind to come forward. Let any and all thoughts come and go at will. If at any time you need me to stop, tell me and we'll end it. If you fall asleep, that's okay, too. The mind will do what it needs to protect itself."

“Okay,” I said, my voice quivering on that small word.

I let out a long, slow breath, trying to get my heart rate to slow as Becki began mumbling under her breath. I couldn’t make out actual words, and I wasn’t sure she was actually saying any anyway, so it didn’t really matter.

For what felt like hours, Becki chanted, and I breathed deeply, nothing much happening beyond the recital of a to-do list in my head, and random thoughts of how silly I felt going through all of this.

Then, as if a switch had been thrown, silence hit me. Dead silence. No chanting, not even the sound of my own blood rushing through my ears. Just cold, awful, quiet.

I tried to open my eyes, tried to scream for Becki to stop, but I was frozen, locked inside my body.

Was this how Victor had felt all these years? Paralyzed and scared? Knowing he’d done this to himself and regretting it instantly, but unable to break free on his own?

Angry voices invaded my mind, men screaming and thundering down a hallway, dangerously close to me.

“Victor, run!” I yelled, opening my eyes and shoving him from the dining room into the hallway.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me with him, but I wrenched myself free at the doorway to the rear yard.

It took him a moment to notice that I was no longer at his side, and before he could turn to come back to me, I slammed the door between us, knowing that the only way he would be safe would be to offer myself to the mob come to kill him.

“Claire!” he screamed, his fists battering the stone door as if he meant to break through it.

“I love you,” I whispered, pressing my palm against the rock before turning and running into the fray of men who’d forced their way inside our home.

Pain exploded through me as flames from their torches lit my clothes ablaze, my skin sizzled and cracked in my ears, loud enough to drown out my screams of agony.

My eyes widened at the sight of a sword coming down at me...and then there was nothing.

Chapter Eleven

~Victor~

"I remember everything," Claire whispered.

We were once more seated at the dining room table in my old home, as we'd done the night she was taken from me. The table was littered with candles and empty wine glasses, as if a party had just dispersed around us.

"Does that make you happy?" I asked her, praying that she was as pleased to remember me, as I was to have her remember.

"It does," she assured me. "But also sad. Because now there is an ache inside of me that wasn't there before. I miss you. And yet I don't even know you."

"Things will be clearer once we are reunited," I promised her. "When I can truly hold you in my arms again, the past and present will meld, and we will be as we once were."

"But how will I reach you?" she asked, her fingers sliding across the table toward me.

"You know where I am," I assured her, taking her hand in mine and watching as arcs of light danced over our skin. I could almost feel her touch as if it were a real, tangible thing once more. I was ready. Ready to return to her. To be the mate she deserved. "Come to me, Claire. Come to me now."

Chapter Twelve

~Claire~

"Come to me, Claire. Come to me now."

I jumped out of bed and ran out the door, not even stopping to wonder why Becki wasn't in the room anymore before thundering down the hotel emergency stairs until I reached the lobby. When I burst through the doors, I registered a man shouting, but didn't stop to make sense of what he was saying as I rushed out the front doors and hurried into the woods.

Victor's words echoed in my head, a command I couldn't ignore. He needed me and I was helpless to deny his call.

Rocks and twigs tore at the bottom of my feet, but I was too blinded by my need to reach Victor to be concerned with cuts and bruises. My Victor. My beloved returned to me.

Lightning streaked across the sky overhead as the sky seemed to open and rain sluiced down through the trees, soaking me to the skin as I ran, causing the ground at my feet to turn to mud, which frustrated me as it slowed my progress. But finally I reached the tomb and rushed inside.

The coffin sat as it had that afternoon, sealed and quiet, but I could feel Victor inside. Awake and whole once more. I gripped the lid of the sarcophagus, straining to move it aside, my nails snapping and breaking from the force of my desire to break inside.

"Victor!" I screamed, my arms shaking with effort as I struggled to wrench the ancient locks from the sides of the coffin.

Why wasn't he moving? Why wasn't he using his strength to break free?

Finally, the wood around the lock gave way, splintering and shattering, releasing its hold on the lid.

When I finally managed to open the coffin, for a moment I was terrified that I'd been wrong. That his voice in my head had only been a dream, because the body in the coffin surely couldn't be my Victor.

Emaciated, grey, cold. The skin stretched so tight and thin over the bone, it was as if only the skeleton remained. His dark eyes were open, but sunken so far back they looked like inky black pools of nothingness.

My mind went into overdrive, sifting through the memories of past and present Claire, desperately seeking the answer to unlocking my love's torpor.

A kiss. He needed my kiss to wake him.

Lowering my face over the corpse-like body of my soulmate, I pressed my lips against what remained of Victor's mouth, his teeth hard and sharp against my skin.

Then his arms folded around me, holding me in a way that I'd thought he never would again.

And as his fangs sank deep into my throat I came back to myself enough to realize that Booker had been right. It hadn't been a good idea for a human to open the coffin of an unfed vampire.

The memories of two Claires warred inside my head, even as darkness began to close in around me. Present day Claire wanted to struggle, but back then Claire insisted that we'd died for him once, and it would be fitting to die for him again.

In the end, the decision was left to Victor, who held me tightly against him as he drained my consciousness away through the wounds in my throat.

Chapter Thirteen

~Victor~

I came awake slowly, as if from a dream. It felt as though I was aware of my body for the first time in centuries. Confusion clouded my mind and I had to force myself to open my eyes.

And then I remembered.

I remembered everything.

Drifting for almost two hundred years. Claire returning to me.

Claire!

I sat up quickly, looking around the dark tomb for my soulmate. She had been there. She had broken me free of the torpor I'd inflicted on myself all those years ago.

And then another memory. One that caused my heart to seize in my chest. I'd bitten her. Drank from her. Drained her.

I climbed out of my coffin and stared at the love of my life crumpled on the stone floor. She looked exactly the same as the last time I'd seen her in life. Beautiful, delicate with thick lashes and shining hair, But now she lay motionless and so pale her skin seemed to glow even in the darkness surrounding us. Crouching to my knees at her side I gathered her into my arms, weeping as I held her body close to my chest.

My hand slid over her throat, and I could feel a faint and stuttered pulse beneath my fingers. I jumped to my feet, holding her tightly as I ran out into the night, desperate to find someone that could help us.

The witches, the vampire or the shifter. One of them surely had healing powers that could rectify what I'd just done.

"Help me!" I screamed, running into the hotel with Claire still clutched in my arms.

For a moment, the man at the desk just stared at us, his mouth dropping open as his gaze raked over us. And then he picked up his telephone and yelled into it for further assistance.

In moments, the shifter I'd felt from the tomb ran into the room, skidding to a stop when he saw me.

"Victor Galt?" he asked.

"I am," I agreed. "Please, we need a physician. She's dying."

A woman rushed in behind him, followed by two more women and the vampire. They all stopped, as the shifter had done, but then one of the women, the one with fiery hair, rushed forward and pulled Claire from my arms.

I snarled at her, but the vampire sped forward and knocked me back, responding with his own growl.

"Back off!" he shouted. "We're helping her."

"Someone should get him some pants," the red-haired woman said, nodding toward me though her gaze never left Claire as she slowly hovered her palms over my

beloved's chest. "And we're going to need blood. A lot of it. Trudi, get to the mainland hospital."

I watched in complete shock as one of the dark-haired women popped out of sight immediately. I'd heard of powerful witches that could travel at the speed of thought, but I'd never seen such a thing.

"Have I killed her?" I asked, frozen in place as I watched the witch stare down at Claire.

"She's not dead," the woman answered. "But it's not good."

"Sir?" I turned to see the man from behind the desk holding out a robe to me. I felt my brows furrow in confusion, then looked down at myself to see that I was standing in the room completely naked. The clothes I'd been buried in apparently having rotted away over the years.

"Thank you," I said, taking the strange, white, towel-like thing and pulling it on, tying the belt around my waist.

The witch suddenly pressed her hands firmly onto Claire's chest, causing the unconscious woman to begin coughing and spasming against the floor.

I moved to stop her, but was impeded by the vampire, whose arms closed around my waist and held me back.

"What are you doing to her?" I roared, fighting against the man restraining me.

"I'm duplicating the blood cells left in her body," the witch explained. "If she doesn't get more blood in her she's going to lose brain function. What the hell did you do to her?"

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“It was an accident,” I said, tears pricking my eyes as I watched the love of my life writhing on the floor, knowing that this time I was the one who had put her life in danger.

“The monster inside took over,” the vampire whispered, finally releasing me. “You’ve been in torpor for centuries. It wasn’t your fault. But you need to let Candi work now if you want to save Claire’s life.”

“What if he turns her?” the third woman asked, kneeling across from the red head who could only be her sister, they looked so similar.

“He can’t,” the vampire said. “All of the blood in his body is hers. By time the vampirism spreads through the cells enough to infect anyone else, it will be too late.”

“Booker, can you turn her?” the woman asked, looking at the vampire.

“She is mine!” I yelled, taking a step forward but finding my way blocked by Booker once more.

“Touch her and die,” he growled, his eyes flashing with anger. “Mindi is mine and you will not go near her.”

“The testosterone in here is a little thick,” the dark-haired woman said as she popped back into view, her arms laden with a box and a shell-shocked looking woman clinging to her elbow.

“Doctor Mann,” the shifter said, stepping forward with his hand outstretched to the

woman. “Thank you for coming.”

“I didn’t exactly give her a choice,” the witch said, rolling her eyes as she set down the box. “What’s going on here?”

The doctor joined the two witches at Claire’s side and waved them off as she examined my mate.

“She’s stable,” the doctor said after a minute. “Quick thinking, Candi, with the blood duplication. I’d like to move her to a room and hook up a transfusion.”

“I want to stay with Claire,” I pleaded.

“The doctor will need privacy to work,” the shifter, Colton apparently, said firmly.

“I will update you as soon as Claire has made progress,” Doctor Mann promised me. “Right now she needs blood and rest.”

“He’s her soulmate,” the red head informed the doctor firmly.

“I see,” Doctor Mann said, nodding once. “Then yes, young man, you will need to join us. Your presence will aid her recovery. However, you will not get in my way or impede me in any way.”

“If you hurt her,” Mindi added, glaring at me, her eyes flashing with power. “I will kill you myself.”

“I will never allow harm to come to her again,” I vowed.

The three witches stood next to each other, staring at me for a moment until Mindi nodded.

“So mote it be,” they said in unison, sealing the vow between us with their magic.

“Come along,” the doctor said, motioning for me to pick Claire up and follow her.

“We have much work to do.”

Claire was not nearly as cold as she’d been when I’d brought her to the hotel, and I clung to that as hope that she would recover. Cradling her gently to my chest, I followed the doctor and Colton down the hall to a room and stepped inside to sit beside my mate while the damage I’d done to her was fixed by these strangers.

If Claire woke up and never forgave me, it would be no less than I deserved. But as I watched blood began to pump into her arm through a needle and tubing, I prayed that she could find it in her heart to give me another chance.

Chapter Fourteen

~Claire~

I woke up slowly, my body warm and comfortable as if I were wrapped in an electric blanket on a snowy winter night. But it wasn't a blanket, because the thing I was burrowed against had arms that were holding me firmly and hands that were gently stroking my skin.

Not wanting the moment to end, I allowed myself to drift a while longer, reveling in that space between sleeping and wake where it's dark but peaceful. And then the memories returned, and I sat up violently, clawing at my neck as if to attack the vampire that had tried to kill me.

"Claire!" A man yelled, his voice deep and smooth as he grabbed at my hands, pulling them away from neck and holding them firmly in strong fists. "Darling, wake up. You're having a nightmare."

I blinked open my eyes to see Victor staring at me, wide eyed and clearly scared as he held my hands in his, keeping me from scratching at my skin again.

"Victor," I whispered, tears stinging my eyes as two sets of memories drifted forward, reminding me of both first times I'd ever seen his face. The young, handsome man sitting before me now, and the shriveled, half-dead corpse that had woken and attacked me.

"I will go if you wish," he offered. "The doctor suggested that our bond might help

you recover. But I understand if you do not want me here.”

“Bond?” I asked, looking down at our joined hands and watching in amazement as sparks of light flashed over our skin. “Are we bonded?”

“No,” he answered quickly, squeezing my fingers gently until I looked back up into his face. “No, I would not ever take that from you without permission. But our souls recognize one another and being close will always help you.”

“Okay,” I said, rolling my lower lip between my teeth as I pulled one hand free to tug the edges of the robe I hadn’t remembered wearing closed over my chest. “Am I a vampire now?”

“Another thing I would not take from you without consent,” he assured me. “The witch and the doctor were able to fix what I’d done to you without the need for vampire intervention. You are human and free.”

I thought about that for a minute as silence stretched between us. Had he just taken his liberties, it wouldn’t be a decision I would have to make. The memories of being a vampire all those years ago were fresh in my mind as if they’d just been my truth, and sadness permeated every part of me to know that I’d lost that. But my current, human memories were terrified of losing everything I’d worked so hard for in my present life.

It was completely understandable why Trudi had been concerned about unlocking back then Claire’s memories. I didn’t feel as if I were losing my mind, but I wasn’t sure how I could balance what the old me wanted and what the present me needed.

Victor was my soulmate. That was undeniable. The physical manifestation of that was still dancing in arcs of electricity between us. We belonged together. We completed each other. And while I’d only had twenty-six years of this life, the

previous twenty were also inside of me.

“Are you alright?” Victor asked, pulling me out of the warring memories to bring me back to the actual present. “Do you wish me to leave?”

“I want you,” I said, my words clipped as they hitched on a breath lodged in my throat. “Right now. I want to be one with you Victor.”

“You’ve been injured,” he reminded me, his eyes squinting as if in pain. “And you are dealing with much confusion and fear right now. I believe I’ve hurt you enough for one evening.”

“You haven’t hurt me,” I insisted, propping my head on my fist and staring at him. “I’m fine. I’m right here and you’re right here and we’ve waited forever to take this step. That was our downfall two hundred years ago. Please, Victor, I’m done waiting.”

“Claire,” he said, my name like a prayer whispered on his lips. “We have forever to build a new life together. Once this step is taken, it cannot be undone. You will be mine. And I yours. Forever.”

“Don’t we already belong to one another?” I asked, fear clawing at me as I realized that maybe he was the one who didn’t want to reclaim what we’d once had.

“You are the heart of me,” he assured me, pulling my hand to his lips and pressing a soft kiss along my knuckles. “I have loved you for centuries and will continue to love you until the end of the time. That much will always be true.”

“Then prove it,” I whispered.

Victor’s hand cupped my jaw, his thumb gently stroking across my cheek as his gaze

searched mine. I wasn't sure what he was looking for, but he must have found it, because he finally leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine.

Our robes were discarded in a flurry of hands, my body so on fire for his touch that I didn't even bother to ask why we'd been wearing them in the first place. I didn't actually care in that moment. Now that I had him here, I just wanted him inside of me. Wanted to complete the bond that should have been consummated centuries before.

Victor trailed hot, wet kisses over my throat and across my chest, pausing to sip each nipple between his teeth before continuing his descent down my body.

I arched into him, my fingers tangling into his hair as he dragged his tongue across my stomach and over my mound before settling between my thighs and flicking over my sex.

My body convulsed as he pressed his face against my folds, his mouth sucking at my core, tongue flicking over my clit until I thought I might combust with need for him.

"Victor, please," I whined, clawing at his arms to urge him to come back up and take me. "I need you inside me."

"As if I would deny you anything," he whispered, kissing his way back up my body to settle his hips between my thighs.

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Victor shifted forward slightly, barely breaching me at all, but causing me to gasp loudly at the touch. He was thick and hot and I ached for him in a way that I didn't understand. Neither back then Claire nor present day Claire had ever experienced this kind of touch before, and we desperately desired it in a way that I never could have imagined.

"I don't want to hurt you," he whispered, pausing with just the tip of his erection still stretching my opening.

"You won't," I promised him. "We're done hurting each other."

He slid forward firmly but gently, breaking through my innocence in one fluid motion that left me breathless and clawing at his back.

The electricity dancing across our bodies grew brighter, blue and white sparks dancing in the air like fireworks as we moved together, our hips meeting each thrust, pleasure dancing up my spine already, fueled by the knowledge that we were finally joining in the way that the universe had intended for us.

Over and over again he slammed into me, sending wave after wave of passion through my nerves until I feared I might pass out from my need to release the coiled pleasure burning inside of me.

His own movements became stilted, his rhythm faltering as he altered the angle inside of me and my orgasm exploded in a literal flash of light, my screams tearing from my throat as every muscle in my body seemed to try to contract and release in unison.

Victor's cries of pleasure followed mine, his shaft jerking and spasming inside me, filling my channel with his release as he bucked against me.

When he finally lowered himself over me, his lips frantically peppering kisses over my face and lips, the light show around us dissipated, leaving us sweating and panting together in the dim light from the lamp across the room.

For a while we lay there in silence, our fingers gently stroking each other's hands, our bodies occasionally quaking with aftershocks, and I couldn't remember ever being happier. Not back then or now. I was complete in a way that I'd never even known I was missing.

"Are you alright?" he whispered after a while, his lips ghosting a kiss against my head.

"I'm fine," I promised him. "I love you."

"And I love you."

That was one thing that back then Claire and present-day Claire would always have in common. Our love for this vampire was fast, deep and complete. And it would never, ever waver. He was mine and I was his. Through oceans of time, we would always find our way back to each other.

"Was I worth the wait?" I asked softly.

"My darling, you are worth everything."

Chapter Fifteen

~Claire~

"They came for you," she whispered, her fingers clenching tightly over my chest. "They realized who and what you were, and their fear would not allow them to leave until they had blood on their hands."

"We could have run together," I told her, fear gripping me as if I were reliving that night all over again. I hadn't expected her to want to talk about it, at least not yet, but she seemed to need to, and I would always allow her anything she needed. "You didn't have to sacrifice yourself for me."

"They wouldn't have stopped unless they got at least some of what they came for. And I believed we would be reunited," she said, lifting her head and staring down at me with wide eyes that were clouded with unshed tears. "And now we are."

"I will never allow harm to come to you again," I vowed to her, lacing my fingers with hers. "I would sacrifice myself a thousand times to save you."

"Maybe we could stop dying for each other and just live our lives together instead," she suggested, blowing out a sigh before settling against me once more.

"I think that sounds like a good idea," I agreed, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel wonderful," she said, her tone full of surprise. "Energized. Like I've spent my

life living in a fog and it's finally lifted. I thought I knew what happiness was but now I realize that I've never felt anything like this before."

I thought about that and realized she was right. I'd never felt as whole as I felt with Claire in my arms. It had never occurred to me that by not bonding with her all those years ago, I'd allowed us both to exist with incomplete souls. Now that we were really and truly one it was as if I were seeing a sunrise for the first time. Though I was quite sure that no rising or setting of a ball of fire in the sky could compare to the beauty of my darling Claire.

"When will you turn me again?" she asked suddenly, jarring me from my own thoughts.

"How jumbled are your memories right now?" I asked in return, my lips frowning with concern.

"Very," she admitted. "I remember eating pancakes this morning, yet also remember chasing down and draining deer with you in Canada. It's...odd."

"I would imagine," I agreed. "Where my consciousness drifted for centuries, allowing me a continuation of learning and memories, you are being bombarded by a past and a present that do not coexist. It would be best, I believe, if we were to wait." I held up a hand to stop the protest I could see forming on her lips. "Just for a little while as you adjust and recover."

"I'm not a patient woman," she grumbled, sliding in closer to me until she was practically laying over my entire chest.

"You never were," I assured her with a chuckle. My fingers roamed over her naked back, and I found myself blinking back tears. It was overwhelming to be back with Claire after all this time. And while we would both have much to adjust to and

recover from, I knew that we would be doing it together.

Forever.

Just as we were always meant to do.

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Epilogue

~Victor~

Five Years Later...

“Claire!” I called, already ripping into the box that had just been delivered. “The new shipment of texts have arrived from Dublin.”

“You’re such a nerd,” she teased as she thundered down the stairs from our loft into the main area of the research facility.

“Says the woman who kept the tracking information on the homepage of her phone,” I reminded her.

“I just wanted to ensure they weren’t lost.” She grinned at me as she joined me at the table. “Hugh was quite reluctant to ship these over to us, and it would have been catastrophic if something had happened to them.”

She wasn’t wrong. The tomes in the box had been discovered at a dig site in Egypt and the carbon dating that had been performed indicated that they were over five millennia old, which meant they’d been hidden away by monsters even before the tombs of Saqqara had been built by the norms.

It was an incredible find, and while my wife was ecstatic to have the opportunity to study them, I knew that she was saddened to have not been the one to discover them in the first place.

She'd mostly adjusted to our new life together, the strain of her memories colliding between past and present had faded, and she was able to more easily move between them and identify which was which. But once she'd finally convinced me to turn her, her inability to walk in the sun meant that she was no longer able to work in the field as she had loved to do.

She claimed it was a small price to pay to ensure that we would be together forever, but I knew she missed the physical work of her old job.

We'd established a research facility about two hundred miles north of Fayshore, which provided us the privacy and isolation that I craved but kept us close enough to our friends that Claire was not without people who cared for her...other than me, of course.

It wasn't the same as getting her hands dirty and discovering new secrets, but it kept her involved in the work that she loved, while allowing us to remain together and safe.

I hadn't intended to join in her career, but after she began to pull me in with questions and teased me with mysteries, I couldn't help but get excited about it myself. So now we were a team, and archaeologists all over the world, human and monster, would contact us for assistance.

It was the kind of life I'd never expected to find. Even before I lost Claire that horrible night in Canada, all those years ago, I don't know that I'd ever been as happy as I was now. Working with ancient manuscripts and artifacts gave me a connection to the past, while living my new life in the present.

"Oh my," Claire said softly, drawing my attention back to her.

She'd pulled a tablet from the box and was running her fingers over the stone carvings, her eyes wide.

“Hey, you’re skipping ahead,” I complained, standing up to look over her shoulder. I wasn’t nearly as good with translations yet, but I was getting better. “Oh my. Is that...”

“Yeah,” she whispered, her finger paused on a symbol we’d only seen once before but was impossible to forget. “Hugh is going to be quite peeved when he realizes what he’s let out of his possession.”

“He’ll get it back,” I reminded her. “But what does it say?”

“He came with feathery wings, horns like stone upon his head,” she read, moving her finger up to start at the beginning again. “Heat like the sun in his touch. And when I asked his name, his voice roared like the Nile at flood...Lucifer.”

We stared at the tablet in her hand, I think both of us not quite able to believe what we had. Legends of such a thing had been prevalent even the first time I’d walked the Earth, but it had seemed no more than stories invented by monsters.

Yet here it was, in the hands of my beloved...an actual Angel Tablet.

“How pissed are you right now?” I asked her, my tone thick with humor.

“I’m too excited to be angry that I didn’t discover it,” she admitted. “But yes, I’m a little pissed.”

“I love you.” I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Let’s get to work and perhaps we can figure out how to wander the desert at night so you can see inside the tomb.”

“Every time I think I can’t love you more,” she said, her voice thick with tears as she set the tablet on the table and turned to step into my arms. “You say something so incredibly romantic that I just melt.”

“No more tears,” I whispered, reaching up to wipe moisture from her cheek. “Not for us. Not anymore.”

I moved my hand to tilt her chin and gently kissed her lips.

For almost two hundred years I’d locked myself away, waiting for her return. And being with Claire now was more magical than anything I’d ever imagined. Even more incredible than the discoveries we’d poured through together, our love was a story made in Heaven.