



Sexual Appetites of Vampires

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Category: Romance, Adult, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Lara is about to find out if vampires do exist.

Lara Bennett only plans to take a few minutes of Michael Valaine's time—just enough to ask him a few quick questions about his family's strange heritage. After all, a snowstorm is about to bear down on the area, and she fully intends to be on her way before the first snowflake falls.

But nothing goes as planned.

For starters, Michael Valaine isn't just any man—he's drop-dead gorgeous, the kind of man who makes Lara's pulse race the moment she steps through the door. Worse, he claims to be a vampire. She's torn between thinking he's playing some twisted game to get rid of her or, worse, that he might actually believe what he's saying. Either way, Lara knows one thing... she needs to get out of his house and fast.

Then the storm hits—hard. Blinding snow traps her inside, leaving her no choice but to ride it out in the unsettling presence of a man who might be crazy... or might actually be a vampire.

Just as Lara starts to question her own sanity, she sees Michael's eyes flare an unnatural, menacing red. His lips curl back into a feral snarl, and she catches the gleam of sharp, descending fangs.

Lara's about to find out, firsthand, the information she came looking for... the sexual appetites of vampires?

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CHAPTER 1

It was much too dark, the night much too cold, and Lara too unfamiliar with her surroundings. She hurried along the street, the cold air nipping at her nose and cheeks. She pulled her red, black, and white plaid scarf up over her chin determined to find what she was looking for. The shops on Main Street were near to closing in the quaint Village of Mull. She scanned the street signs as she got close enough to read them. The librarian had told her that the book shop was off Main on Juniper. She should have waited until morning, but she was anxious to gather what information she could as quickly as possible, since a major snowstorm was headed this way. She wanted to be home on the Jersey Shore before it hit, tucked away in her nice cozy cottage where she could start on the chapter she'd been invited to write.

She had been surprised when Vera Duluth, an executive editor with a top publishing company in New York city, had called—not e-mailed—but actually called to speak with her in person. Vera Duluth had this wonderful idea for a book and was searching for writers who would embrace the topic with their hearts and souls. And Vera believed Lara would be perfect to write the chapter on vampires.

Vera claimed to be an avid fan of Lara's successful blog *I'm Not That Gullible, or Am I?* To Lara's surprise her blog had become popular practically overnight. She had tens of thousands of followers who religiously read and posted comments daily. The unbelievable had always fascinated Lara and research had been another interest of hers. Add to that her endless curiosity, though her dad called her his nosey one, and it was inevitable that her blog was born.

While the invitation to write for a major publisher sounded inviting, the premise of

the book was another matter. It wasn't a chapter on simply vampires Vera was looking for, but rather a specific area concerning vampires, and the chapter title said it all...Sexual Appetites of Vampires.

Vera had gone on to explain how she was hiring topnotch writers for each and every chapter of the book titled Sexual Appetites of Unearthly Creatures: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact? Vera had also intimated that if the book did half as well as she suspected it would, they would then talk about a contract for single title books from Lara.

It was an enticing offer, though she was doing quite well on her own and wasn't even sure if she would have the time to write a book. With her various social media accounts growing daily, advertises were coming out of the woodwork to be on her site, publishers included. Sales for the e-books she had compiled from her various blogs were doing great, enabling her to do some traveling to research the unbelievable and provide a variety of interesting topics.

In the end, it wasn't the fact that Vera had made her a generous offer to write the chapter or the possibility of more books to come that had her accepting. It was when Vera had dangled the enticing fact that the Village of Mull in upstate New York near the Canadian border was believed, as legend claimed, to have been founded by vampires that had actually sealed the deal.

Lara certainly didn't believe in vampires, but the information she could get from such a place would give her tons of material for her blog. And with the publishing house footing the bill for her trip, how could she say no?

She also figured that somewhere buried beneath the folklore she would find some beguiling tales about seductive vampires, providing her with material for the chapter. To Lara it was a win-win situation. The only problem was that the winter weather was refusing to cooperate. Vera had hired a car service to deliver her to the Village of Mull and the driver would return for her in three days. With the approaching storm, it

had been necessary to change it to two days, and she had wasted most of today at the library with Madge, the librarian who had never heard such a ridiculous tale that Mull was founded by vampires. After scouring the shelves for any hint of such a myth, she had given up and had cajoled the temperamental Madge into confiding that the village had worked hard at burying the insane tale, fearing they would suffer a never-ending string of crazies descending on them. They much preferred to keep the quaintness and quiet of their small town. Lara had promised, crossing her heart, that she had no interest in marking the Village of Mull as a haven for vampires. She simply was looking for some information on vampires that she could not find anywhere else. Madge had told Lara that Desmond, the proprietor of Treasures of the Mind Book Shop on Juniper off Main might be able to help her. But Madge had also and, with some reluctance, suggested that Lara speak to Michael Alexandru Valaine, a descendent of the original founders of Mull.

Lara was relieved that the next street sign she came upon read Juniper. She turned down the narrow alley to find four shops, all but one closed, and it was the bookshop. She hurried to the light from inside reflected on the cobblestone street. Her hand grabbed the doorknob just as the sign on the door turned to closed.

She was not one to give up easily, so she tapped on the door's windowpane.

Surprisingly, the door opened, though not surprisingly the distinguished looking white-haired man said, "I'm sorry, but I'm closed for the day."

"Please, I have one day left to find the information I'm looking for and leave Mull before the snowstorm hits," she said with a smile and a bit of desperation.

"How can I say no to such a beautiful woman," he said and swept his hand back, inviting her in.

She stepped into the shop with a, "Thank you," and pulled off her white gloves to rub

the chill from her cold hands.

“Knit gloves won’t do here,” he scolded with a smile. “You need ones that will stand up against the cold. Come with me. You can sit by the fire while I make you a cup of tea.”

“I don’t want to impose,” she said, though she would kill for a cup of hot tea right now.

“Nonsense, you’re freezing,” he said and with a gentle hand to her back guided her to the rear of the small shop where a black cast iron stove radiated heat. He assisted her to sit in one of the two wing-back chairs that sat opposite each other in front of the stove. Then he opened the stove doors, inserted two logs from the nearby basket that was almost empty and instead of closing the doors, placed the fire screen in the opening. “Warm yourself, I’ll only be a moment.”

He didn’t have to tell her twice. Lara yanked off her white knit hat and ran her hand over her long auburn hair to chase away any static before slipping out of her red wool jacket and draping it over the back of the chair. She stretched her hands out and sighed with pleasure as the heat from the roaring flames licked away the cold. If only she could slip out of her mid-thigh black boots and do the same with her cold toes, though she was glad she had worn her gray leggings. They had, at least, kept her legs somewhat warm as did the black swing sweater she wore over a white tailored shirt.

She took the opportunity to glance around the shop as she continued warming her hands. It was smaller than she had expected. Two walls held floor to ceiling shelves filled with hardcover books, all old, not a new one among them. Chest-high, double-sided shelving ran down the middle of the store, dividing the small space into two aisles. Next to the door was a large window and in front of that sat a desk with all the usual technical paraphernalia for ringing up a sale, along with a laptop.

That made her reach into her oversized harvest gold leather purse and fish for her cell phone. “Drat,” she mumbled when she saw she still had no bars.

“If you’re looking for cell phone service, it’s practically impossible to find around here,” the man said, returning with a silver tray in hand. He placed it on an antique, pie-crust table next to the empty chair, then lifted both and placed the pair between them. After asking her how she took her tea and fixing one for her, and then one for himself, he sat opposite her and said, “I’m Desmond Hargrove proprietor of this shop and you are?”

“Lara Bennett,” she said, extending her hand.

Desmond shook it and smiled. “You’re warming up, that’s good.”

Lara determined his age to be somewhere in his late sixties. He was tall, over six feet, slender, and she had no doubt he could still set a woman’s libido jumping. She could only imagine how the women must have responded to him when he was younger.

“Now what may I do for you, Lara?”

“Tell me you have books about the vampires that founded this town.”

His brow knitted for a split second, and then he smiled like a father about to placate his child. “Now what does a lovely woman like you want with vampires?”

“Research for a book.”

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“Ahh, yes, vampires are all the rage now, but I’m sorry to tell you that vampires are truly nothing more than myths.”

“I’ve always found that myths have some basis in fact, and I was hoping to find something different that could help me. Like the origin of the myth that the Village of Mull was founded by vampires.”

“That is an easy one to answer. It seems that gypsies were camped in the area when the founding family, the Valaines, arrived and began settling the place in 1784. The tale goes that Thaddeus Valaine chased them off the land and that the gypsies cursed Thaddeus to forever walk the earth as the undead and feed off the blood of his kind. Tales...nothing more than tales to frighten the ignorant.” He stood, placing his teacup on the silver tray. “I believe I have a book on the settlement of the Village of Mull, which mentions something about the gypsies, if you’re interested.”

“Very much so,” Lara said. “Would you also have any books on vampire legend or lore?”

“I do,” Desmond said and went to scan a couple of shelves before returning and handing Lara three books. “These two vampire books are the best I have of the lot. The others repeat much of what has already been written.”

The books smelled musty with age, and she carefully scanned the delicate pages. She knew with a quick glance that she would take all three as long as they weren’t too pricey. “How much for the three?” she asked.

“The book on Mull is old and hard to come by, though certainly not in demand. On

the other hand, there is a demand for the vampire books.” He robbed his chin. “A hundred dollars should do it.

A bit steep, but Lara felt they were essential not only to help write her chapter, but the vampire books would also give her social media material. “Sold,” she said before she could give it more thought.

“I’ll ring them up for you while you have another cup of tea,” Desmond said and refilled her cup before taking the books from her and walking to the front of the store. “It is a shame you don’t have time before you leave to speak with Michael Valaine. He has amassed a unique library on unearthly creatures, and he is a direct descendent of Thaddeus Valaine. Unfortunately, he doesn’t see anyone unless they have an appointment. He is a very busy and very private man.”

It was the second time that name was mentioned to her, which naturally got her curious. She had such limited time before she was to leave, though perhaps she could arrange a phone interview with him once she was home. When Desmond returned with her books and receipt, she said, “I have kept you long enough, Mr. Hargrove.”

“Desmond, please, and it is getting late. I’m sure Martha warned you that she closes the bed and breakfast for the night as soon as Main Street shuts down. Spring and fall are a different matter, but we don’t get many tourists in the winter since we’re not near any ski resorts. And when a winter storm hits, it’s not easy to get in and out of Mull.”

“Then I best be on my way before the storm hits.” Lara stood, slipping into her jacket and tugged her knit hat down on her head, and over her ears, before putting on her gloves. She thanked Desmond again for all his help and the hot tea and was out the door after a peck on the cheek from the old charmer.

Main Street was deserted, the streetlights turned low, and the night so eerily quiet that

it had her quickening her steps as she made her way to Martha's Bed & Breakfast. She tripped on her own feet and a chill crept through her when she thought she caught sight of a shadow moving along the street opposite her. Was it the cold, dark night that had her jittery, the talk of vampires, or the complete silence?

She was startled when she thought she spotted it again, and this time she knew she wasn't wrong. Someone was following along with her on the opposite side of Main Street. Her heart began to beat harder as she hurried her steps. Two more blocks to the bed & breakfast or was it three?

Hurry, Lara, hurry!

Her skin prickled with fear and her breathing quickened.

She yelped when she saw the shadow dart across the street so fast that it blurred before her eyes. He was on the same side as her. She would have to pass him, but would she see him? Was he hiding?

She stopped abruptly when she realized she was in front of the bed & breakfast. Two blocks, it had only been two blocks. She sprinted up the few steps and tore open the door. Once instead, the door closed, she threw the lock.

"I was just going to have a look outside for you. Desmond called and said you were on your way not to lock you out. He's such a sweetie and a hottie as well," Martha said with laugh.

Lara smiled, feeling relieved and somewhat silly. Everyone she had met from Martha to the waitresses who had served her lunch and dinner at the local eatery, and to Madge at the library and Desmond had told her how safe and quiet this town was.

"I know your car service doesn't arrive until twelve tomorrow, but I was wondering if

you could possibly vacate your room by nine in the morning?” Martha asked. “When a major snowstorm is expected, I always close up the place and go stay with my sister and her family. Don’t want to be marooned alone here for days. Gets too boring.”

“Not a problem,” Lara said thinking it an unexpected opportunity. “And don’t worry about breakfast. I’ll grab something at Molly’s Place.”

“You’re an angel, thanks so much. Now can I get you anything before bed?”

“No thanks, I’m fine. Goodnight, Martha,” Lara said and headed upstairs to her room. Her mind was racing with ways to carry out her plan that had suddenly struck her out of the blue. If she called Michael Valaine and asked to see him, he could refuse, but if she simply showed up at his door, how could he turn her away? She would explain that she wouldn’t take much of his time, a few questions that’s all and maybe she could even get a quick look at some of his unique books on vampires.

She hurried into flannel bottoms and a thermal top and was about to hop into bed when she was struck with the urge to look out the window that faced Main Street. She tried to stop herself, but the impulse was too strong to resist. Was it that she wanted to see if the shadow still lurked there?

Lara turned away from the window before she reached it. “You’re being silly,” she scolded herself. Then suddenly, as if an unseen force took hold of her, she rushed to the window and pushed the curtain aside.

The distorted shadow stood in the middle of the street, and she swore that it was looking up at her window—at her. As much as she wanted to, she couldn’t look away, couldn’t move, and then in the blink of an eye it vanished.

As soon as movement returned to her limbs, she ran to the bed, jumped in, and pulled the covers up to her chin. Whatever was the matter with her? She had never been

frightened that easily even as a child. Her curiosity had always proven stronger than her fears.

Why did the shadow frighten her?

Nonsense, this was all nonsense. Besides, tomorrow she would be done with the Village of Mull and on her way home. The shadow could find someone else to stalk.

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Lara yawned, turned on her side, and closed her eyes, but she didn't turn out the light.

CHAPTER 2

Lara stood staring at the house and smiled. If she didn't know any better, she would think that she had been swept away to the British countryside to a stately manor home. She had to admit it was stunning especially with the wooded hills framed behind it, though its gothic veneer did make one pause before approaching it.

She had been at Molly's Place, a quaint little eatery whose omelets were to-die-for, by nine and had asked around for a ride to Valaine's home. Molly, who wore a perpetual smile that was contagious, had expressed how it must be serendipity since her husband Joe was headed that way and could drop her off.

So here she was on Michael Alexandru Valaine's doorstep at ten o'clock in the morning with the hope that he wouldn't turn her away. Having to be back in the village by twelve gave her about two hours, at the most, to interview him and with a bit of luck and get a look at his vampire book collection.

Lara no soon as knocked on the door than it opened. A stocky, elderly woman in a brown wool coat stepped out, yanking her hood up and over her short, white curly hair.

"Go on in, he's expecting you, not that he's happy about it. Can't say I blame him. You can thank Molly for Mr. Valineagreeing to see you. She called ahead, which is what you should have done, and she explained that you were a nice young woman who needed only a moment of his time. So, make sure it's only a moment you take.

He's in the library, up the steps to your right, the door on the left." The elderly woman shook her finger at Lara. "Then make sure you're gone before the snowstorm hits." With that she yanked her gloves from her coat pocket, slipped them on, and walked down the path.

Like she would want to be stuck here, Lara shivered at the thought. She turned to the large oak door that stood ajar and with steps born of let's-get-this-over-with more than confidence stepped into the house.

The large foyer captured the eye with its highly polished wood and numerous framed, painted landscapes. She turned to close the door, but it had already clicked shut. She left her suitcase near the front door and hurriedly followed the elderly woman's directions and took the few steps to her right to find herself in a narrow hallway with two doors...one to the right and one to her left.

The one to her left stood ajar and she knocked on it as she eased it open and called out, "Mr. Valaine? Lara Bennett here. I'll only take a moment of your time." She pushed the door open further and stepped inside. It was a magnificent room, walls of bookcases and every shelf overflowing with books. A fire burned brightly in the fireplace and overstuffed chairs urged you to grab a book and have a seat. Lights on the various side tables created ample lighting, though shadows lingered in corners—and one moved.

Lara jumped and watched Michael Valaine emerge from the shadowed corner, slowly as if the darkness was a lover that refused to release him, clinging possessively to his arm, his shoulder, his waist, until she had no choice but to let go.

And Lara couldn't blame her...he was a gorgeous hunk of a man. Tall, dark and handsome didn't do him justice and didn't fit, though he was tall, at least two maybe three inches over six feet. Not dark, though paler skinned and not handsome—drop-dead gorgeous. Any woman would kill for his perfectly arched dark brows and long

lashes, not to mention his eyes. Dark brown, no intense black, no lighter...oh, forget the eyes what about his lips? Slim and lusciously kissable. Dark hair, shoulder length. What man wore his hair even a bit long today? Confident ones, her thoughts whispered. And damn if his smoky gray sweater didn't display just enough muscle to entice. Gorgeous, hunky and wealthy. What was she thinking? This wasn't a social meet, this was business. She was here to find out about vampires.

Recalling her reason for being there, Lara got right to the point. "I am terribly sorry for showing up without an appointment, but I have limited time and from what I've learned around town you may have information I'm looking for."

Michael Valaine walked over to an oversized chair by the fireplace and pointed to one. "Sit and tell me what you want from me, Ms. Bennett."

"Lara, please," she said and sat in the chair or actually sunk in it. It was so soft and comfortable that she could imagine herself sitting there for hours lost in the pages of a book. "I've been contracted by a New York publishing house to write a chapter on vampires for a forthcoming book and with the myth that vampires settled Mull, my editor suggested that this was a good place to start."

He didn't say a word; he simply stared at her with those dark eyes that unnerved.

Lara continued with some unease. "Whatever you can tell me of the myth or if you have your own unique take on vampires due to your family being the founding family of Mull, I'd appreciate anything you have to offer."

Michael sat on the sofa opposite her and crossed his legs, running his hand down the crease in his black wool trousers. "Exactly what do you want to know about vampires?"

"Anything you can tell me," she said eagerly.

“With limited time before you must leave, Lara, I suggest you be more specific.”

The way her name rolled seductively off his lips raised goose bumps along every inch of her flesh and she had to stop herself from shivering. She forced a smile and said, “Their appetites.”

“For blood or sex?”

If he intended to intimidate her with his blunt response, he was in for a surprise. “Both,” she said and leaned forward in the chair, “and with as much detail as possible.”

“An easy answer—ravenous. Vampires thirst for blood is as ravenous as their hunger for sex.”

“And you would know this how?” she asked, certain he was doing nothing but humoring her.

“I’m a vampire.”

“Very funny, Mr. Valaine,” Lara said not at all amused by his tactless response.

“Michael,” he said, “No, being a vampire isn’t funny, voracious for human blood isn’t either, and then there is the ravenous appetite for sex. Not human sex with passable climaxes, but sex that engages the couple down to the very core of their being. Where everything is felt beyond what is imaginable, where a climax is not the end, but the beginning.”

Lara slipped off her red wool jacket and loosened her scarf around her neck, feeling suddenly much too hot and—much too sexually charged. And too sexually curious. “And how do you know this?”

“I am a vampire,” he repeated.

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A sudden chill replaced the heat that left Lara in a flash. She braced her arms across her chest not just for the warmth, but feeling the need to protect herself. Was Michael Valaine so angry with her for showing up unannounced that he was making her appear a fool for asking about vampires or was he simply nuts? Either way she thought it was best that she leave sooner than she had planned.

“You see, Lara,” he said continuing, “a vampire can have sex the human way and make it more than enjoyable for his partner and adequate enough for himself, but when he truly wishes to satisfy his sexual appetite then he must find a willing woman who doesn’t mind being—bitten.”

“And made a vampire?” she asked, finding the conversation ridiculous, yet herself curious.

“When bitten by a vampire you become one is a fallacy as are many other myths associated with vampires.”

“Like a willing woman? Doesn’t a vampire simply take what he wants?” Was she really playing into this game of his? It certainly made for good material for her chapter, but was it also feeding his absurdity? Fantasy?

“Don’t humans take what they want? There are good and evil in all races and creatures, though vampires continue to be portrayed far differently than they truly are. But then it’s not likely that a vampire will scream discrimination.”

He spoke with such conviction that it was hard to imagine that he was simply making fun of her. If he wasn’t that would mean he was insane. What the hell had she gotten

herself into? A chill so deep ran through her that her whole body quivered.

Michael was out of his chair in an instant, his hands reaching out around her to grab her jacket behind her and drape it over her shoulders. Then his long fingers went to her scarf and gently adjusted it around her neck.

His potent scent hit her when he leaned over her and stole her breath for a moment. When she was able to breathe again, she thought she would have been wiser not to. His scent was so richly sexual that she felt herself grow moist between her legs.

She almost jumped when his finger grazed her chin. Had she expected it to be cold like a vampire's touch? It was warm like any human's touch, though it did leave a tingle in its wake.

"Do I make you nervous, Lara?" he asked after returning to his seat.

She slipped her jacket on, letting him know she was ready to leave. "Should I be? Do you intend to bite me?"

"Only if you want me to," he said with a sly smile.

Lara stood. "I think I got what I came for. Again, I am sorry for arriving unannounced?—"

"But you didn't."

She was startled for a minute and then realized what he meant. "Yes, Molly did call and let you know that I would be arriving."

"No. Last night when I caught your scent—a most intoxicating one—I followed you. I knew then you would come to see me."

Her eyes turned wide, and she stepped behind the chair. Had he been the shadow last night? Her stalker? A vampire? She seriously needed to leave, and right away. “Well, I have, and now it’s time for me to leave.”

“But I haven’t even begun to touch on sexual appetites of vampires.”

He knew the title of her chapter. No one knew it except Vera Duluth, and she had sworn Lara to secrecy. This was just too creepy even for her. She had met plenty of people who believed themselves creatures of the night. Some were just plain nuts while others played at it. She wasn’t sure if Michael Valaine fell into either category. And that was even more frightening.

“The need for sex can border on complete madness when a vampire is in need of it.”

Madness. Now there was something she could agree with. Michael Valaine was stark raving mad.

“But that type of aching hunger, a need to devour, is what vampires try to keep at bay for it comes with consequences. So, we keep ourselves well satisfied with sex with willing human women of which there is an abundant supply.”

Lara finally had it. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You really expect me to believe this bullshit. I get it. You’re annoyed with me for showing up unexpectedly, and so you decide to play a little game with me. See if I frighten easily. Well, you chose the wrong woman, buddy. But I do have to thank you for giving me some great material for the book. Now I’m leaving and will never darken your already dark doorstep again.”

“What were you expecting to find when you came here?” he asked accusingly.

His dark eyes grew so intense that Lara thought they glowed black. “Certainly not a

grown man who claims he's a vampire."

"So you're upset because you meet a vampire who can answer your questions about sex?"

Lara rolled her eyes. "Really? You're going to continue to claim that you're a vampire. A blood-sucking, unearthly creature that is ravenous when it comes to sex."

"I thought you came for the truth."

"The truth would be nice, but it seems that you are intent on continuing your little game. I, however, do not wish to play."

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That sly smile of his surfaced again. “I guarantee that you would enjoy playing with me, Lara.”

“That’s it, I’m leaving.”

Michael stood. “I’ll see you to the door.”

“Not necessary, I know the way out,” she said, buttoning up her jacket.

“Just because I am a vampire doesn’t mean I’m not a gentleman,” he said and stepped aside for her to pass.

“A gentlemen vampire, now there’s an oxymoron if ever I heard one,” Lara said as she scooted past him, eager to get out of the house and as far away from Michael Alexandru Valaine as she could get.

A phone’s jarring ring startled Lara as she entered the foyer and made her way to the front door.

Michael picked up the phone on the side table behind the vase of a beautiful winter floral arrangement. “Michael Valaine. I see. No, not to worry I will see to the matter. Thank you for calling and see that you take care in this storm. I hear that it is to last at least two days. Good. I’m glad to hear that. My regards to your family.”

He sounded so civilized and so normal that Lara grew more annoyed. Why had he treated her in such a ridiculous fashion? Why hadn’t he simply told her that he wasn’t interested in speaking with her and send her on her way?

He approached her slowly, almost predatorily. And she was damn glad she was leaving.

He stopped next to the door, taking hold of the handle. “That was Martha. She has calls for her bed & breakfast forwarded to her sister’s place when she’s not there. Your car service called and cancelled. The snow has already started and with predictions worse than they first thought, they won’t endanger their driver or you. It looks like you’ll be my guest for the duration.”

“Hell no! I’ll find someplace to stay, but it won’t be with you,” she said and shoved his hand off the door to swing it open. Her heart dropped along with her mouth at the sight of the blizzard-like conditions. She could barely make out what was in front of her, since the snow was falling so heavily.

Michael pulled the door closed and turned the lock. The click sounded so final, as if a jailer was locking her in and there would be no escape. She was trapped with a sexy hunk of a man who thought himself a vampire. It sounded more like the setting of a romance novel than real life. But she was no swooning heroine.

She looked Michael Valaine straight in those dark eyes of his and felt like a fool saying, “Tell me you’ve been playing me and that you’re no vampire.”

“Oh, sweetheart, if only I could.”

His eyes began to glow red, his lips curled back, fangs dropped down, and Lara fainted.

CHAPTER 3

Lara wrestled herself awake. Part of her was eager to wake and the other part screamed, don’t open your eyes, don’t open your eyes! She struggled with herself a bit

longer and finally her eyes sprung open and as she did, she bolted up to find herself on a bed. She quickly backpedaled until her back hit the headboard. Her heart beat wildly as her eyes scanned the fair-sized bedroom and, to her relief, found herself alone.

Images of blood-red eyes and fangs assaulted her, and she cringed at the memory. He couldn't be. He just couldn't be.

Michael Alexandru Valaine couldn't be a vampire. Vampires did not exist. They were creatures produced by fear and overactive imaginations.

Then why the glowing red eyes and fangs?

"Get control of yourself, Lara," she scolded aloud. There's a reasonable explanation for everything, she silently reminded. Perhaps he has a set of retractable vampire fangs that seemed to be the all the rage with vampire enthusiasts. Whatever it was, she was going to have to find out. After all she was stuck here with him until the snowstorm ended. Then she was going to get out of here so fast that he wouldn't even see her leave.

A thought hit her, and she jumped off the bed and ran to one of the two windows in the room and pushed aside the beige, floor-length drapes. Her shoulders slumped as she rested her brow against the cold pane. She hoped that perhaps there was a chance she could trek it out of there before the snow got too deep, but with several inches already on the ground and blinding snow, it would be foolish of her to even attempt it. She was stuck here for the duration.

She turned and noticed that her small suitcase sat on the tufted-topped, green bench at the end of the bed. She also noticed that the room appeared as if it had been prepared for a visitor. A fire crackled in the fireplace, a crystal carafe of water and a single glass sat on a silver serving tray on top of the lone bureau, and a lovely, long purple

robe lay draped over the beige chaise that sat perfectly positioned for enjoying the fire.

She shivered. Had it been his intentions for her to stay all along? But he had walked her to the door, had all intentions to let her leave, and then the phone call, the snow—and those damn fangs. She shook her head.

Another tremble racked her body. She had no choice but to go find him and discover what really was going on. He could not be a vampire; vampires didn't exist. She intended to keep repeating that over and over, hoping it would ease the knot that was growing ever tighter in her stomach.

She slipped out of her red jacket and plaid scarf and lowered herself to the bench, grasping both against her chest. It just dawned on her that he had to have carried her here to this room, which no doubt was on the second floor or perhaps third? She was no petite woman. She stood a good five feet six inches, taller in heels, which she loved to wear, and was one hundred and forty plus pounds. She wasn't all hard muscle, though she was toned since she loved to walk the hiking trails in the park near her home. But carrying her two or three flights, and in her jacket, had to have been a chore—not for a vampire.

She shook her head, hoping to shake some sense into it, or shake her doubts out.

“Reasonable explanation, reasonable explanation,” she mumbled. “You just have to find it.”

And she could do that. It was what she did, hunt down the unbelievable and show how there was a reasonable explanation for it.

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“So don’t sit here in fear, get moving,” she scolded again, though didn’t move. It wasn’t that she was a fearless person, because there were times fear could be a good thing and stop you from doing the stupidest things, but having been raised in a cemetery had probably given her the edge over others when it came to fear or perhaps it was that it had given her—a boatload of courage.

Determined, she tossed her jacket and scarf on the bed and slipped out of her high-heeled boots. She zipped open the front compartment of her suitcase and took out a pair of grey flats. If she had to run, she’d have a better chance in flats than heels.

She shook her head again. How did one exactly run away from a vampire, especially when there wasn’t anywhere for her to run? And there was the fact that he knew this house and she didn’t.

“Reasonable explanation. Reasonable explanation,” she reminded again and slipped her shoes on.

Lara felt a moment of panic when she went to reach for the doorknob. What if he had locked her in? She hurried to turn the knob and sighed with relief when it opened easily. She poked her head out first and looked left to right and spied nothing but an empty hallway. She stepped out and wondered which way to go. Right would take her to the closed double doors and left was probably where she would find the staircase, a more logical choice. But something told her it would be wise to get the lay of the land so to speak, find out about the rooms on this floor before making her way downstairs.

The hallway was fairly wide. Between the wall on the door on the left and the double doors at the end of the hall sat an ornate wood console table. A crystal vase dressed in

a winter floral display similar to the one in the entry foyer sat on top. An ornate carved bench sat on the wall across from it, though a few feet down. And more landscapes decked the walls along the hall and had Lara stopping to glance at them. Art lights above the paintings cast sufficient light for her to study the detail. She had thought something looked familiar about them and after a moment she realized that the paintings were of the Valaine property. There was the long driveway up to the place with woods to either side, the hills behind the house and where the house itself sat, but without the house. The paintings were of the land before the house was built.

Lara scrunched her eyes to see the artist's name, but it wasn't clear enough for her to read. She wasn't familiar enough with art to tell the age of the paintings, but she had to admit they were beautiful and so very detailed.

She kept her steps light along the Oriental-style runner that graced the dark wood floors and peeked in the room that sat to the right. It was a bedroom, smaller than the one she was in, though decorated just as lovely. The other door was locked, and she wondered why. What secrets did it hide?

Her hand hesitated when she reached for the knobs on the double doors at the end of the hall, but she once again warned herself that it was best she became familiar with the layout of the house. She turned one knob and inched it open slowly, then cautiously peeked inside.

Low lighting and flickering flames from the fireplace cast faint light on the large, dark room. She had to step further in to make out what was in it. She stood a few feet inside the room and turned in a circle looking it over.

Everything was dark from the intricately carved four-poster bed with a grey velvet canopy to the tall, wood armoire more heavily carved than the bedposts and headboard. Nightstands sat to either side of the bed, though they were grey metal and of modern design. Grey and black damask drapes covered the windows, blocking any

view, and the lights were a mix of modern and antiques. A modern grey chaise sat at an angle to the fireplace similar to the way the one was situated in her room.

The room appeared as if someone could not quite decide which century he wanted to live in.

The small table beside the chaise held a single crystal wine glass and decanter with what looked like red wine. Lara assumed the room was Michael's, which had her wondering just what was in the decanter. She took cautious steps over to the table, itching to lift the top and take a sniff, yet worried about what she would find.

She reached out.

"I don't think that flavor will be to your liking."

She spun around and her heart slammed against her chest. Michael stood with a black towel wrapped around his hips, his dark shoulder length hair damp and tousled. His torso, so finely sculpted with muscles, stole her breath. The towel hung so low on his hips that she half expected to see a hint of dark hair peeking out. He obviously had just finished a shower, though she had not heard a sound coming from the closed door in the corner of the room that now stood open, a shaft of faint light spilling out of it, illuminating his perfect and almost completely naked body.

She told herself to turn away, but it was impossible to take her eyes off him. The more she looked, the more she realized that her body was finding his body mighty appealing, so much so that she felt a tickle in her clitoris. She drew in her breath—a mistake—his scent so fresh yet so earthy that she felt her legs go weak.

Weak legs. No man had ever turned her legs weak, but then he wasn't a man—was he?

She blinked, hoping— if only for a moment—to vanquish his tempting image and gain some sanity. When she opened her eyes, he was standing right there in front of her, and so close that their bodies almost touched.

He lowered his head, his lips drifting toward hers and she told herself to run, get out of there, get away from him, but her limbs wouldn't move. She was frozen there, incapable of escape. The closer his lips came, the harder her heart beat, the tickle in her clitoris turned to a hum and she stupidly wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

“Your scent overpowers,” he whispered as his lips drew closer, nearly resting on hers. “It is like no other I have ever known, and I want to get lost in it.”

He didn't smell so bad himself, as a matter of fact, she had never known a man's scent to be so appealing.

“You're going to be mine, Lara, I will see it done.”

She felt as if she was wrapped in strong, loving arms and yet he hadn't touched her. She never felt so protected or so loved—loved? She shook her head. What was she thinking? He didn't love her. She would be his to command with one single bite.

Bite? Did she really believe him a vampire? It went against common sense to think such a ridiculous thought. It also went against common sense to be standing in the bedroom of a near naked man she barely knew.

With reluctance, she stepped away from him. It annoyed her that she could be so attracted to him when they had barely met. And that she could even give credence to him actually being a vampire. She felt as if she had fallen down the rabbit hole.

Under the circumstances, meaning he was nearly naked and possibly a vampire, it

was foolish to remain in the room with him. She stepped around him to leave and his hand caught hers.

She gasped, his skin was so cold it shocked, and then suddenly he warmed, and he tugged her closer to him. She didn't stop him, though she doubted she could. His grip was gentle, yet his immense power radiated through her, and there was no escaping it.

"Stay," he whispered, lowering his head and kissed her ever so lightly.

She felt her breath catch in her chest. The kiss was a mixture of cold and hot and it was like a flame sparking dry tinder, heat surged through her, shuddering her body and settling an aching need between her legs that she hadn't felt in a long time.

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“Let me make love to you.”

His sexy whisper and another kiss, a little harder this time, enticed and invited, and she almost collapsed against him in surrender. But somewhere inside her sanity prevailed and she forced herself to once again step away from him.

She stared at him for a moment, fighting back the word that rose to her lips. Somewhere inside her part of her screamed for her to stop, don't say it, while another part of her urged her to spit it out, and she did. “No!”

Her eyes widened at his response.

“Why not? I can feel your desire. It burns hot inside you.” He scrunched his brow. “It has been a long time since you have been with a man.” He scowled. “He disappointed you. I would never disappoint you, Lara. I would always satisfy you.”

Heat stained her cheeks, but it was from embarrassment, not passion. “Stay out of my thoughts,” she said and tried to pull away from him, but failed. His hand felt like an iron shackle around her wrist. And she wondered if he did it to demonstrate his power, to show her that there would be no escaping him.

“Let me go,” she demanded.

His hand released her. “We should talk.”

“Not here,” she said, hurrying to the door.

“The living room,” he said, stopping her. “Take the stairs at the end of the hall down to the foyer. It’s the first room to the left of the front doors.”

She nodded and rushed out the door and down the hall. His kiss lingered on her lips, and she swiped her hand across them, but it didn’t do any good. Her lips pulsed and ached, as if missing his taste, as if hungering for him.

What disturbed her the most, though, was how he had read her mind. That he should know that her last sexual encounter had been anything but satisfying upset her. Worse, though, was him saying that he would never disappoint her, he would always satisfy her.

Her whole body flushed at the thought of what sex would be like with him? Could he satisfy her that easily? She had always struggled to reach orgasm and when she had one it had never been as satisfying as her friends claimed them to be. No one had ever rocked her world or had come close to it. She had wondered if it was her fault or the fault of inept lovers. There just always seemed to be something missing, something she failed to grasp—something that lay just beyond her reach.

Now that he had planted that suggestion in her mind, she couldn’t shake it. It lingered there tormenting her, whispering over and over, reminding her of the pleasure he could bring her.

Lara didn’t remember taking the stairs down to the foyer, but once there she stopped and took a breath. Stay in control, she silently warned herself. Keep your wits about you. Don’t surrender your will. She couldn’t, however, help but wonder what it would be like to surrender to Michael, but to surrender would mean to trust and how did one trust a vampire?

She entered the living room, a fairly large room with a mix of contemporary furnishings and antiques. The colors were a blend of gray, black, beige, silver and a

splash of blood here and there. Red. Red. The color was red, not blood. She turned her attention to one of the four windows. Black and beige drapes were drawn open and the falling snow clearly visible, though it was the only thing outside that was visible.

Snowbound. How long? Recalling the forecast, the snowstorm was expected to last two days, and then there would be digging out from the storm, which meant she could be here possibly three or four days. Lara felt herself pale. Could she survive that long with a vampire? Listen to yourself, Lara. A vampire? Was Michael Valaine really a vampire? It was a question she was definitely going to have to settle for herself, though the alternative wasn't promising. If he wasn't a vampire, then he was a nutcase who thought himself a vampire. She didn't know which one was worse to be stuck in a snowstorm with.

Lara paced the room, never feeling so trapped in her life. There was little recourse left to her, though her father had always told her that once you waded through the bullshit, you'd find at least an ounce of truth. She needed to start with the truth. Was Michael Valaine really a vampire?

Lara jumped when she saw him standing in the doorway. He had changed to black jeans and a black V neck knit sweater. His black hair was no longer damp and was pulled back away from his face, defining his handsome features even more.

A thought struck her then and she voiced it. "Why did you shower?"

"You don't want to know," he said entering the room and going to a black lacquer cabinet and opening it.

She watched him uncork a bottle of red wine all the while wondering what it was that she wouldn't want to know. Could he have gone on a hunt for food? Did he keep food stored here? Or was she his next meal?

Lara jumped when he suddenly appeared in front of her, offering her a glass of red wine.

“I make you uncomfortable,” Michael said with no apology.

“You think?” she said, accepting the much-needed wine.

“Why don’t we get to know each other better?” he suggested and pointed to the grey sofa.

“How much better?” she asked, taking a seat on the couch, though remaining perched on the edge in case she had to run. Run where, idiot, she silently admonished herself. You’re good and stuck like a prisoner in a cell. The comparison unnerved her, and she shivered.

“I’m not going to bite you if that’s your worry—not yet at least,” he said with the hint of a smile.

She shook an accusing finger at him. “You may smile and appear as if you’re joking but trust me when I tell you I don’t think it’s funny.”

He sat in the chair close to where she sat on the couch, though he leaned forward, looking almost as if he was about to pounce. “A little levity may help to lighten this unusual situation.”

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Lara quickly drew back even though he wasn't that close to her, she felt as if his move had brought him nearly on top of her. His musky scent drifted around her like an alluring aftershave that men wore to bait and hook a woman. Only his scent was lethal, add to that his intoxicating dark eyes and he would have a woman surrendering in no time.

"Tell me about yourself," he said.

A sense of loss descended over her as he eased back in his chair, and she wondered if he manipulated her emotions. Didn't vampires manipulate people as a way of controlling them? But then she knew some human males who were talented manipulators. She hadn't fallen prey to them, and she wasn't about to fall prey to Michael Valaine—vampire or not.

"Let's start with you. When and how did you become a vampire?" she asked.

"It's in my blood."

"Very funny. Vampires are bloodless creatures."

Again, he moved forward fast, though this time he reached out and took hold of her hand. "And yet I am warm just like you."

Lara snatched her hand out of his, thinking how he had felt cold and hot when he had kissed her, and yet he felt so warm now. She was relieved when he moved away from her to settle comfortably in his chair. She didn't like admitting it, but his touch and that damn enticing scent of his stirred her libido and, worse, he knew it. But there

would be no surrender, no matter how much her clitoris begged for more.

“One nail in the coffin, excuse the pun,” she said with a grin, “in proving you’re not a vampire. You’re warm-blooded.” His sly smile had her saying, “Don’t tell me, a vampire misconception?”

“Vampires aren’t warm-blooded creatures, but we have the ability to draw the warmth of the person we touch back onto them.”

Naturally, her need to wade through the bullshit had her saying, “Prove it.”

“Give me your hand.”

Why did it feel as if he was saying let me bite your neck? And, of course, she felt compelled to do so, though she wondered if it was her own stubborn curiosity or his magnetism that provoked her.

She slid to the edge of the couch and extended her hand to him. As soon as he took hold, she gasped. He was ice cold, and the shock sent a shiver racing through her. In the next instant, his hand turned warm, and he was rubbing warmth back into hers with his lean, strong fingers. His thumb pressed firmly into her palm while his fingers massaged the back of her hand. She hadn’t realized how tense her muscles had become, and she closed her eyes as her whole body began to relax.

His touch gradually turned slower and lighter until his thumb faintly caressed the palm of her hand in an ever-expanding circle. It was when a soft sigh escaped her lips that her eyes finally shot open, and she yanked her hand away from his and sunk back against the couch. He not only skillfully manipulated; he skillfully seduced.

“As for when and how I became a vampire,” he said returning to her original question, “I was born one.”

Her eyebrows shot up questioningly.

“Vampirism began as a curse, morphed into a condition and eventually became a way of life.”

“Now that’s a new one to me, and it certainly makes for an interesting theory.”

“It isn’t as if vampires can shout it from the rooftops. We need to be selective as to who we invite into our group.”

“Invite not bite?”

“I know all this is difficult for you to comprehend since you were raised with the belief that vampires are pure evil that we don’t have a single redeeming quality about us.”

He had caught her interest. It was such a different take on vampires, one she had never heard and one that seemed possibly plausible, and so she asked, “Then you’re not an evil creature?”

“If I am pushed too far, I am far more deadly than the average human.”

“How far is too far?”

“Why? Do you plan on pushing too far?” he asked with another teasing smile.

“No plans, but my curiosity can irritate to the point of being pushy.”

“I find your curiosity quite appealing and your natural beauty even more alluring. You do realize how rare your auburn hair and green eyes are, don’t you? Not to mention your pale, silky complexion and exquisite bone structure. And your perfect

body tempts not only the man in me, but the vampire as well and that is not easily done. Many men must pursue you.”

She wasn't sure if she should be flattered or frightened, though she had to smile at his last remark. “Pursue me?”

“My age is showing.”

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“Exactly how old are you?”

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty-nine,” she smiled, “until the end of the month. Now it’s your turn.”

“I am the grandson of Thaddeus Valaine, the founder of Mull.”

Lara did a quick calculation in her head. “That would make you over two hundred years old.”

“Around that.”

“And here I thought you weren’t a day over one hundred.” She didn’t know why she joked about it. Perhaps it was because she was still trying to wrap her head around him being a vampire. Or perhaps she had actually fallen down a rabbit hole or maybe that night she was returning to the bed and breakfast she had slipped on a patch of ice and was in a coma in the hospital and now living in an alternate reality. Both explanations seemed more logical than the present one...that this was all real.

“I like your sense of humor.”

“As you said, levity may help.” She took a breath before asking, “So the myth about Mull is not a myth after all?”

“No, it’s not.”

Rabbit hole, coma, or reality, she didn't know which, but information was what she needed if she was to reach any kind of sensible conclusion. "The book about Mull I got at the bookshop says that it was gypsies who placed the curse on your grandfather, but research shows that gypsies didn't arrive in America until the early 1800s."

"My family is originally from the area now known as Romania. It was there the gypsy cursed my grandfather. Once he realized what he had become, he knew he had to leave Romania and find a place where his family could live in relative peace. The New World was the perfect place for him to start anew and see that his family was prepared for what was to come as well as future generations. You see what no one knows about the myth is that the gypsy didn't only curse Thaddeus, but all of his progenies as well."

"I thought vampires couldn't reproduce, but since you were born a vampire, I suppose that's another misconception."

"You'll learn much about vampires in the few days you're here, including their sexual appetites."

Not from first-hand experience, she was about to say when in the blink of an eye he was out of his seat and standing in the doorway.

"I have matters I must see to. Make yourself at home. If you're hungry the kitchen is down the hall, first steps to your right. If there is anything in particular that you'd like, just ask."

How about an earth-shattering orgasm? Where the hell had that thought come from? Sex hadn't been something that had been on her mind lately, but since meeting Michael Valaine it had suddenly become a constant. Sex was, in a way, the reason she was here.

She finally managed to say, “Thank you.”

Michael gave a nod and turned to leave when he stopped, turned back around and with a hint of a smile said, “I will make certain you have multiple orgasms.”

CHAPTER 4

Lara sat staring at the empty doorway, her cheeks burning bright red. “Idiot, idiot, idiot, he can read your mind.” She placed her wine glass on the table and rested her face in her cupped hands. “This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening,” she mumbled. “I’m trapped in a nightmare, and I need to wake up. Wake up now, Lara, do you hear me? Wake up now!”

She raised her head, and her shoulders slumped as she looked around. “Of course it couldn’t be that easy. All right, since this is real, you need to protect yourself. How is the question?”

She sprung off the sofa. “His library.” There hadn’t been much money when she was growing up, and she had loved to read as had her dad. He always told her that if she wanted to know anything about anything, the library was where you would find your answers. Of course, once they had gotten the Internet, it had become her chief source of research. But right now, that wasn’t available to her and from what Desmond had told her Michael had a substantial collection of vampire books.

With quick steps, she hurried out of the living room to the library. She entered without worry that Michael would be there. Taking care of matters wouldn’t have taken him to the library, though she did wonder where he had gone off to and why. She paused a moment to warm her chilled hands in front of the fire. The fireplace was early Victorian, ornate and ostentatious, but that would be expected in a home built in the early 1800s. She had read, this morning while having breakfast at Molly’s Place, the book about the founding of Mull. It mentioned that the Valaine house had been

built in the early 1800s.

A sudden thought had her turning with a huge smile. If the library was that old, she could only imagine the literary treasures it held. But first things first, she silently admonished herself. She was here to look for books on vampires.

To her surprise and delight, she discovered that brass plates marked the topic for each shelf. She got busy reading each one, keeping in mind that she didn't think she would come across one marked vampires.

After the lower shelves revealed nothing, she climbed the sturdy library ladder that ran along a brass rod. It was when she moved slowly along to the middle of the wall of shelves that a brass plate caught her eye...Unearthly Creatures.

She couldn't help but smile and think that it was no little coincidence it should bear the title of the book she was connected with. She reached out and ran a finger along the spine of each book while perusing the titles. One immediately jumped out at her...The Life of a Vampire.

The embossed cover had faded with time and the edges were worn. She searched for the date of publication and her eyes widened when she found it...1875. There was no author's name, only edited by Samuel Bidford and it had been published by Bidford & Sons, Willington, NY.

She opened it and read the brief Forward.

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You might ask why a reputable publishing house would dare publish such nonsense... *The Life of a Vampire*. It is the belief of this publisher that any work that provides insight or reveals truths should not only be published, but widely read. Vampires, you say, though, I say no mythical creature should be ignored. Has each such creature sprung from only the imagination or is there a small kernel of truth to each?

We, as a rational society, cannot scoff at unearthly creatures as if they are nothing but myths if we wish to protect ourselves against evil. We must examine the improbable and ascertain for ourselves if such strange phenomenon exists.

This is why I chose to publish *The Life of a Vampire*, for you to judge for yourself and reach your own conclusions. Naturally, the author remains anonymous for obvious reasons, though I must say that he appeared nothing more than an average man to me. What he wrote, however, will leave you wondering.

Lara eagerly, though with a bit of trepidation, turned the page.

I am a vampire.

She drew a quick breath. Those were the exact words Michael had said to her shortly after meeting him.

Believe what I say or not, it is your choice, though know this...vampires do exist.

She shut the book, her stomach muscles tightening nervously. Had she just gotten the answer she was searching for? Did vampires truly exist? But how had they kept their existence secret for so long? And if she believed Michael, then she would also have

to believe that people could be cursed.

This was becoming much more complicated than she would have ever thought. She had written several blogs on curses after investigating some incidents her readers had written her about, but none had proved valid. All had to do with old beliefs dying hard combined with all too malleable people.

No one was truly capable of cursing another person, and yet...

Lara propped the book on a shelf and continued perusing the section. There were more books on the subject than she could possibly read while here. She would definitely have to be selective, and so she began glancing through the titles that caught her interest. Some she returned to the shelf, their content too common to the myth. Others proved interesting and those she added to her pile, while others were just comical and gave her a good laugh.

As far as sexual appetites went, after a quick perusal of the books and combined with the research she had previously done on the Internet, research seemed to agree with what Michael had said about vampires' sexual appetites being ravenous. But then most normal guys were as well, so to her there was no difference. There was nothing that set vampires apart from human males...except of course for the bite on the neck.

It was another thing she couldn't wrap her head around. How could someone draining your blood be sexy? Then how did she explain her attraction to Michael? Vampire or not, he was a man, a good-looking man—no—a gorgeous hunk of a man. The kind women dream about but are completely out of the average woman's league. Handsome and hunky goes with gorgeous and slim.

She was not gorgeous and slim, attractive and shapely, was even stretching it a little, and yet he had commented on her natural beauty, but exactly what he had meant by natural, she wasn't quite sure. She wasn't one for much make up, since to her, her

pale complexion—when made up—looked like the painted face of a corpse. She usually wore a bare hint of blush and rose-colored lipstick with a bit of glimmer. If she wanted to highlight her eyes, she added massacre, though that wasn't very often. So, what was there about her that interested Michael Valaine?

I want to suck your blood.

She laughed at the more common line in satirical Dracula movies. Her laughter died fast, and she cast a nervous glance around the room. She was alone, the crackling fire the only sound. She worried for a moment that Michael was there and had placed the thought in her head. Vampires controlled like that, didn't they?

She shook her head. She had to get busy reading. The books she didn't finish here and now, she'd take to her room to read before going to sleep.

Sleep?

How the bejesus was she going to sleep when a vampire's bedroom was only a few steps from her door? And why did Michael need a bedroom when vampires didn't sleep? Then what would he be doing all night?

She shook her head. Way too many questions. She needed to start reading and see if there was anything in the books that might help her situation.

Once she deposited all her books on the large square ottoman table between the oversized chairs and sofa in front of the fireplace, she returned to the ladder. She decided to see if there was a section on curses, hoping it would provide some insight into Michael's theory of vampirism starting as a curse.

It took a while, but she finally located the section under spells. It was up high, in a corner, the ladder stopping just out of its reach, almost as if tucked away on purpose.

Lara scanned the titles, squinting to read a few. One struck her interest...Forever Spells. She stretched, reaching out for the book, struggling to grasp hold, but failed. It was just beyond her grasp, so with one arm hanging over one rung of the ladder and one foot planted firmly on another rung, she stretched further out. Her finger almost hooked onto the top of the spine when suddenly her foot slipped off the rung. It happened so fast that she didn't have time to lock her arm tightly on the ladder. She felt herself begin to topple and reached out, trying frantically to grasp anything she could, but connected with nothing solid.

Suddenly an arm coiled around her waist, and she found herself braced against Michael's chest. Her arms instinctively went around his neck, and she shuddered at the possibilities if he hadn't prevented her fall. Then she shuddered again as their bodies seemed to mold and fit together, conforming to each other's contours as if familiar with each other. And then there was his intoxicating scent, one whiff sent her clitoris into overdrive. It tingled, hummed, throbbed, and screamed to be touched.

He pressed his cheek to hers and though cold to the touch, it felt good, since she was growing as hot as Hades.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, his warm breath tickling her ear and sending shivers through her already overstimulated body.

"Yes, thank you," she said, raising her head to look at him, though she should have given it thought, since one look in those dark eyes of his and she wanted to surrender. She froze. A tint of red glowed in his eyes. She quickly turned her head away and realized that they hovered in mid-air beside the ladder. If she had had an ounce of doubt that he was a vampire, it vanished in that instant.

"What book did you want?" he asked.

He sounded so calm, so in control, as if being suspended in mid-air was a common

occurrence to him, but then it was. Somehow, she managed to raise her hand and point.

“Forever Spells?” he asked.

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She nodded and wondered if he would deny her reading it.

In the next instant, she felt them float upward, and he reached out and slipped the book off the shelf.

“An interesting choice,” he said. “Would you like another book?”

Lara shook her head unable to speak. How could she when she was hovering several feet in the air in the arms of a vampire?

“I frighten you,” he said softly as he lowered them down.

She grasped hold of his arm when her feet touched the floor and managed to whisper, “Vampire.”

He smiled. “Yes, the word does say it all.”

She reluctantly stepped away from him, her legs wobbling as she did.

He reached out and once again his arm circled her waist and he walked her over to the reading area in front of the fireplace, though she didn't feel her feet touch the floor once and eased her down to sit on one of the oversized chairs. He went to a cabinet and returned shortly, handing her a glass of red wine.

“Drink,” he insisted.

“Trying to get me drunk?” she asked, attempting to make light of the situation, for

her own sanity, and took the glass, her hand trembling slightly.

“No, I want you completely sober when I make love to you.”

She stared at him in shock, glad she hadn't taken a sip of wine, or she would have spit it all over herself. He was reminding her again that they would not just have sex but make love and damn if it didn't stir something in her. She had long ago lost her virginity—a painfully memorable moment—and since then had had limited sexual encounters, all not only leaving her feeling totally unsatisfied, but completely disillusioned about sex.

After retrieving all her books off the various shelves and placing them on the ottoman table, he sat in the chair beside her. “You should be more careful.”

“I'm trying to be,” she said saluting him with her glass of wine, certain he'd understand the double meaning.

He responded with a slight nod and a faint smile, then said, “This isn't the kitchen.”

She scrunched her brow, then recalled he had given her directions to the kitchen before leaving her in the living room. “I was hungrier for information rather than food.”

“Well, you do have a chapter to write. Perhaps now would be a good time to talk about... sexual appetites of vampires.”

Her curiosity was definitely aroused as was she. Damn, she hadn't been attracted or aroused by a man in ages and now that she finally was, he had to be a vampire. She was treading on dangerous ground here. He wouldn't be generalizing when it came to a vampire's sexual appetite, he'd be speaking from experience. She would know the intimate details of his sex life. She took a sip of wine, settled back in the chair with a

knot in her stomach and said, “Tell me how the sexual appetites of vampires differ from that of human males.”

Michael smiled, a compelling and all too sly smile. “I will try to explain it, though it would be much better demonstrated.”

“What makes you think I’ll have sex with you?” Lara demanded.

“You already want to have sex with me. I can feel your ache; it grows stronger by the minute, and your scent is so robust, so irresistible...your skin hot, your nipples hard and I want to?—”

“Stop it,” she shouted, fearing she would lose control any minute and demand he make love to her. “I will not be caught up in your spell and bent to your will.”

“Isn’t that exactly what human males do, persuade and seduce women? And to be fair, women do the same to men. And isn’t it our sexual appetites that drive us to seduce whether male or vampire?”

“Then what you’re saying is that vampires really aren’t all that different than those of human males. Both are ravenous.”

“Not entirely true, since with a human male it would depend on his age and health whether he was ravenous for sex or not. Not so with a vampire, due to his longevity and vitality, his sexual appetite rarely wanes. However, I think the biggest difference is that not all sexual encounters of humans are satisfying.”

“Are you saying that every sexual encounter you have is satisfying? There hasn’t been one that has displeased or disappointed?” she asked as if she hadn’t quite understood him.

“Yes, that is exactly what I’m saying.”

“And your partner?”

“I would never leave a woman I have sex with feeling anything but fully satiated.”
His brow knitted and he stared at her.

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Lara turned away not wanting him to read her thoughts again and discover how disappointing sex had been for her through the years.

He leaned forward in his chair. “Lara, look at me.”

“I don’t want you listening in on my thoughts. They are private. Mine alone.”

“Your thoughts are easily heard when you speak them so clearly.”

“You mean clear enough for a vampire,” she said, keeping her head turned away.

“Granted, my senses go deeper than the common male, but?—”

She whipped her head back around. “No buts, stay out of my thoughts.”

“Then stop sending them to me,” he said with a bit of annoyance as he leaned back in his chair.

Was she sending him them? How was that even possible? And how did she stop it?

“Why did you agree to participate in this book?” he asked. “You present fact, not fiction on your blog and this editor who hired you is obviously looking for sensationalism.”

His question had mirrored her own when she had taken on the assignment. “My intentions were to find out what I could, piece it together, discard the ridiculous and write what possibly could be, though make it clear that it was nothing but fantasy.”

“And now?”

“That’s a good question. What now? Why did you admit to me that you’re a vampire? It wasn’t necessary. And now that I know...” Her stomach churned waiting for an answer.

“You wonder if I will let you tell the world?”

“It has crossed my mind.”

“It would be a hard sell.”

Lara had to laugh. “You’re right it would be, but it doesn’t answer my question—why did you tell me?”

“That answer is best left for a later time.”

“I would prefer to know now.”

“Not just yet,” Michael said and from the firm tone of his voice, Lara knew even persistence would get her nowhere. “Your lips constantly tempt me to kiss you.”

“Kiss not bite?” she asked, trying to make light of his remark that stirred her in places she didn’t want to think about.

“I would love to bite you.”

He said it with such seriousness that it startled her, and she quickly said, “But you won’t.”

“There will come a time you will want me to.”

“You’re so sure?”

“Very,” he said with such confidence that it made her shiver.

Lara silently questioned the sanity of any further discussion about sex with him. Somehow it always seemed to come back to them eventually making love. And it troubled her that she could easily, though foolishly, surrender to this man. But he wasn’t only a man, he was a vampire. Something she continued to have difficulty believing even though she was seeing proof with her own eyes. And that’s what would stop her...surrendering to a vampire. It wasn’t what she had planned for her life. But then life never quite turned out as you planned it.

However, never in her wildest dreams would she have believed she would not only meet a vampire but give thought to having sex with one.

Needing to get away from the topic of sex completely, she said, “I could use a bite to eat.” She cringed at her choice of words.

Michael laughed. “So could I.”

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That made her eyes pop wide open.

“One of the misconceptions of vampires is that we exist solely on blood.”

“You don’t?” she asked surprised.

“It is our main source of nutrition, but through the years we have evolved, and we can now enjoy certain foods and drink.” He stood and leaned over her to slip her wine glass out of her hand and took a sip. “To my pleasure, wine is one of them.” He sat the glass aside and offered his hand to her. “Come, we’ll get something to eat.”

She eyed him suspiciously.

He stood and leaned down over her, bringing his face much too close to hers. “Or we can remain here and continue to discuss my sexual appetite.”

His lips started to pull back in a smile or was that a snarl? She didn’t wait to find out. She slipped out of the chair and squeezed past him, relieved that he didn’t stop her.

When there was a safe distance between them—though was there any safe distance from a vampire—she said, “I’m starving.” This time she rolled her eyes at her words.

“Never worry, Lara, I’ll see that all your hungers are more than satisfied.”

Lara froze, not sure if shivers were running through her or if cool fingers were stroking her flesh. When she thought she caught a hint of red in his eyes, she quickly fled the room.

CHAPTER 5

Lara stood in the foyer, bent over at the waist, catching her breath.

Keep your distance from him. Keep your distance from him. She repeated the silent litany over and over, whether it would do any good or not was another thing. Suggestive words, blatant or simple touches, faint kisses and those damn dark eyes tinted red sent her into a sexual frenzy capped with a hint of fear.

Dark and dangerous that's what he was, and she had never been one to go for such a man. The type was trouble with a capital T.

She changed her litany. Keep your wits about you. Keep your wits about you.

A cool hand suddenly traveled up her back. She straightened in a flash and backed away from Michael. He was smiling, and she couldn't help but think of the sly Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland—the rabbit hole scenario again—though Michael's smile was not as wide and was much more pleasing to the eye. Still, her situation seemed as surreal as Alice's.

“Keeping your wits about you in any situation is wise, though in this one I would recommend the inevitable...surrender.” He turned away and headed toward the hallway to the far right.

“I told you to stay out of my thoughts,” she said, following him.

“And I told you to stop sending them to me.”

“How do I stop doing something that I don't know I'm doing?”

“Ask,” he said without turning to face her.

They were in the kitchen before Lara could ask him and once there the room caught her by surprise. It was a modern kitchen with the backsplash a blend of white, black and grey tiles, sleek black cabinets, and high-end, stainless-steel appliances. What use did he have for a stove and two wall ovens or a microwave? And what about the fully stocked wine fridge beneath the island snack bar, unless it was stocked with his specific flavor?

“I see my kitchen surprises you,” he said, walking over to the fridge and opening it.

Her eyes widened at the fully stocked fridge, and she tilted her head at him questioningly.

“Appearances,” he said and stepped aside, “help yourself.”

She eagerly rifled through the fridge and whipped together a favorite of hers, a cheese sandwich. She also sliced an orange pepper and was about to sit on one of the steel stools beneath the snack bar when he snatched her plate from her hands.

“Follow me,” he said and walked out of the room, leaving Lara no choice but to follow.

She was glad she did. He took her to a small, cozy room right off the kitchen with four overstuffed chairs grouped around a square wooden coffee table that sat in front of a stone fireplace flanked by two windows. A bottle of red wine and two glasses sat on the table as did a large bowl of apples, oranges, and pears.

He nodded to one of the chairs closer to the roaring flames and waited until she sat, then placed her plate in front of her on the table and took the seat across from her. He poured them each a glass of wine and sat back in his chair, wine glass in hand.

“Have you always been interested in the unbelievable and strange?” he asked.

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“Since I’ve been young, but what would you expect when raised in a cemetery?”

“Cemetery?”

“My mom died when I was young. I hardly remember her. Dad didn’t have any family left and he got along better with nature than people. With no people skills and limited talent, he didn’t have many job opportunities. After my mom died, a friend of hers got him a job as caretaker of an old, private cemetery. It came with a small house on the property, which worked out perfect, since he could take me along with him when he tended the grounds, until I was old enough to attend school.” She smiled. “I got to know most of the residents, as Dad called them, and I talked with them as if they were still alive. I’d even pat the headstones, as if comforting them. It may seem a strange upbringing to some or most people, but I wouldn’t have changed it for anything. My dad and our unique living conditions gave me the courage to explore areas that other people feared and led me to the most amazing and fun career.”

“Your dad sounds like an exceptional man.”

“He was,” she said with a sad smile. “He passed last year while doing what he loved, tending our garden.”

“But he left an amazing legacy...a fearless daughter.”

“I have my fearful moments,” Lara said and sipped at the delicious Pinot Noir.

“Tell me of such a moment.”

“I would prefer you answer a question of mine,” she said, not wanting him privy to any of her fears.

“You want to know how to stop what you don’t even know you’re doing.”

“I purposely didn’t think about that this time. How did you know?” she asked irritated.

“No mind reading this time. Simple deduction.”

“This time, but what of the other times? And how do I stop you?”

“Stop wanting me.”

“Excuse me,” she said, though felt a flush creep up to faintly stain her cheeks.

“You’re attracted to me as I am to you. Your body sparks to life around me and that spark lingers in you never seeming to go away. Mine is more of a fire for you than a spark, though once we make love, I would venture to guess that yours will burn as hotly as mine. With your thoughts lingering on such intimacy between us, it makes it easier for me to hear your thoughts. While you could try to stop thinking about me in that way, your body won’t and besides, you’re here to learn about my sexual appetites, so it really is an impossible task not to think of me in a sexual manner.”

Lara swallowed what was left of her wine, and possibly her sanity, and refilled her glass from the bottle on the table.

“Tell me why sex has been such a disappointment to you.”

She held on to her composure, though by a thread. “Tell me why sex with a vampire is always satisfying—wait, let me guess—you place a woman under your spell?”

“You watch too many vampire movies,” he admonished with a playful shake of his finger at her.

“I admit it,” she said with a grin. “Vampires, werewolves, zombies, any unearthly creature movie, and I’m right there to watch it.”

“Then you need to put aside all your preconceived notions when it comes to vampires. We don’t cast spells on unsuspecting women and bend them to our will.”

“But you can sense when a woman is attracted to you and use your acute senses to play on it.”

“So a vampire’s sex radar is more highly attuned than the average human male. That doesn’t make us predators. Our highly developed senses allow for more beneficial and satisfying sex for both parties. As you’ve learned yourself, I can sense your attraction to me, can feel what your body aches for, which also means I can sense if I’m satisfying you. Not every woman likes the same thing when it comes to sex. A vampire can modify each experience, making it unique and gratifying for his partner as well as himself.”

“Have you ever met a woman whose libido you haven’t stirred?” Lara asked annoyance stinging her words.

“Why? Would it bother you if I had?”

“Why should it bother me?” she snapped.

“I don’t know, but your own question obviously annoyed you.”

He was right. It had and that bothered her even more. He didn’t mean anything to her, so why should she give a fig how many women’s libidos he had stirred? Was it that

she was just one of the many who found her body sparking around him?

“You should have phrased the question differently,” he said, breaking through her thoughts.

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“How so?” she asked curiously.

“You should have asked...have you ever met a woman who has stirred your libido—first?”

“Now you have me more curious. Explain.”

“I sense a woman’s attraction to me and proceed from there. It is a rare find when a woman sexually stirs a vampire. It is even rarer when her scent stirs him before they meet.”

She scrunched her brow, knowing he would understand that he should explain further without voicing it.

“She could be a few feet or a few miles away, but her scent is so alluring, so strongly sexual that he has no choice but to find her.”

“And do what?” she asked, this time with a quiver rather than annoyance in her voice.

“Make love to her.”

Lara’s whole body tingled at the thought of him wanting a woman so badly that he would chase after her. Why did she find that so appealing?

Michael stood with such speed that he startled Lara, her breath catching.

“I have some things I must see to,” he said. “I will find you when I am done.”

He was out the door before Lara could say a word. She couldn't help but wonder what was so urgent that caused him to leave so abruptly and for the second time in just a few hours. There was no cell or telephone service and no Internet service, so he couldn't be conducting any business. Perhaps he had reports to write. The book on Mull made mention that the Valaines had expanded their business ventures through the years and were very successful in all their endeavors. They also made certain to continue to invest heavily in the town, which was why Mull prospered even when towns around them didn't. From all accounts they were a generous family.

Lara stretched herself out of the chair, feeling relaxed and gave the near empty bottle of wine a smile. With the day she was having, she was grateful for a reprieve from the tension. She cleaned up after herself and went straight to the library. She intended to read or scan the books she had come across and see if there was anything in there that could help her.

Help her do what?

But then that was the question.

Once in the library, she settled herself in one of the oversized chairs by the fireplace and reached for the book that had made her more curious than any of the others...The Life of a Vampire.

The author started by explaining how in his village, when he was a boy, there were many who believed in such blood-sucking creatures. And some samples of incidents that might make one believe that vampires did exist were included.

Lara saw the incidents for what they were worth, signs of a time where fear ruled rationale thought. And she believed the author was trying to do just that...make people see reason about vampires.

Unfortunately, reading how vampires lived off blood, had powers beyond normal, and could sense peoples' thoughts, didn't help his cause. It read more like a fantasy novel than a non-fiction book. And she could only imagine the stir it had created when published. It did not mention a vampire's sexual habits, but then at that time, if it had, it would have never been published. It did mention that a vampire mates for life, though it gave no detail as to how a vampire found a willing mate.

It read like a personal journal, rather than conjecture or fact. And it seemed as if the author wanted to portray vampires, not as brutal, evil creatures out to harm humans, but as near to human creatures as possible.

It was interesting and entertaining, and to some it could prove disturbing, since it presented the vampire in a vastly different light. A funny thought, since they were believed to be creatures of the night.

Lara placed it aside and dug into the other vampire books. Some expanded on the myth, though remained in preconceived boundaries. One or two stepped out of the box and added some nuances to the myth that seemed to reflect some of the things Michael had told her.

The majority seemed to rule when it came to the censuses that once caught by a vampire the only possible way to break free of him was for him to let you go. The author of *The Life of a Vampire* held a different and one not widely accepted opinion. He stated that a vampire isn't foolish enough to reveal his true identity to anyone. If he did, it would be for a good reason and if a vampire was accidentally discovered, he would do what was necessary to protect his identity. However, he did not say what that would be.

So, the question begged to be asked...why had Michael revealed his identity to Lara?

A yawn had her realizing that the wine had not only relaxed her but had made her

sleepy. She could easily fall asleep in this chair that you sunk into like a welcoming bed. Add to that the warmth of the fire that caressed, and she'd be a goner in no time.

But before she gave into her yawns, her bobbing head, and lazy eyelids, she wanted a quick glance at the book...Forever Spells. She picked it up, its cover old, and its pages fragile. There were a variety of spells, mostly benign, rather sweet actually, but then the book was about spells not curses. Some would argue there was no difference, but Lara always thought of a curse as something evil. After all, a love spell would certainly lose its appeal if referred to as a love curse.

She turned the page and smiled at the title of the spell, though it was quickly swallowed by a yawn.

Forever Mine.

She began to read, through drooping eyelids.

In the dark deep chasm of night—she scrunched her eyes. The next line was in a different language. The line that followed read, I call on the forces that be, again the next line was a different language.

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Another yawn interrupted her reading, and she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. And just as her eyes fully closed, she caught a few words from the spell...I curse his soul.

CHAPTER 6

Lara felt herself wake with a jolt. She moved to the edge of the chair and listened. Something had woken her, but what? After a few moments of silence, she shook her head, thinking herself crazy, then she heard it.

Lara.

She shut her eyes against the soft, sensual whisper of her name that seemed to drift around her like a gentle, yet eager embrace.

Come to me, Lara, come to me.

He was calling her, Michael—no, the vampire—was calling her. She forced herself to stay where she was, not move. She would not surrender to him. She could not, for if she did, she feared that he would satisfy her beyond reason, and then what? Sex had been a big disappointment to her, if he should satisfy her, how would she ever find satisfaction with a human male? She would want him and only him, just as she did now.

Why did her body betray her? It was humming and throbbing and begging her to go to him. Go and find out for herself if once and for all she could have a decent orgasm.

Lara.

“Ohhh,” she moaned, as if she’d been intimately touched and damn if it hadn’t ignited her passion to the point where she felt herself wet with desire.

She was out of the chair, through the kitchen and up the steps before she could stop herself and no amount of reasoning slowed her. It was when she got to the second-floor hallway that she stopped dead.

What was she doing? Was she crazy thinking to make love with a vampire? Sex. It was just sex, nothing more. Making love—to her at least—involved so much more. And she could honestly say she had yet to make love, though have sex? After all she was human. She had to laugh at that. Had human sex disappointed her so badly that she was willing to surrender herself to a vampire?

Lara.

Oh hell, his voice was growing ever stronger in her mind, and she was growing ever weaker to ignore it. Or was it that her lust was getting close to spiraling out of control? She never had such a craving for sex as she did at this moment.

Lara. Come.

Damn, did she want to come and hard. Yes, please very hard, she silently begged.

She held herself back as long as she could, which wasn’t long at all, since her feet started moving before she even gave them permission. And she was through his bedroom doors, not even recalling opening them.

He stood wearing only black jeans, the metal button unhooked and the zipper partially open. And she thought how easy it would be for her to slip the zipper the rest

of the way open and slide her hand down inside to feel him.

She raised her eyes to his and the glint of red in his dark eyes propelled her forward. She quickly discarded her sweater, shirt, and bra as she went. She stopped when just a few feet in front of him, suddenly feeling unsure and vulnerable. Did she really want to do this? Did she really want to surrender to a vampire? Was she that desperate?

Lara.

She shut her eyes, her name whispering around her in a sensual embrace and when she opened them, he was standing in front of her.

“What do you want from me?” he asked, his hand caressing her throat.

A mind-blowing orgasm, she thought, but instead surprised herself and said, “I’m not sure.”

“You must be sure,” he whispered and lowered his lips to hers and kissed her lightly. “I will not make love to you until you’re sure.”

His arms went around her and eased her against him so that her naked chest rested against his. Cold shot through her, though was followed quickly by warmth. And then his lips descended on hers again, only this time with hunger.

Never had she been kissed with such strong, bold, confident passion. And when his tongue slipped into her mouth, it was almost orgasmic. Her arms went around his neck and held on, her legs having gone weak.

She found herself returning his kiss like she had never done before, or was it that her hunger was as great as his and she had no choice but to return it?

His hand slipped down over her backside and squeezed her firm cheek while easing her closer against his erection. He was so hard and thick that she could feel him pulsating against her, or was that her own throbbing she felt? She didn't know. She didn't know where her passion stopped and his started. It was as if they were one, linked together in a sensual bond.

She rubbed herself against him, needing to feel more of him, needing to get closer, needing him inside her.

He tore his mouth away from hers and she moaned in disappointment.

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“I’m going to make you come, Lara,” he whispered in a low growl near her ear.

“Yes. Yes,” she said, hearing the anxious plea in her strained voice.

He turned her around so quickly that she grew dizzy. He planted her back firmly against his chest and his left arm slipped across her chest to rest under her breasts. His right hand drifted down along her stomach and slipped with ease into her leggings.

“You’re going to come hard, Lara, very hard. I won’t have it any other way,” he commanded with a strong whisper in her ear.

She cried out as his fingers began to tease her clitoris. She dropped her head back on his shoulder as he robbed her of breath and sanity. He stroked all the right places, inching her ever closer to climax.

Her body never felt more alive. It was as if places awoke in her that she had never known existed.

“Spread your legs,” he ordered, and she obeyed, helpless to do anything else, though not caring.

She felt safe in his arms or was it only an illusion?

If he wasn’t holding her, she would have crumpled to the ground from the pure pleasure he brought her when his fingers drove into her.

“Come, Lara, come for me,” he whispered in her ear, and then she felt sharp teeth scrape her neck.

She exploded in such a hard climax that she latched onto his arm that lay across her chest and squeezed tightly as wave after wave of extreme pleasure rippled through her. When she thought it was done, he flicked his finger over her clitoris, and she climaxed again. Something she had never done before.

Now wake up, Lara. Wake up! I will not make love to you unless you are fully awake!

Lara bolted awake in the chair in the library, her body still humming from her intense climaxes.

“A dream? It was a dream?” Her hand went quickly to her neck, but felt only her soft, unmarred skin. She shook her head. It couldn’t be. It was so real, so very real. She shuddered as the last of her climax faded away replaced by disappointment. She had had sexual dreams before, but never so intense...so real.

It was her own fault. She and Michael’s major topic of conversation had been about sex, so what had she expected? Especially with anything close to an intimate escapade having been non-existent in her life for some time now. Was it any wonder she should fall into a dream about sex with a vampire? But she hadn’t had sex with him; he had brought her to climax.

She scrunched her brow, trying to recall what he had last said to her.

I will not make love to you unless you are fully awake!

She hugged herself and nearly jumped out of the chair when she realized that her bra was undone. She shook her head again. It made no sense, but then nothing made

sense, since she had entered this house and met Michael Valaine.

Lara dropped back in the chair and yanked the throw draped over the back across her. Not that she was cold, more so as a shield of protection, a poor shield at that. But at the moment she needed something, even a weak something.

How did she make sense of what happened? Had her own desires produced the dream? Was it a dream or had it actually happened?

“Lara.”

She jumped, her head snapping to the side to see Michael standing in the open doorway.

“I thought perhaps you might want to wash up before supper, which I thought we would have in about an hour.”

Lara turned, having recalled seeing a clock on the mantel. She was shocked to see that it was almost six in the evening.

She nodded, though for a moment thought about questioning him about her dream. But what if it hadn't been a dream? What if it somehow had been real? What if he had called her to him, made her want him? Made her have the best orgasm she had ever had so far.

So far? Did she expect to have more orgasms with him?

Had she gone completely insane? Of course she had, there was no other explanation.

She gave herself a moment before attempting to get to her feet, not trusting her legs, recalling how they had gone weak while in his arms.

His arms.

They had felt so strong around her, and she had felt so protected, like a warrior of old who would do anything to protect the woman he loved.

Loved?

Love had nothing to do with this and, besides, was a vampire even capable of love?

“There is something on your mind.”

With a suddenness that startled her, she realized that... “It wasn’t a dream, was it?” she said as if demanding he clarify it.

“You came to me,” he said, stepping further into the room.

“Because you called me,” she corrected.

“No, I did not call you. I thought of you, wanted you, but I never called out to you. You came to me of your own volition.”

Lara got to her feet quickly, keeping the blanket against her chest, as if the pathetic excuse for a shield would somehow protect her.

“You can’t deny that you want me, Lara.”

“Do I or have you placed the thought in my head?”

“I don’t manipulate women. I have no need to. I told you...fully awake and also fully willing are the only ways I will make love to you.”

She couldn’t help but ask, “Do vampires love?”

“Vampires love more strongly than any human. Our heightened senses don’t allow us to love any other way. And I wouldn’t want it any other way. The intensity of such strong love feeds a vampire almost as much as the blood we drink.”

“Love and blood, a strange combination.”

“Yet both life-sustaining.”

He had stepped closer, and her shield was useless, her body sparking. How could that be after she just had two orgasms? Yet here she was ready for more. She never remembered feeling so full of lust.

He stepped away from her, going to the cabinet and pouring himself a glass of wine. “You should go refresh yourself and join me here when you’re ready.”

Lara dropped the throw on the chair and scooped up the books she had been reading and hugged them to her chest. She wanted them for later, but now she wanted them to hide her untethered breasts. Untethered breasts? What did she think? That she was in a romance novel and that love would prevail against all odds and there’d be a happy ending to this unbelievable tale? She’d probably wind up bitten by a vampire while having sex with him—she shook her head at the absurdity of her thoughts and hurried out of the library and upstairs to her room. She locked the door behind her, though the lock served no real purpose. If Michael wished to enter, he would.

She dropped down on the bed after placing the books on the nightstand.

“Rational thought here, Lara,” she cautioned and turned on her back to stare at the cream-colored ceiling.

“Only if you’re fully awake and fully willing,” she whispered. Those had been his words when it came to making love to her. He had not forced himself on her nor had

he bitten her. Her hand went to her neck and her body gave a little shiver, recalling the scrape of his fangs against her skin. She sighed and draped her arm over her eyes. One minute he was scaring the bejesus out of her and the next he was sending her into explosive orgasms.

And the next... She lowered her arm, her eyes remaining fixated on the ceiling. There was that warrior-of-old necessity in him to protect. Even if she wasn't the woman he loved, he still protected her—even from herself, so it seemed.

Had she really sensed his desires and hunted them down? She laughed. She was like a vampire herself, though it wasn't blood that drove her, it was sex. She laughed again. She had gone from dormant to raging hormones with one look at Michael. But then a woman would have to be dead not to respond to him. Or would she be dead if she did?

Lara popped up off the bed. "Enough. Enough," she scolded herself. "Take a nice, hot shower and don't dare think."

She went through her suitcase and chose black leggings, and a black sweater with silver threads throughout. It was oversized, loose, and comfy. Forget tight and sexy, it would only get her in trouble. But wasn't she already in trouble?

She carted them off to the bathroom along with her case of toiletries. After setting everything down on the sizeable vanity, she turned on the shower, then stripped out of her clothes. She gave herself a close perusal in the mirror.

"Average. You're average," she said to her image, as if reminding herself of something. "And he's not."

As if that settled things for her—at least for the moment—she stepped into the shower, shutting the door behind her.

She wanted to sigh with pleasure as the hot water beat down on her. She let the pulsating water soak her hair as well as her body. She twisted and turned so that the pelting water could reach every nook and cranny. It was like a gentle massage, and she turned her back to the water and bent at her waist so that her backside was treated to the soothing caress.

That's when Michael popped into her mind. For a moment, she thought of him there, his hands squeezing her wet backside before he stepped closer and rubbed himself against her.

Stop!

She straightened up in a flash. Was that her who warned or had it been Michael?

“Don’t think. Don’t think,” she scolded herself.

Don’t think!

She gasped. That wasn’t her.

Scrub yourself and be done, she silently warned herself and shook her head. She had to stop thinking or at least focus on something benign.

Snow. Think about snow; swirling snowflakes, mounds of snow, stinging cold.

Like Michael’s touch. She shivered at the thought, though the hot water pelted her skin.

“Think of something hot,” she admonished in a whisper.

Michael was a hot hunk.

Lara dropped her head back and moaned. What was the matter with her that she couldn’t stop thinking about him? Sex. It all came down to sex. Did she, or didn’t she? She obviously wanted to since she had called out and gone to him in her dream. So, what stopped her? Why not have a snowbound fling with a vampire? He certainly didn’t seem an evil creature, though his fangs could argue that point. But they had felt

so...she shivered with pleasure, recalling how sensuous his sharp teeth had felt against her neck.

She realized the danger of such thoughts and ordered, “Wash and get dressed before?—”

The lights suddenly shut off, pitching Lara into complete darkness.

CHAPTER 7

Lara froze under the hot spray, goose bumps eating away at her wet skin like tiny, famished bugs. Was it the storm or had someone turned out the lights? Someone? There was only Michael.

What to do? She couldn't see a thing.

She slammed her hand over her mouth, stifling a gasp when she caught the sound of movement in the room. Michael was here in the bathroom with her. Had he shut off the light? Had her thoughts inadvertently called him to her again?

She shivered at the thought or was it anticipation that had her body quivering?

“Don't be frightened; I'm here, Lara.”

“Where?” she demanded remaining under the spray, his voice too clear to be in her head, which meant...

“In the room with you,” he said, finishing her thought.

“Why?”

“The generator to this part of the house shut down. It will kick on again, but not for an hour or so. I didn’t want you to be frightened.”

“A little late, I’m already frightened,” she admitted.

“Of the dark or me?”

“You in the dark with a stark naked me in the shower.” She cringed, realizing she had just put a vivid image of her in his head, not that it wasn’t probably already there.

“Is that an invitation?”

Part of her wanted to scream yes, come join me, but she forced herself to say, “No.”

“Your thoughts not only tell me differently, but so does your body. I can feel the quiver of passion stirring in you. I can hear the soft hum of your sensitive nub waiting to be touched and smell the intoxicating scent of the wetness that grows between your legs.” He laughed. “Tightening your legs will not keep me from touching you, though I would much prefer to explore your unique taste with my tongue.”

Her legs buckled and she spread her arms out, one hand bracing against the wall and the other the shower stall glass door to keep herself from collapsing.

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“And then there’s that squeezable backside of yours. How I would love to give it some loving bites.”

A shot of passion stung between her legs and ran up to torment her clitoris. Damn, if his blatant suggestions weren’t affecting her almost as much as his touch.

“Stop, Michael,” she said with little resolve.

“Let me taste you. Let my tongue bring you to climax...more than once.”

She tried to combat the pulsating throb between her legs with another squeeze, but damn if it didn’t do more harm than good.

“Let me taste you, Lara. Lose yourself to me if only for a short while. Let me give you a climax you won’t forget.”

Yes! Yes! Her mind cried, but she kept her lips locked tight.

She gasped when his hands suddenly circled her waist.

“Your thoughts are as clear to me as your words, or did you forget?”

She opened her mouth to what? Deny it? Deny him when she wanted him so badly? It didn’t matter. He didn’t give her a chance to protest. His mouth found hers and he kissed her as if laying claim to her, as if searing her lips and branding them his.

He drew her up against him as his kiss deepened, and she reveled in the feel of his

naked body, all hard, defined muscle. Curiosity shot with desire had her hand reaching down and taking hold of the hard, thick length of him...velvety smooth, rigid, and so tempting.

She caught her breath when his lips suddenly left hers.

His hand wrapped around hers and held it still. "Not yet, Lara, not until I make you mine."

He lowered his mouth to her neck and nibbled his way down it, along her chest, to catch one of her already hard nipples in his mouth.

It was a good thing his one hand hugged her waist and the other steadied her back, since her body went completely limp.

She almost sighed with regret when his mouth left her breasts to travel down along her stomach. His hands moved along with his tongue, grabbing hold of her backside.

"Brace yourself," he ordered just before his tongue flicked across her nub that had been crying out impatiently for him.

Her arms shot out to her sides, one hand slamming against the wall and the other the glass shower door.

She never knew a tongue could be so sexually lethal. Good Lord, the man knew what he was doing and she damn well wanted him to keep doing it. She dropped her head back and groaned louder with every lick and flicker and whatever else he was doing to make her feel like she had never felt before.

His hands gripped her backside harder and drew her closer to his face, as if he was burying himself in her and oh how she wanted him to burrow himself there. She

startled when he drove his finger into her, though his one hand held her backside firm, not letting her move.

Hot. She was so damn hot and suddenly the water shut off.

“Spread your legs,” he said, and she did, not giving a damn about the water.

She lost all sense of time and reason as Michael brought her to the edge of orgasm, drifted her back again, and then plunged her into a mind-blowing orgasm that had her screaming out, begging him not to stop, and he didn't. Twice he had her climaxing and with the second climax she had realized what she had been missing all this time and tears sprang to her eyes, ever so grateful that she finally got to experience a thunderous orgasm.

And damn, it had to be with a vampire.

She was in his arms before she knew what was happening, snug against his chest.

“Don't cry. Your tears burn my soul.”

“You don't have a soul,” she said sniffing.

“Another misconception. Besides how could I love if I didn't have a soul?” He stepped out of the shower.

“Don't put me down. I like being in your arms.”

He pressed his brow to hers. “And I like having you there. But you need to get dry; you're wet.”

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“I’m always wet around you.” She heard the surrender in her voice, but then what was she to do, fight what she had no heart to fight against?

“I know,” he whispered and nuzzled at her ear.

“Can I keep nothing from you?”

“Definitely not when it comes to making love and also tears, especially when tears accompany sex.”

“They’re not sad tears.”

“I know, but it still hurts me when you cry. To know that you have found no pleasure in something that should be most pleasurable disturbs me, though it also pleases me to know that I am the first man who has ever satisfied you.”

“Satisfy is an understatement,” she said with a laugh.

He lowered her to her feet, and she unlocked her arms around his neck with reluctance.

“I wish I could see you,” she said, the darkness making everything seem surreal, but then everything had been surreal since she had walked into this house.

“Raise your arms,” he said, and she did without question.

She felt a towel slip around her, and he tucked the edge just above her one breast. He

then took her hand and led her out of the bathroom to the bedroom where the light of the flickering fire in the fireplace cast a soft glow over the room...over them.

He wore a towel wrapped around his slim hips and his dark hair glistened, still damp from the shower.

“You are beautiful, especially in the throes of climax.”

She yanked her hand out of his. “You can see in the dark?”

“Yes, and I have never seen anything more beautiful than you when I made you come.”

Her heart skidded for a second and her stomach fluttered. What was this man doing to her? He was making her feel things she had never felt before. And worse, he was making it much too easy to fall in love with him.

She quickly chased the thought from her head, not wanting him to hear it. Not wanting to think it herself, for it was absurd. Wasn't it?

“That's not fair,” she said playfully. “You saw me, and I didn't get to see you completely naked.

“I can remedy that,” he said and dropped his towel.

Lara stared; she couldn't help it. He was gorgeous from top to bottom and definitely in between. If perfection existed, then he certainly was perfect, except—of course—he was a vampire. How did she ever get around that fact?

“I am who I am, Lara, nothing will change that,” he said and took a step toward her.

She didn't step away from him; she didn't want to. And that troubled her even more.

"Vampires aren't the evil creatures portrayed in books and movies. We're simply a different species from humans."

"Far different," she added. "You can kill in a single bite."

"A useful trait," he said with a smile.

"It's not funny," she scolded.

"I would never hurt you," —his eyes darkened and the tips of his fangs peeked from beneath his upper lip— "though I would kill anyone who did."

Lara shivered, his intense tone making it apparent that he would do just that. But why did he feel so compelled to protect her? They had only met. It was nothing more than lust that he felt for her. Wasn't it?

She felt gentle warmth encircle her, as if wrapped in a loving embrace and she wanted to turn into it and burrow in its overwhelming comfort. Never had she felt so safe and secure in her life.

"Two choices, Lara," Michael whispered in her ear, though he had not moved from where he was standing. "Join me in bed now, only if you're ready for me to make you mine or have a drink with me and we can talk."

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What did make you mine entail was the question she was afraid to ask, so she chose the easier of the two, or was it?

“I’ll join you for a drink.”

He scooped his towel up off the floor, though didn’t wrap it around his waist, and walked to the door. She continued to admire his naked body, while wondering if she would eventually surrender completely to him. It seemed inevitable at this point, but it was the consequences that disturbed her the most.

He stopped before opening the bedroom door and turned to her. “It is inevitable; you will completely surrender to me. You will be mine.” He turned, opened the door, and walked out, shutting it behind him.

A quivering thrill raced through her and she scolded herself. “What’s the matter with you? You’re not some helpless damsel who melts at the feet of some mighty warrior. You’re a modern woman who makes wise decisions when it comes to her sex life.”

Who was she kidding? She hadn’t made a wise decision about her sex life since she had surrendered her virginity to Jason Ketchum when she was eighteen. It had been a big disappointment on both sides and the only reason she had done it was out of sheer stupidity. All her friends had lost their virginity years before, and she had felt left out. Jason had always had a thing for her, though she had thought it was more for the fact that he was obsessed with cemeteries or perhaps it had been death he had been obsessed with. So, on a hot summer night she had lost her virginity in a cemetery, though she had drawn the line of doing it on top of a grave. Still, she hadn’t been able to shake the thought that all the residents of Blue Creek Cemetery had been watching.

She had the feeling Jason must have gotten a similar feeling since he had never bothered with her again after that, though it could have been that it had turned out so bad that neither one of them wanted another go at it.

Lara jumped and was startled out of her musings when the door opened and Michael entered. He wore black sweatpants that hung low on his hips and nothing else. An uncorked bottle of wine was tucked in the crook of his arm and two wine glasses dangled from his fingers.

She stared at him, wondering how he could appear more handsome each time she laid eyes on him.

“Slip into something comfortable and easily removable,” he said with a teasing grin.

She glanced down at herself and though the towel was still wrapped around her, she felt naked. She quickly grabbed her red flannel pajama bottoms and pink thermal top from her suitcase and hurried into the bathroom to slip them on.

Her chilled toes reminded how long she had been standing half naked, so she was relieved to find her thick pink and white polka dot socks wrapped in her flannel bottoms. She hurriedly pulled them on, ran her comb through her partially damp hair and with trepidation and an ounce of anticipation she returned to the bedroom.

She froze only a few feet into the room. Michael was staring at her with such intense fervor that she thought he would pounce on her at any moment, and she wondered if she would stop him.

“Is there anything you wear that doesn’t make you appear ravishingly sexy?”

Lara gave herself a quick glance, then pointing at herself asked, “This is sexy?”

“It hugs you in all the right places and best of all I can dispose of both pieces in no time, leaving you in those adorable polka dot socks. This way your feet can stay warm while we make love.”

The image of her in nothing but her socks while he drove in and out of her sent her entire body crying out to him.

Michael grew rigid and his eyes snapped shut for a moment. “Careful, Lara, I can resist your body’s cravings for only so long.”

Lara reacted, reaching out and grabbing the long purple robe draped over the chaise and slipping into it, tying the belt snugly at her waist.

Michael laughed. “Not much of a defense, sweetheart.” He handed her a glass of red wine and nodded at the chaise. “Sit and we’ll talk.”

“Here in the bedroom?” she asked, taking the glass, though making sure not to let their fingers touch as she did.

“Bedroom, living room, library, kitchen, I intend to make love to you in as many rooms as possible before our time together is done.”

Our time together is done. The consequences...have a sex fest with a vampire, enjoy it beyond belief and never see him again? Or become like him? Or find yourself caring for him more than you thought possible? She quickly shifted her thoughts, not wanting him privy to her musings.

“As I have told you, though perhaps you’ve already surmised...vampires have ravenous sexual appetites. But then your body tells me that you do as well.”

Only with you. The thought hit her like a dousing of ice-cold water.

“Oh hell,” Lara said and deposited herself on the chaise and downed more than a sip of wine. “What’s the point of fighting it when you can hear my thoughts as clearly as my words? So, tell me why my libido is constantly on overdrive around you. Do you manipulate me and make me want you with such intensity that I think I’ll go mad if I don’t have you?” Holy crap, where had that come from?

Michael took the chair that sat next to the chest of drawers and positioned it opposite the chaise and sat. “It came from you as do your feelings, your desires. I do not manipulate you.”

“Before you left this room, I felt as if I was wrapped in a loving embrace. Did I imagine that or was that you?”

“It was me. I could feel you needed comforting, but I also sensed your reluctance. I, however, could not resist giving you what you needed. As I’ve told you, I will always satisfy you, whether sexually or emotionally.”

“It’s not possible to always satisfy another and not fair to expect someone to do so.”

“Perhaps not for a human, but you forget I’m a vampire.”

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“Tell me more about vampires,” she said still finding it difficult to accept that such creatures truly existed and wondering if she would wake up and find that none of this was real.

“Our sexual appetites?” he asked with a grin.

“I think I have a pretty good idea about that.”

“Oh, darling, you haven’t even touched the surface of it yet.”

Damn if her clitoris didn’t quiver, her body ran hot, and an aching need settle uncomfortably between her legs.

“I can smell your need for me, almost taste it.” He licked his lips slowly, his eyes drifting closed for a moment. “I love the taste of you, and I quite fear I will never get enough of it.”

Think of something else, Lara, think of something else, she silently warned herself.

“Yes, Lara, it would be wise to think of something else.”

“Tell me of your grandfather and the curse.”

Michael nodded, then smiled. “My grandfather claims I am much more like him than my father, but my grandmother and mother insist that all Valaine men are alike—stubborn. My grandfather refers to it as determined. Whatever way you look at it, it is the reason my grandfather was cursed.”

CHAPTER 8

“My grandfather lived when there was great turmoil in the area that is now known today as Romania. As he often told me, it wasn’t a pleasant era. Wars raged, people were persecuted for their beliefs, and survival was difficult, but it didn’t stop him from falling in love. Unfortunately, he fell in love with the wrong young woman. She was a gypsy and one of the free ones, since most gypsies, at that time, were slaves. Her family or troupe had managed to remain free, and they intended to keep it that way. Outsiders were forbidden.”

“But your grandfather was stubborn,” Lara said with a smile. She was a sucker for a love story, though she preferred the ones with happy endings.

“Determined,” Michael corrected. “And as my grandfather has explained time and again, my grandmother was too much of a spirited beauty to simply walk away and forget. He told me that he knew from when he first laid eyes on her that he loved her, and there was no way he would ever live life without her.”

“I guess the gypsies had other ideas.” Lara’s eyes turned wide. “Wait. I think I found the spell that was used on him.” She left her wine glass on the small table beside the chaise and hurried to the nightstand, snatching up the old, battered spell book. She sat on the chaise and carefully thumbed through the worn pages. “I recall reading a few words before I dozed off. I curse his soul. Here it is—” she shook her head. “Parts of the curse are in another language. Here you must know it. Read it.”

Michael took the book from her hand. “Not now.”

The distress in his eyes had her offering an apology. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He turned and placed the book on the side table. When he turned back around, he

asked her a question she had to stop and think about.

“What would you do if the person you loved from the depths of your soul was forbidden to you?”

After some contemplation, she said, “I wonder about love in today’s world. I sometimes think that love has become a word that is thrown around so easily that it has lost the sacred power it once held. I think sacred love has become rare and if I found someone who I loved from the depths of my soul I would fight with all I had, so I would never lose such a blessed love.”

“You would be determined.”

“Not only determined but committed to such a rare love.” She laughed softly. “And patient, since, no doubt, a love so strong would have its challenges.”

“Yes, it would, but I am confident that you would be up to the task.”

Her brow knitted and she tilted her head in question. “You barely know me and yet you have confidence in me?”

“You are like an open book to me that I have spent the last several hours reading and thoroughly enjoying, and I am eager to read more.”

She couldn’t help but wonder if the ending of the book would be a happy read for either of them, for what could the end possibly bring?

“It is after seven. I suggest we continue our talk while having supper,” he said, holding his hand out to her.

She took it and the familiar spark his touch ignited sent a sensual quiver through her

body. She tempered it as best she could, but she realized that it was getting more difficult to do so. Her body was demanding what her mind was fighting and, most unexpectedly, her heart was joining in.

“I should change,” she said, stepping away from him, needing a bit of distance.

“Nonsense. Stay as you are...comfortable. Tonight is not for formality. We’ll enjoy our meal in the room off the kitchen.”

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Lara couldn't stop a smile from surfacing and admitting, "I'd like that."

"Let me slip on a shirt and socks, though I fear I have no polka dot ones."

Lara laughed and stuck out her foot. "I have dozens."

They left the room together, though Lara waited in the hall. Michael didn't take long. He returned wearing a black knit shirt that, of course, had to cling to his every muscle and curve.

They hurried off to the kitchen. Lara selected one of the pre-prepared suppers in the freezer and popped it in the microwave while Michael fixed a plate of raw veggies and fruit. He also chose a Pinot Noir from the wine rack, and they soon were ensconced in the comfortable room off the kitchen, sitting across from each other as they enjoyed supper together.

Lara couldn't recall the last time she had felt so relaxed with a man. She found it hard to believe that it had been only this morning that they had met. They talked and laughed more like old friends than new acquaintances. He was easy and interesting to talk with and seemed so...human.

"You were never frightened growing up amid all those gravestones?" he asked, settling back in his chair with his wine glass in hand.

"No, never. I was so young when my father got the position as the caretaker. I didn't understand what a cemetery was. My father would take me with him on the riding mower when he cut the grass." Lara smiled. "At first, I thought the headstones were

doors and I would knock on them and asked to come in. Then I began talking to the deceased, calling them by name. Then one day my dad found me at one of the burial ceremonies talking to the widow of a man who had just been buried. He apologized to the elderly woman, but she told him it wasn't necessary that I had made it easier for her to leave her husband's graveside since I had promised her that he would not be alone that I would keep him company and talk to him every day.

“The woman always made sure to find me when she paid her husband's grave a visit, and I would tell her what I talked to him about. She asked me if I would promise to do the same for her when her time came.”

“And you did.”

Lara nodded and wiped at tears lingering in her eyes. “She loved flowers, so I planted daisies, her favorite, and talked with her often until the day came that I had to say good-bye to them all.”

“That must have been difficult for you, since no doubt they felt like family.”

Lara stared at him. She had stopped sharing that story a long time ago because of the way people reacted. Most thought she was crazy or weird, not one person understood the cemetery had been home to her and the residents, though deceased, family she talked and shared her hopes, dreams, fears, and sorrows with...no one that was until Michael.

“You're such an interesting woman, Lara, I could talk with you forever and never get bored.”

Lara had to laugh. “I think eventually you would grow tired of hearing the same old stories.”

“You will have new stories to tell, especially with your travels and the interesting subjects you write about.”

“I do enjoy traveling, seeing new places, meeting new people, and investigating strange phenomenon.”

“Have you traveled outside the U.S.?”

“No, but I would love to someday. And you?” she asked.

“I’ve been all over the world, but then I’ve had the time to travel.”

Lara grinned. “I forget your advanced age, though you look to be only in your mid-thirties.”

“We age, but much slower than humans.”

“What of the woman you fall in love with and marry or do you go through several wives in your extended lifetime?” she asked curiously, though she felt a twinge of sadness. She couldn’t imagine falling in love with him, knowing he would live well beyond her years.

Right, Lara, you’re more concerned with him living longer than you rather than the fact that you’d fall in love with a vampire. And why was she even thinking about falling in love with him? Because he appealed to her in more ways than just his good looks.

Stop thinking about it, he’ll hear you, she silently warned herself.

“We can marry our own kind, but if we choose to marry a human there is a way for her life to be extended.”

“A bite on the neck?”

“There are advantages to a bite on the neck for the woman I marry, but having children is what gives her the ability to live longer.”

“How and what advantages are there to a bite on the neck for the woman you marry?”

“The child’s blood mingles with the mother’s and slows the aging process.”

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“So the more children she has the longer she lives?”

Michael laughed. “We’ve found that two children will usually give a human the same life span as a vampire, though my grandmother had six children and she’s definitely retaining her age better than my grandfather.”

Lara grinned. “I’d say it was the opposite for humans. The more children we have the faster we age, mostly from worry and anxiousness over being a good parent. I will admit, though, being an only child makes me want to have a bunch of kids. It was great having my father’s undivided attention, but there were times I missed having a sibling to share things with.”

“At least you missed the fights. My brothers and I were at one another’s throats at times.”

“Literally?” she asked with a laugh.

Michael laughed as well. “No, my father had bigger fangs than us and that kept us from going too far, though my sister suffered the most since we were always trying to keep her safe and protected. She wanted nothing to do with us and complained to my father endlessly. It did little good since vampires have this overpowering need to protect those they love.”

Family. She had none, no grandparents, no aunts or uncles, no one at all. She had few fears, but the big fear that had always lurked in her mind was losing her dad. Once he was gone, she’d have no one. She’d be alone, and now she was.

She shook the sadness away as best she could, not wanting Michael to sense it, and said, “What about the other part of my question?”

Michael moved forward in his chair and emptied the bottle of wine evenly in each of their glasses. He remained perched on the edge of the chair and after taking a sip of wine, he answered, “I would much rather show you what a bite can do.”

Damn if he didn’t send her sensual senses somersaulting. How could she think a bite from a vampire could be sexy? She was definitely losing her sanity. She was the one who disproved such nonsense and here she was sitting with a vampire who wanted to bite her neck.

Yup, she officially had lost her mind.

She popped up off the chair. “It’s been a long and,” —she searched for a fitting word— “crazy day. Time for bed.”

“Mine or yours?” Michael asked, standing.

She had to grin while she shook her head. “Mine and alone.”

“My bedroom door is always open to you.”

She opened her mouth, but words failed her.

“Why deny what your body aches for?” he asked in a much too softly alluring tone that she fought to ignore.

“One word—vampire. Make that two—crazy.”

“Then let yourself be crazy for tonight and the next few days. Enjoy what I can give

you.”

Why not, she thought. Why not have great sex with him while stuck here in a snowstorm? When it was over, though, then what? Does she simply walk away, knowing she’d never have such great sex again? Or was it that she had already started to feel something for this man—vampire— and she just might want more?

“You’re nothing that I would expect a vampire to be,” she said.

“You sound as if you accuse me of a crime.”

“It would be so much easier if you were like the evil, bloodsucking creatures in the books.”

“Then I would simply put you under my spell, suck your blood, and make you one of us, and that is not what true vampires do. They do not take what is not offered.”

“So, if I told you that I wanted you to bite me...”

“I would make it memorable, and you would not regret it.”

It would be so easy to surrender to him, to share a moment in time that would leave her with...memories. But would memories be enough for her.

With sadness in her heart, she said, “I will see you in the morning.”

“Sleep well, Lara,” he said.

“And you.” She turned quickly. “You don’t sleep.”

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“We do, though we don’t require as much sleep as humans.”

She nodded and hurried out of the room, thinking that he would be up wandering the house as she slept. But there was no need to worry. Vampire or not, and odd as it seemed, she trusted Michael. It was herself who she didn’t trust.

Once in her room, she slipped out of the purple robe and climbed into bed prepared to read through some of the books she had collected from the library. She didn’t think sleep would come easily to her, but reading would help, though choice of subject matter might prove to make it more difficult.

Lara lay beneath the warm quilt, staring at the ceiling with no thought of reaching for a book. Her mind ran wild with the day’s strange happenings and again she wondered if she would wake and find that it all had been nothing but a dream.

But did she want it to be? Her father had been a practical man and had taught her that there was a reasonable explanation for everything. It was a debate on the unexplainable she had won with someone online that had encouraged her to start her blog.

Now here she was Ms Reasonable-Explanation-For-Everything finding herself in a situation that had no sensible reasoning to it. And, of course, how rational was it to want to have sex with a vampire?

She moaned and her cheeks blushed pink as she recalled how Michael had made her come—twice—in the shower. She couldn’t imagine an orgasm any better than that one, yet Michael had implied that it was only the beginning.

Lara squeezed her legs closed tightly against the titillating tingle that gripped her. She was on lust overload and the only thing that would satisfy it...sex with a vampire.

“Stop,” she shouted. She had to stop thinking about Michael and sex or she’d be calling him to her. And her resolve was growing weaker by the minute and before she knew it she’d be begging him to make love to her.

“Read,” she ordered. “Yeah, right...read about vampires. That will help.”

She shook her head. She was comfortable, the quilt warm, and her eyes heavy. Sleep was not far off, so why fight it. At least it would give her a reprieve from her chaotic thoughts. She snuggled deeper beneath the quilt and soon drifted off to sleep.

Lara bolted up in bed, her eyes wide and trying desperately to adjust to the dark. The fire in the fireplace had dwindled down to a few embers and there was a decisive chill in the air. She hurried to reach over to the lamp on the nightstand and turn it on, but it didn’t work. She scrambled across the bed to the other light and turned the switch—nothing.

Had the generator gone out again? The lights had been on when she had returned to her room after supper. How long ago was that? Had she slept several hours? Was it nearing morning?

Reluctantly, she left the warm bed, glad she had slept in her socks and stumbled around the room in search of her purse. She might not be able to get a signal, but her cell phone would still show the time.

After a few bumps to the chins and ankles and a couple of ouches, she found her purse and a quick search inside produced her phone. It read, 2:00 a.m. and then went dead.

“Damn,” she muttered. She might not have a signal now, but as soon as she was able to get one she wanted the phone working.

There was no point in plugging it in this room when the electricity was unreliable. Downstairs was her best bet, since the electricity had held firm there. After locating her charger and managing to find the purple robe she had on earlier, she went to the door, opened it, and stepped out.

It was so dark that she couldn’t see a thing and a twinge of fear engulfed her.

Calm down, she silently told herself. All you have to do is turn left, hug the wall until you come to the end and proceed forward slowly until you feel the top step of the stairs. Once you make it down the curve in the stairs, you’re bound to see the light from the floor below.

Holding tightly to her courage, she stepped out of her room. Her toe caught on the edge of the hall runner, and she stumbled and fell to her knees, her cell phone and charger flying out of her hands.

Lara frantically searched around on her hands and knees and sighed with relief when she found both. She got to her feet and was about to turn left when she realized she wasn’t sure of her direction.

Don’t panic. Don’t panic. It’s a hallway. At one end is the stairs, the other Michael’s room. If you should reach his room, you only need to turn around and go the other way.

Her sensible, silent urging did not stop her heart from pounding, but it also did not stop her feet from moving. She took cautious steps until, to her relief, she touched the wall. She halted a moment and took a deep breath, knowing she’d be fine now no matter which way she went.

After a few steps, she grew more confident and picked up the pace, tightly hugging the wall as she went. Then suddenly, without warning, she encountered an empty space and fell into what she surmised was her room.

She lay on the floor for a moment, calming herself and her breathing. At least now she knew where she was and this time, she had managed to hold on to her cell phone and charger.

Pockets. She shook her head. Why hadn't she thought of that sooner? Probably because she was too busy thinking of her cell phone as a lifeline and not wanting to let it go. She got to her feet and checked the robe and sure enough it had pockets. She slipped her cell phone in one and the charger in the other.

Lara took cautious steps to get her bearing, and her knee hit something. She reached out to touch it. It was a wooden chest with a metal lock, and it made her realize that she hadn't fallen into her room.

Of course, there wasn't a fraction of light anywhere and if it had been her room there would have been the glow from low embers from the fireplace. The same if this was Michael's room, so where was she? The other bedroom she had spied on earlier. And in what direction was the door?

She reached out hoping to connect with a wall, but she connected with something that hung on the wall. And the realization of what it was, startled her...it was a set of shackles, thick iron-cuffed shackles. Further exploring along the wall, she touched something else and after examining it with her hands, she surmised it was a cat of nine tails.

She backed away from the wall, bumped into something and fell to sit on a chair and jumped up as soon as she did, having felt something prick her backside. She cautiously ran her hand over where she had sat and felt pointy steel spikes protruding

up through the seat.

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What the hell was this room? She shook her head, wanting nothing more than to get out of there. But where was the door and what obstacles did, she need to get passed to reach it?

She could call out to Michael for help, but why hadn't he realized she needed help. He read her thoughts so easily. Was he sleeping? Could he not sense her when he slept?

She shook her head again and gave herself a small pep talk. "You're on your own, always have been. You can do this."

Lara took several cautious steps, bumped into a thing or two, though didn't dare touch the objects for fear of being pricked again. After what seemed like forever, but was probably only a few minutes, her hand finally connected with the frame of the doorway. She sighed with relief and stepped through the door.

The wall sconces suddenly flamed with light, and there at the end of the hallway by the stairs stood Michael in nothing but his black sweatpants, his chest muscles taut, his eyes flaming red and his fangs protruding.

Instinct took over, she ran in the only direction left to her—straight for his bedroom. Once inside, she locked the double doors. Her heart beat like a mighty drum against her chest, fear sent gooseflesh crawling over her entire body, and her wide-eyed stare was glued to the doors.

"Lara."

She froze. It wasn't in her head she heard her name being called. It was from behind her.

CHAPTER 9

Lara turned slowly around. If she had any doubt that he was a vampire, she sure in hell didn't doubt it now. His eyes blazed with red fury and his fangs were so pointy that she cringed with sympathy for his victims. Was she about to be one of them?

"You're hurt," Michael said, his tone angry rather than consoling.

Her hand flew to her bottom, and she was surprised to feel a sticky wetness that had seeped through her pajama bottoms and robe. She raised her hand, shocked to see blood on it. She looked at Michael, and she could have sworn she saw saliva dripping in anticipation from his fangs.

She didn't think, she slammed her bloody hand against her neck, like that would stop him, but it had been a gut reaction to protect herself.

He lunged forward and was in front of her in seconds.

Her hand flew off her neck and slapped against his naked chest; it did little good. He scooped her up into his arms and carried her to his...bathroom? He lowered her to stand on the tile floor and removed her robe, then he grabbed the waistband of her pajama bottom and yanked it down before she could stop him.

"Step out and turn around," he ordered after bending down to slip her bottoms out from beneath her feet when she lifted each foot.

"What are you doing?" she finally managed to get out, looking down at him crouching in front of her, his face not far from her...damn, just thinking about it made

her...don't think, don't think.

“Yes, don't think.”

Was that a snarl that accompanied his warning?

“Between the scent of your intoxicating blood, the sweetness between your legs and that deliciously pulsing nub of yours, I'm finding it extremely difficult to keep myself from carting you off to my bed and making you?—”

He stopped abruptly, and she was relieved that he did, since she was pulsating in places she didn't think pulsated.

“I need to cleanse the wound you got from the Chair of Torture. Have you had a tetanus shot lately?”

“Chair of what?” she said, yanking her knit top down as far as she could get it.

“Tetanus shot?” he demanded.

A warning look from his hot red eyes had her answering quickly. “I keep it updated, since I find myself in strange situations like sitting on the Chair of Torture.”

He sprang up so fast that it caused Lara to spring back, her hands slamming back against the vanity to keep her steady.

Michael stepped in front of her, bracing his hands on the vanity as well, to either side of her, trapping her with his body. He stood much too close, and her body reacted. It didn't just strike a spark; it blazed.

“How you got in the room of torture, I?—”

“Room of torture?” she all but squealed.

“It’s what I called it when I was young. My grandfather has and continues to collect torture devices throughout the ages and donates them to various museums around the world. He hopes it will make humans realize something about their own humanity. The pieces in there are recent arrivals.”

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She could only imagine why his grandfather would do such a thing, and she had to ask, “Was anyone in your family ever tortured?”

“Yes,” he said bluntly, but did not expand on it. “Now turn around so I can take care of your wound.”

She thought a moment, gnawing nervously at her bottom lip.

He brought his nose to within inches of hers. “Don’t bother to argue. This is going to happen one way or the other.” He tilted his head and smiled. “I’ve already seen you naked, sweetheart, so what difference does it make?”

She jabbed him in the chest. “A big difference between feasting on me until I couldn’t stop coming and taking care of a wound to my backside.”

He leaned even closer until his lips almost touched hers. “You have no idea the pleasure you would get if I truly feasted on you. Now turn around.”

She gave his chest a push, not that it did any good. “Step back.”

He did, though slowly.

Lara turned around before she lost her nerve and gripped the edge of the vanity for support. She jumped when his fingers touched her bare backside and fought to keep her mind empty of any salacious thoughts.

“Thank goodness the spike didn’t fully puncture your skin,” he said as he came to

stand beside her.

She watched as he searched the medicine cabinet, taking out a bottle of peroxide, antibiotic ointment, and a large bandage. She had to ask. “I thought vampires healed instantly, so why a stocked medicine cabinet?”

“Appearances.”

“You have many strangers going through your medicine cabinet?”

“Overnight guests,” he said with a wink, and then dropped down beside her once again.

The thought that he had had other women here, in his bathroom, in his bed, annoyed her, so she threw a sarcastic barb at him. “Bite any?” She winced, the peroxide having connected with her wound and stinging mightily.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to hurt you,” he said.

His apology was so genuine that it touched her heart. It sounded as if it had pained him to have caused her pain. But what about when he bit a woman on the neck? Surely that would be more painful than this minor wound. What did he feel then? Pleasure?

She was about to ask him again if he ever bit any woman when he sprung up to once again stand beside her.

He got busy wetting a hand towel and grabbing the larger one that lay beneath it on the towel bar. “Need to get the blood off you.”

“I can do that she offered.” Worried the blood might be too much for him.

“Not to worry. I’m not a young vampire who needs to learn to control his urges. Although with you, it is proving more difficult than I anticipated.”

“Is that why you looked so...” she shivered recalling the feral look on his face when she had seen him at the end of the hall after the lights had come on.

“I was in the middle of trying to get the generator to kick on again, not wanting you to wake to pitch darkness when I sensed you were already up and about. Then when I realized where you were,” —he stopped— “I was too late to stop you from getting hurt. I should have gotten to you sooner.”

He’d been angry because she’d been hurt, not because he was thirsty for her blood. He cared about her, and her heart didn’t hammer this time, it swelled like a young girl who was on the precipice of falling off and into love.

“The snowstorm has grown worse, and I fear the one generator will shut off again and might not turn back on, so it would be best if you slept in my bed tonight,” he said as he finished drying her leg and patting her backside dry.

She was about to reject his suggestion when she felt him apply the antibiotic cream to her wound. His touch was so tender, so considerate that the little embarrassment left from this strange incident vanished. That was as long as she didn’t allow herself to think about her naked derriere being practically in his face. Or be reminded that he had told her he’d love to give it some tender bites.

She quickly said, “I’ll do fine in my own bed.”

“There’s no need for you to worry, I’ll sleep on the chaise,” he assured her and stood, taking her by the arm and turning her slowly around to face him. “I want to make sure you’re safe. And being with me, I know you’ll be safe.”

She realized right there and then that it wasn't Michael she had to fear—it was herself.

“Can I have my pajama bottom?” she asked much too tempted to remain half naked in front of him. After all it would only take a quick yank of his sweatpants to have him naked. Yup, the thought was just too damn tempting.

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“They have blood on them. I’ll lend you something of mine.”

That wasn’t good, then she’d have his scent on her. Just like her scent stimulated him, his scent stimulated her—big time.

He braced his hands on either side of her again. “It’s torture for me, having you here so close and not being able to do anything about it, since I will not take what is not given freely.”

“I should go to my room,” she said his body pressing lightly against hers.

“Stay here,” he said his sweatpants whispering against her clitoris and sending it tingling wildly.

She sucked in her breath, trying to gain control of her passion that was screaming I want, I want, I want. She needed to get away from him or she’d do something she’d regret or would she?

Come on let’s have fun, her libido shouted.

“I need to go,” she said and pushed past him, out the bathroom door and into his bedroom. He followed her, though didn’t stop her, though his words did as her hand reached for the doorknob.

“What are you afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid,” she said turning with a toss of her head.

“Then let me love you.”

Love. Is that what she was afraid of, that she'd fall in love with this unearthly creature and what future would there be in that? Or did she take this moment in time, a few precious days, and simply enjoy him and not worry about what followed?

“Why fight what you—and I—so badly want?”

“No bites?” she asked in a whisper. If he didn't bite her then it would just be a man and a woman making love, enjoying each other while stuck in a snowstorm, nothing more.

“If that's what you want.”

For now. Her thought startled her and she hoped Michael didn't hear it.

He held his hand out to her.

I will not take what is not given freely. His words echoed in her head. Was she about to surrender to him?

She smiled and instead made it her choice by hurrying over to him, throwing her arms around his neck, and giving him a kiss that let him know just that. His arms instantly circled her, yanking her up against him, and she reveled in the feel of just how hard he was for her.

Her body's tortuous need for him surprised her. After all, it hadn't been that long ago that he had satisfied her—quite thoroughly—yet here she was aching for him as if she hadn't had sex in ages. She had never felt so drawn to a man, and she intended to get her fill while she could, if she could.

He pulled his mouth away from hers and yanked her top off. A shot of cold air hit her or was it his breath? Whatever it was, hardened her already hard nipples more.

She raised her leg to pull off her sock.

“No,” he ordered with a smile. “Leave them on. You look,” —his smile grew— “delicious in them.”

His hand shot out and grabbed the back of her neck, then he yanked her forward to meet his lips...lips as hungry as hers. They tempted, tormented, and teased to the point of orgasm.

It was like they were lovers who had been lost in time and had finally been reunited and could not get enough of each other. His hands explored her body with exquisite acuteness, as if familiarizing himself with every bare inch of her. Or was he was claiming every bare inch of her?

She wanted to do both to him, familiarize and claim every inch of him.

Her hands began to roam over his chest and when they got to his waist, she realized that he still wore his sweatpants. No, no, no, she thought, they had to come off. She slipped the waistband down his hips, and though she didn't want to stop kissing him, or disturb his hands that were doing divine things to her, she had to so that she could quickly get him naked.

Lara pulled her mouth off his, bent down and yanked his pants down past his ankles, so that he could slip right out of them when he moved, and then she bounced back up, though not all the way.

His jutting penis brushed her cheek, stopping her.

He was big. Bigger and thicker than any man she had ever been with, which of course got her even more excited than she already was, though how that was possible she'd never know. And, of course, with it being right there in her face, so lusciously close, she had the urge to taste.

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She was yanked up so fast that it made her head spin.

“No, you don’t,” he said. “I damn well won’t be able to control myself if you take me in your mouth.”

She smiled at the thought.

He frowned. “Remember...vampire.”

“But I’m not and I want to taste you.” Only this time she went up on her toes to reach his neck and nibbled along it with her teeth. She felt his whole body stiffen, and she continued her teasing assault, fueling her own need.

Suddenly, his arm went around her waist and the next thing she knew they were in his bed with him on top of her.

“You’re playing with fire,” he warned, a hint of red sparking in his eyes before he once again kissed her.

After that, time seemed to stop, and she felt as if she was caught in a sensual vortex where her senses were so heightened that the slightest touch sent quivers of pleasure stinging her flesh. Michael’s lips followed his hands, wherever he touched, he kissed, and he touched her everywhere. She tried to reach out and do the same, but her limbs were too sedated with passion to move.

“Michael. Oh, God, Michael, please!”

She cringed at the sound of her pleading tone, but then she couldn't help it. She wanted him inside her, needed him inside her. It was where he belonged. She cringed again. What the hell was wrong with her thinking he belonged there?

"Damn it, Michael!" she yelled and punched his shoulder. He laughed, and she damned him again.

"That's so you will never forget our first time together."

And before she could say a word, she felt him drive into her and, oh my God, did it feel fantastic!

She grabbed onto his muscled arms and held tight as he drove her to heights of unadulterated passion. Thought wasn't possible, breathing was rapid, and what she felt was indescribably beautiful.

Then she climaxed.

Lara didn't think she could scream that loud or long, but then she never climaxed like that before, never thought it was even possible. It was beyond mind-blowing, beyond believable as wave after wave quivered her body senseless.

What sent even more quivers through her was watching Michael come, his head tossed back and a long groan spilling from his lips as he drove in and out of her until he finally finished, collapsing on top of her.

She kept her arms around him, loving the feel of their bodies plastered against each other, as if they were forever joined. And she never wanted to let him go.

Michael eased out of her arms onto his back and pulled her to rest against him. "I hope the snowstorm lasts longer than predicted, for I want you to myself for as long

as possible, though I fear my thirst for you is far too great to ever quench.”

“You quenched my thirst ever so,” —she smiled, though scrunched her brow— “now that I think of it, I’m sure I’ll be thirsty again soon.”

He laughed and hugged her against him.

A chill took hold of her, and she shivered.

He was quick to pull the sheet and quilt over them and to her surprise he eased her away from him.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

“You’ve lost some of your body heat to me and I don’t want to draw anymore from you until you warm up, so my body will be cold to the touch and only make you colder.”

Lara closed the short distance between them and wrapped herself around him. “Cold or not, I don’t care. I love being in your arms and want to be there as long as possible.”

Forever would do.

How did one slap a hand over her mind to stop it from thinking? Besides, why was she even thinking that?

“And I love having you in my arms.”

She dared not think about the many things she wished she could say to him for fear of him hearing her. She wondered if he could feel how content she was at this moment.

She smiled and looked at him. “Thank you for the best sex I’ve ever had.”

He grinned. “Oh, sweetheart, the best sex is yet to come.”

CHAPTER 10

Lara woke hungry, though this time for food. She didn't know if she'd been sleeping only a few minutes or hours. All she knew was that she was hungry, a post-condition of sex. It never failed; sex always left her stomach growling.

She sighed when she realized she lay on her side hugging the edge of the bed, another post-condition of sex. It was almost as if she was trying to get away from the guy she had just slept with, but she hadn't felt that way about Michael, so why was she hugging the edge of the bed? Habit no doubt.

She turned slowly not wanting to disturb Michael if he was sleeping, which he was and she smiled. He was such a gorgeous man and thoughtful, two qualities that would make for a great husband. But there was that one snag...he was a vampire.

Her stomach reminded her of why she had woken and as quietly as possible she slipped out of bed. She grabbed Michael's black sweatshirt off the chaise, slipped it on, and hurried out of the room. Thankfully the lights were on in the hall, and she sped down it, a smile spreading wide when she made it to the stairs without the lights going out.

With her stomach grumbling much too loudly, she made her way to the kitchen and flipped on the lights. It was still dark outside, and she looked to the microwave clock to see the time, 6:05. Sunrise wasn't for another hour. She did look out the window to see if it was still snowing, but it was difficult to see anything with it still being dark.

Besides, she didn't want to think of leaving Michael, at least not just yet.

She went to the fridge and gathered the makings for a spinach and mushroom omelet and got busy. She also put the kettle on, dying for a cup of tea. She chopped and beat and hummed to herself, since her singing was so horrible that she couldn't even stand listening to it.

She turned the boiling tea water down when the kettle began to whistle and was about to start cooking her omelet when she turned and saw Michael standing in the doorway. He wore sweatpants that matched his sweatshirt she was wearing. His hair was rumpled, making him look sexier than he already was, however, the spark of red in his eyes worried her.

"Is something wrong?" she asked

He walked over to her, took the bowl from her hands, sat it on the counter, grabbed her face in his hands and kissed her, his tongue shooting into her mouth with an urgency that she immediately responded to.

His hands dropped to her waist and with a quick lift, she was sitting on the edge of the counter. His hands rushed to push his sweatpants down while their mouths continued to feast on one another. His hands went around her waist and yanked her forward.

A deep gasp rose up in her throat, and she had to tear her mouth away from his to release it when she felt him hard and probing against her. She reached down, grabbing hold of him, and before guiding him inside her, she caressed her clitoris with the tip of his penis and let out a moan that echoed off the kitchen walls and heated her cheeks red.

After that she wasn't sure how he got inside her, but she was glad he did. And even

more glad when he yanked her forward, forcing himself deeper inside her.

With his hands tight at her waist, he urged, “Wrap your legs around me.”

She did and he began to drive in and out her with a force that rattled her bones and sent her passion soaring.

“I’m going to come, damn it” she cried annoyed, wanting the exquisite anticipation to last a bit longer.

“More than once,” he said with conviction and slammed into her.

She toppled over into a breath-stealing climax and let herself drift and enjoy the exquisite sensation and just when she thought it was done another climax gripped her and sent her reeling, Michael joining her.

After sanity, somewhat, returned, Lara rested her brow on Michael’s shoulder, while her hands lay limp on his arm muscles that continued to throb from exertion. His head rested against hers and his hands remained at her waist, and he remained inside her. That was fine with her, she liked him there.

They stayed that way for a while, resting and reveling in the aftermath of quick, yet damn good sex. Lara still couldn’t quite wrap her head around at what she had been missing all these years. It felt so good, so right, so perfect with Michael and that was the catch...it was Michael who had made the difference.

Michael eased out of her as he eased her further back on the counter, though he kept his hands at her waist, as if he wasn’t ready to let go. “You were gone when I woke,”

“I was hungry, for food this time.”

“You don’t understand,” he said, “I should have woken when you did.”

“You didn’t have to wake with me. I can see to feeding myself,” she assured him.

“That’s not the point.” He shook his head. “I should have sensed you waking and I didn’t.”

“And there’s something wrong with that because...”

“Because I was so content from making love to you that I slept more deeply than I normally would.”

She grinned and wiggled her shoulders as she sang, “I have power over a vampire.”

His eyes sparked red and she stopped, seeing that she had angered him. Their eyes held and his eyes grew redder, and then...her stomach grumbled.

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“You need to eat,” he said and lifted her off the counter.

She couldn’t help but shiver, thinking how powerful he was and that it was more than just physical strength.

“You’re cold,” he said. “Is there something I can get from your room that you can slip on?”

“Gray and white stripe flannel bottoms in my suitcase.” He nodded and turned to leave when she asked, “Is there anything you can eat for breakfast?”

“I usually have fruit.”

“I’ll have it waiting for you,” she said and heard him chuckle as she turned to open the fridge. It took her a moment to find the containers of cut fruit and when she turned, she gasped, glad she was holding them tight.

Michael stood a hair’s breadth away from her, holding her flannel bottoms.

He took the containers from her and handed her the bottoms.

She hurried into them. “Well, I guess I’ll never beat you in a race.”

He laughed. “That’s a given.”

Her stomach really let out a good grumble this time.

Michael took her by the shoulders and pointed her toward the stove. “Cook. I’ll see to the fruit.”

They took the meal into the cozy room off the kitchen. Michael started a fire in the now cold hearth and then sat beside her on the sofa.

They ate and talked about various subjects, avoiding the obvious ones until they were finished and settled back on the sofa.

Lara rubbed her arms, feeling a bit chilled and Michael went and put another few logs on the fire. He also grabbed the soft wool throw off the back of the chair and draped it over Lara’s shoulders before he returned to his seat.

Lara tucked the blanket around her, thinking she wouldn’t mind it being his arms that kept her warm, but when he reached out and took her socked-covered foot and began massaging it, she changed her mind.

She relaxed, not wanting to think beyond this moment, though curiosity had a way of poking at her. She tried to ignore the pokes and think of nothing but how great he was at giving a foot massage. His fingers were strong, the pressure hard and her feet ever so grateful. Yet the pokes continued.

“You have something you want to ask me?” he said.

“You read me as easily as an open book.”

“You keep leaving the book open.”

“Then I’ll have to close it,” she said with a determined smile.

He laughed. “I’d just pick up the audio version.”

She shook her head, though continued smiling. “You’re impossible.”

“That is a trait of mine you should be aware of, but back to what it was you wanted to ask me.”

“I’m curious?—”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he reminded.

“But satisfaction brought her back,” she said with a grin.

He smiled. “Your question?”

“Do you ever regret being a vampire?”

“I can’t say that I do. It’s my heritage and knowing my family history, I must admit I’m proud of my grandfather for all he has done to create a loving family of strong and courageous creatures.”

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Curiosity kept poking, and so she asked, “With your grandfather cursed how did he ever find a woman to?—”

“Accept who he is?”

“Love him regardless for who he is,” she said, “especially over two hundred years ago. Myths, fears and ignorance flourished.”

“My grandfather never let fear rule him, though he’s been quick to point out that it’s not that he has never feared anything. He just doesn’t let fear rule his decisions, his life. He always took chances, and he never regretted the choices he made, though he will admit to making some mistakes. However, he told me, from when I was very young, it’s not just admitting your mistakes but learning from them that makes the difference. Besides he claimed that without mistakes we never see the true worth of wise decisions.”

“He sounds like a remarkable man, but then he would have to be to have not only survived such a dreadful curse but thrived in spite of it.”

“It was a challenge, but he accepted it and did what he needed to do. Besides, he had someone there to help him.”

“Your grandmother?”

Michael smiled and chuckled. “A woman far beyond her years, even more so than my grandfather. They make a good pair, but then they have been through much together.”

“So, your grandfather knew your grandmother before he was cursed and became a vampire?”

“Yes, they were lovers.”

“Wasn’t she afraid of what he had become? It wasn’t like he had someone to teach him how to be a vampire. He was on his own with no guidance.”

Michael nodded at the window. “The snow still falls. We may be stuck here longer than expected.”

With her question sidetracked, Lara followed his glance. The day had dawned, at least as best it could since the skies were a heavy gray and snow was falling, though not as heavily as yesterday.

“We’re snug, safe, and warm,” she said, trying not to moan as his fingers dug into the soles of her foot. Good lord, could he give a good foot massage.

“This may be a good time to remind you that vampires have ravenous sexual appetites, as I told you when we first met.”

“I’m experiencing that firsthand,” she said with a wiggle of her eyebrows and a smile.

“Not yet you haven’t?”

“What do you mean?” she asked with a boatload of curiosity and a tiny twinge of fear.

“You’ve experienced me as a man making love to you, not as a vampire. And the vampire in me wants you even more than the man in me does.”

“Why?”

“Biting you during sex—tasting your blood—is the ultimate in intimacy and I want to experience that kind of intense intimacy with you.”

Why did that have to sound so appealing to her?

“And the more we make love the stronger my need to taste you becomes.”

“You mean the harder it is for you not to bite me?”

He nodded.

“But you won’t bite me without my permission, right?” she asked anxiously. He didn’t answer as quickly as she expected. He seemed to think about it. “Right, Michael?”

He shut his eyes for a moment and before he did, she thought she saw a glint of red in them. But when he opened them, it wasn’t there.

“You’re much too tempting.”

She eased her foot out of his hand, inching it further and further away from him and tried to make light of a situation that seemed to grow heavier by the minute. “You wouldn’t like the taste of me. I haven’t an ounce of sweetness to me. I’m much too tart.”

“Perfect, since I don’t have a sweet tooth.” He reached out, his fingers caressing her ankle. “Where’s your myth hunter curiosity?”

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“It runs away as soon as I see your fangs.”

“You’re afraid of them.”

“I’d be a fool not to be,” she said and tried to hold on to her sanity as his hand moved up to caress her calf. He intoxicated her with one touch, one simple touch and her body wanted more, needed more. If she felt this way now, how would she feel after he tasted her blood? Would she be as ravenous as a vampire? And how would she ever live a normal life after that? But then how would she ever live a normal life again after getting to know Michael?

“I can ease your fears.”

“How? I’ve seen how sharp your fangs are. You can’t tell me that it doesn’t hurt when you bite.”

“Not in the throes of making love it doesn’t, but first you need to see for yourself how good my fangs can feel.”

His hand slipped off her calf and with a hand to each knee, he spread her legs apart and pulled her slowly down until her head rested on the couch. Then he moved between her legs, coming to rest over her with his body.

“Remember, I will never hurt you,” he whispered. “You have nothing to fear.”

Even though he assured her, the sensual quiver that ran through her held a touch of fear. And, of course, it grew when his eyes began to glow red and grew even more

when his lips drew back, and his fangs began to descend.

CHAPTER 11

Close your eyes. Close your eyes, Lara screamed in her head. She didn't listen to her own warnings, she couldn't. She was too mesmerized with how his fangs were growing. They gleamed wet and the points looked so much sharper than she had first thought.

Yes, close your eyes and let yourself feel.

Was that her thought? It didn't matter; she shut her eyes. She had to, the sight of his fangs making this all too real, all too frightening.

Her whole body locked in fright when his fangs skimmed lightly along her neck. The sharp points tickled her skin, sending goosebumps running along it. She jumped when he nipped the flesh near her shoulder and then ran his sharp teeth back up her neck again.

Her whole body quivered at the startling sensation, and she grew wet between her legs.

He either sensed her reaction or caught her damp scent, for in the next second, he moved down her, yanking her bottoms off her hips as he went until he completely discarded them. Then his fangs settled against the soft inner flesh of her thighs.

She would have bolted off the couch if he hadn't held her firm, and when he nipped gently along her flesh, her hands dug into the sofa cushion, looking somehow to anchor herself and stop the spiraling passion she felt herself falling into.

His hand went to rest on her stomach and in the next instant she understood why. He

brushed his fang over her clitoris, and she thought she'd shoot right off the couch like an exploding firework.

He held her firm as he continued to torment her with his fangs and tongue, and she feared that given time she would beg him to bite her, and she didn't know if she really wanted that.

"Enough, Michael, you've proven your point."

He raised his head, his eyes red glowing orbs and his tongue dripping saliva or did he drip with her wetness? The thought shivered her senseless.

"You're ready to come, I can feel it."

"Not this way, not because you want to prove a point," she said and tried to squirm her way out from beneath him. "A point you have obviously proved without a shadow of a doubt."

He held her firm, stopping her from squirming. "Yet somehow has annoyed you. We can talk about that later, but for now let me satisfy the lust that is ready to burst inside you."

"No," she said, "now let me go."

He turned his head away for a moment and when he turned back his fangs were gone and his eyes normal. "I can't let you go with your need so great." His finger whispered across her sensitive nub, and she groaned, pure pleasure racing through her.

"You want to come, I can feel it with each touch," he said, his finger teasing her some more. "And I want to make you come. I want to taste you when you come. Say yes,

Lara, say yes.”

She stubbornly wanted to scream no, but her body was screaming yes, yes, yes, and so she caved and shouted, “Yes, damn you, yes!”

Within minutes she was screaming again, only this time in the throes of another mind-blowing climax. It took her a while to finally regain her sanity and when she did, she got annoyed at herself.

Michael must have felt it, since he moved off her and with knitted brow said, “You’re upset.”

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She was quick to jump off the couch, snatch her flannel bottoms off the floor, and slip them on. “There’s no point in denying it, since you know everything I think and feel and, of course, you can make me come without any effort at all,” —her eyes turned wide— “oh, but that isn’t enough. Let’s now add to that how your fangs can send me over the edge into oblivion, and I won’t even give a damn!”

She turned to hurry off.

“Lara—”

“No,” she shouted and turned, shaking a finger at him. “Don’t you dare say a word. You’ve made me feel things I’ve never felt before. And now you’re telling me I can feel even more, but at what cost to me? And I’m the only one who can protect me, so I need to step back and?—”

“No!” He bolted up off the sofa, though didn’t approach her. “Don’t step away from me. And you don’t need to protect yourself; I will protect you.”

“And who protects me from you?” She shook her head. “I need some time alone. I’m going to take a bath and you’re to leave me to my thought, so stay out of them.”

“That may be difficult.”

“I don’t care how difficult it is, stay out of my head.” She hurried to the open doorway.

“I will make love to you again, Lara, you’ll want me to.”

She turned. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Lara rushed into the large foyer and up the stairs to her room, locking the door behind her, not that it would do any good. But she had to believe that Michael would respect her wishes and give her this time alone. She needed it.

She was glad there was a bathtub as well as a shower stall in the bathroom. She wanted to soak away her worries. She adjusted the water to a temperature that suited her and added some vanilla bath salts from the jar on the shelf. She then returned to the bedroom and collected some clothes. She had brought her long, gray knit skirt that worked well for any occasion, including wearing it around the house to relax in, and she needed something comfy like that today. She paired it with thick black socks and a long-sleeved, black knit top. She seldom wore shoes when home for the day. She added undergarments to her pile and carted the bundle to the bathroom.

She planned on washing her hair, so she left it free, stripped off her clothes, and sunk into the water that was just hot enough to ease her muscles and relax her worries. She slid down along the back curve of the tub until the water framed her face, then she closed her eyes and let her thoughts float away.

Wasn’t she afraid of what he had become?

Her eyes shot open. Michael had never answered the question about his grandmother. Had the snow diverted his attention, or had he purposely not answered? Was there something about his grandmother that he didn’t want her to know? He had mentioned that his grandmother held her age better than his grandfather. Was it only because of the many children she had or was it something else? Could his grandfather have made her a vampire? And had she wanted him to or had it been an accident? In his immaturity as a vampire could he have taken from the woman he loved something she hadn’t wanted to give? Or are sexual appetites of vampires so ravenous that there comes a point where they can’t control it?

She shook her head, slushing the water around her face. Michael would have told her, or would he? Should she trusted a vampire to tell her the truth? Was she that gullible? She thought about her blog and all the reasonable explanations she had come across for explaining the strange phenomenon she had investigated. She had never let herself be gullible before, but then she had never fallen in love with a vampire before.

Love.

What was she some romantic idiot?

This was nothing more than sex while stranded together in a snowstorm with a vampire.

She groaned and sunk beneath the water. Love. Sex. Vampire. Nothing made sense.

Except when making love with Michael, then everything seemed right.

That was the most difficult part of all this. She couldn't wrap her head around her feelings for Michael. Was she falling in love with him? Was it only lust because she had finally experienced mind-blowing orgasms? Or was she simply intrigued by the vampire in him?

She started washing her hair, scrubbing her scalp quite vigorously, wishing she could scrub away her doubts and confusion and reach a sane conclusion. She hurried through the rest of her bath, the water growing cold.

It didn't take her long to blow dry her hair with the dryer she found in the cabinet and slip into her clothes. She applied moisturizer to her face and a touch of gloss to her lips, nothing more. She preferred the natural look. It worked for her. She wrapped a slim white knit scarf around her neck, for warmth or to protect her neck from bites, she wasn't sure.

She planned to spend an hour or so reading right here in her room when she caught sight of the old spell book on the mantel. It reminded her of how he had avoided speaking further about his grandmother, and she suddenly had the urge to know more about his ancestors who had turned the Valaines into vampires.

She grabbed the book off the mantel and made her way downstairs. He was in the first room she looked at...the library. He looked freshly washed himself, his hair a bit damp and his black sweatpants gone replaced by dark gray ones and a light gray knit top that hugged his muscles.

He raised his head from the book he was reading and smiled. "You are beautiful."

His words fluttered her heart and naturally stirred her libido.

"I have some questions," she said and approached him, though sat across from him in one of the overstuffed chairs.

She saw him glance at the book in her hand.

“My grandparents,” he said.

“I’m curious about your grandmother. How did she cope with loving a vampire?”

Looking for an answer to how you can love a vampire?

The distinct thought startled her. Was she looking for such an answer?

He held his hand out for the book, and she handed it over to him. He placed it on the table beside him. “As I mentioned my grandfather lived in turbulent and difficult times. Wars were more prevalent than peace. But there was a space of time when life had grown peaceful and farms prospered, people grew hopeful, though remained cautious.” Michael smiled. “As my grandfather likes to point out, it was around this time that he was a fine, strapping young man and all the women had an eye for him. He insists he could have had his choice of a wife, but one day changed all that.

“He was hunting in the woods and came across a beautiful woman bathing in a pond. He thought her an angel, smooth, pale skin, stark black hair, piercing dark eyes and a face so beautiful it robbed a man of his breath and his sanity. He knew then and there he would make her his wife. He waited until she finished, keeping his eyes off her, or so he claims, and followed her. He planned on finding out who she was, and then properly introducing himself to her family and seeking permission to wed her, having no doubt permission would be granted. You see my grandfather was of noble blood and being the oldest son, he would inherit the land and all on it, so he was quite a catch. Unfortunately, his dreams died in an instant when he saw that she arrived at a gypsy camp in the woods. Gypsies were not people nobles associated with or for that matter peasants didn’t associate with them either. They were pariahs in all areas of

society.”

“And yet your grandfather didn’t give up.”

Michael laughed. “No, my grandfather’s expectations changed after that and he thought to have sex with the beautiful gypsy woman, never expecting love to strike him so hard, so my grandmother claims. Personally, I think love caught both by surprise. One thing they both agree on is that they had the best summer of their lives that year. They were young, falling in love, and fearless, until...”

“The gypsies found out and cursed him,” Lara said.

“No.” Michael shook his head, a hint of red sparking in his dark eyes, though fading fast.

Lara’s brow knitted in question. “What happened?”

“My grandmother told my grandfather that she was a vampire.”

CHAPTER 12

“Your grandmother was—is—always has been—a vampire?” Lara asked her brow knitting more deeply. “Did she make your grandfather a vampire? Did he want to become one?”

“Let me finish. You’ll have your answers then,” Michael said.

Lara remained silent, more eager than ever to hear the tale. She had wondered about Michael’s grandmother and what she must have gone through discovering the man she loved was a vampire, and yet now it was just the opposite. How in heavens name had his grandfather handled it?

“My grandfather didn’t believe her at first, as my grandmother tells it—he laughed. He stopped laughing as soon as she showed him her fangs.”

Lara could relate to that, though she doubted his grandfather had fainted like she had done.

“My grandfather drew his dagger on her, which my grandmother says nearly broke her heart. He didn’t run, though, which gave my grandmother hope. He questioned her and they talked. My grandmother says that she knew from first meeting him that she loved him and that he was a man of great strength and that he was endowed with a courageous nature. And that if anyone could survive loving a vampire, he could.” Michael grinned. “My grandfather always puffs his chest out when my grandmother tells that part of it, though he does admit that she scared the hell out of him when she first showed him her fangs.”

Lara laughed. “I can relate to that.”

“My grandfather says he had first wondered if she had put a spell on him, since gypsies were notorious for casting spells and curses. When he asked her if she did, my grandmother got furious and told him to leave and never return if he believed she could do such a thing to the man she loved with all her heart. My grandmother can be very dramatic at times, and she has a temper, though it’s quick to fade. She claims it’s the gypsy in her.”

“But your grandfather couldn’t stay away,” she said, knowing how he must have felt, since the thought of leaving Michael filled her with sadness.

“No, he couldn’t stay away. He returned night after night, and then two things happened that changed everything. His father discovered that his son was involved with a gypsy woman and the gypsies discovered that my grandfather knew they were vampires. My grandfather was ordered to take part in a raid on the gypsy camp and

kill the gypsy woman to break the spell his father had been convinced she had put on his son.” Michael paused a moment, his face suddenly shadowed with sorrow. “My grandmother was ordered to kill my grandfather.”

“Did they run away?” Lara asked, thinking it was their only way out of the horrible situation.

“It wasn’t a choice. My grandmother said her band of vampires would hunt him down and kill him. There was only one way—my grandmother had to make him a vampire.”

Lara gasped. “That’s when she cursed him.”

“That’s when my grandfather gave up being human for the woman he loved and as he says to this day, he has never regretted it.”

“So, she cursed him.”

“No, she cast a spell on him.”

“The book,” Lara said, pointing to it.

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Michael picked it up, opening it and turning the pages with care. “My grandmother complied this book of spells, writing some lines in English and others in her native gypsy tongue. She felt it was safer that way, even though there were certain observances that needed to be met before a spell could be cast. She didn’t want to take any chances.”

He stopped at a page, though didn’t look at it as he recited the spell. “In the darkest time of night, when no moon shines fully bright, I call on the forces that be, to grant my impassioned plea, this love that beats strongly in our hearts, cannot survive if we must part, and so with love I curse his soul, as through the ages has been told, take our souls and combine, so that he/she will be forever mine, and in the years those we sire, will forever be born of fire, it is done and will always be, a love that lasts through eternity.”

“What happened to your grandparents after the spell was cast?”

“Once he proved to my grandmother’s people that the spell had worked, they married to seal his commitment to her and her people. My grandfather insisted my grandmother leave right afterwards since he knew the raid on the camp would come soon. He planned to join her after he spoke with his father. She refused to leave him and waited in a safe place in the woods. His father and he had a vicious fight and being my grandfather was so new at being a vampire, he couldn’t control the urge to show his fangs when threatened. His father ordered a stake to be driven through his heart and his body burnt. My grandmother could read my grandfather’s thoughts and sense his feelings, as I do yours, and she didn’t hesitate to save him. With constant wars in their homeland and changing times, they eventually came to the New World and made a new life for themselves and generations to come. But you will not see

that story in the books on the Village of Mull and I know you will understand when I ask you to keep the story to yourself.”

“Of course,” Lara said, “though who would believe it? It sounds more a myth.”

“But somewhere in a myth is a basis of fact, something that gave birth to the myth.”

“Like the suggestion that this town was founded by a vampire. However, did that myth, though actually fact, get started?” she asked.

“My grandfather credits my grandmother with that one. It seems Grandma wanted to honor her family or band of gypsies. They were known in their own circles as the band of mulla...band of corpses. Grandpa shortened it to Mull, and curiosity—which you are very familiar with—had a journalist putting two and two together and coming up with the idea that the Romanians who settled Mull were gypsies. He insists that the original town name was probably Mulla, which then of course had to mean that the founding family had to have been vampires. The story stuck, though the town has fought hard through the years to negate such a ridiculous claim.”

“Your grandfather’s love for your grandmother must really run deep for him to have given up so much for her. It’s never wavered through the long years?” Lara asked curious that such an everlasting love could possibly be real. It was a nice thought and of course poetry and books had been written on such undying love, but was it real or simply a myth?

“I asked my grandfather that once, and I recall how serious his expression had been when he told me that never once had he questioned his love for his wife. He insists that his love for her has never diminished, but rather has flourished through the years. And that life would not be worth living without her. My grandmother told me just about the same when I purposed the question to her.” Michael smiled. “Not that I’ve never seen them fight. Believe me, they can go at it good sometimes, though they

never stay mad at each other.”

“Now that I know all your dark, deep secrets?—”

He smiled and a hint of red shined in his eyes. “Sweetheart, you haven’t even touched on my dark, deep secrets yet.”

Her libido and curiosity went into overdrive at the same time. What more dark secrets could he harbor? She wanted to know, or did she?

“What bothers you, Lara?”

“Where to begin?” she said with a quivering laugh. “All of this is so surreal that I sometimes wonder if it’s a dream and I’ll wake up.”

“And would you be disappointed if it was?”

His question startled her as did the answer she kept from slipping past her lips—yes. She would be extremely disappointed, just as she knew she would be when it came time to say good-bye to him. Barely two days knowing this man, and yet she felt more connected to him than some of her friends she had known for years.

She realized he was waiting for an answer and she quickly said, “It’s been memorable.”

“I can make it more memorable.”

She had to smile. “I’ve no doubt you could.” Before he could respond or the conversation went in a direction that she preferred it didn’t, she stood. “I could use a cup of tea. Would you like one?” She shook her head. “You don’t drink tea,” she said more to herself than him.

Lara put the kettle on and tried to keep from looking at the section of the counter where only a few hours ago they had had quick, deliciously satisfying sex. She turned away and planned to busy herself looking through the wide selection of teabags kept in a beautifully carved mahogany box and found herself face to face with Michael.

“I would love to hike your skirt up, pull your panties off and have you here again on the counter, but I think we should try the library next. The couch is soft, though up against the ladder could prove interesting.”

“Damn it, Michael,” she said, stepping around him.

He grabbed her hand before she could get all the way passed him. “Aroused you, didn’t I?”

“Smart ass,” she said and yanked her hand out of his and turned around, opting for a regular teabag from the ceramic container on the counter rather than trying to get passed him.

He thought differently, snagging his arm around her waist and turning her around to face him. His lips caught hers in a kiss before she could say anything. And of course, she melted in his arms as always.

Always.

But it wasn’t always. They would have only this short time together and nothing more but...memories. Why did the thought disturb her so? Could she have actually fallen in love with him in such a short time?

His mouth left hers and he whispered in her ear, “Let me love you, Lara”

I’m not stopping you, she thought.

Aren't you?

Now wasn't the time to argue with herself or was she? She laid her hand to his chest and pushed him away, though he went only so far. "That was you in my head."

"It's grown more difficult not to respond to some of your thoughts since I hear them as if you spoke the words aloud to me."

"Have you intruded on all my thoughts?" she asked, realizing what he would have heard. She didn't wait for an answer, she moved away from him, shutting the whistling kettle off as she went.

"I don't do it on purpose," he said.

"That's not what I asked and that's not an excuse." She folded her arms tightly across her chest.

"Shielding yourself from me?" he asked with a nod to her folded arms.

"Is a shield possible?"

"Shall we see?"

She kept her arms tight against her, but he didn't make a move. He didn't have to. She gasped when she felt his fingers slide between her legs and enter her ever so slowly.

“You’re wet, but then my touch, even the lightest one turns you wet.”

She grabbed the edge of the counter. “Stop.”

“Are you sure?” he asked his fingers going deeper.

“Yes,” she shouted and gripped the counter even harder when his touch left her.

“Looks like shields don’t work.”

“So, you cannot only read my mind at will, but you can also touch me without physically touching me. Do I have no way of defending myself against you at all?”

“Why would you need to?”

She threw her arms up in the air. “Oh, I don’t know. Could it be that you invade my thoughts and touch me at whim...no matter where you are? Is that why I always want you?”

“I don’t invade your thoughts. Your thoughts reach out to me. I’ve blocked them when you’ve asked me to, but as I’ve explained, the more we connect the harder it is to block you.” He took a step toward her, though left a small distance between them. “I never touch you at whim. I touch you because I can’t resist not touching you. You’re like an intoxicant to me, once tasted impossible not to taste again. My appetite for you is ravenous now.” He shook his head. “I cannot imagine what it would be like if I did bite you while making love. I fear that I would never get my fill of you.” He took another step closer, their bodies almost touching. “But then I think you feel the same, since your ache for me is of your own doing. Never would I touch you if you didn’t want me to and believe me, sweetheart, you have made it quite obvious that you want me.”

“So, what you’re saying is that we’re simply two consenting adults that have fallen into—lust,” she said annoyed

He brought his face to rest so close to hers that their noses almost touched. “What else could it be?”

Her heart thundered in her chest, her stomach fluttered uncontrollably, and she fought to control her thoughts, fought to stop from silently shouting, love, you fool...love!

His arm went around her waist, and he brought his body to rest against hers. “Let me love you, Lara.”

Yes, yes, love me, she thought and pushed away the thought that ached to follow, the one she didn’t want him to hear. Love me like your grandfather loved your grandmother...a forever mine kind of love.

Her eyes closed as he kissed her and she got lost in it, got lost in him.

She didn’t know how they had gotten to the library, but she knew they were there. She could smell the aged books and feel the rungs of the ladder against her back as he leaned into her.

Just the thought of him taking her there against the ladder, hiking her skirt and slipping her panties off to bury himself inside her had her growing so excited and wet that she feared she’d come before he could get inside her.

He was right. Her ache for him was of her own doing, and she didn’t want to think that there would come a time when they would make love for the last time.

She felt warm air brush her legs and knew he had lifted her skirt. Soon his hands would be at her panties pulling them down. Her hands hurried to push his sweatpants

down, and when her hand slide over his penis, she took a moment to caress him. The feel of him so silky smooth, yet so thick and hard had her moaning with the anticipation of him slipping deep and sung inside her.

An incessant ring had her scrunching her brow, breaking her concentration, and then she heard Michael utter,damn, and step away from her.

She reached out to grab him.

“Only a moment, I promise,” he said and squeezed her hand before releasing it.

She sighed with frustration, wondering what could be more important than making love with her, and then she realized what had separated them—the phone was ringing.

It was like being doused with cold water. If the phone was working, then that meant—she turned to look out the window. It had stopped snowing.

Lara stepped away from the ladder, her skirt falling to her ankles as she did. She caught clips of what Michael was saying, and dread began to clench at her stomach.

After returning the phone to its cradle, he walked over to her. “That was the private contractor that handles my snow removal. He says that the main roads will be passable later today and that he will be here early tomorrow morning to dig me out and that he should be done by noon. He also had a message from Martha. The bed and breakfast will be open tomorrow and your roomready for as long as you need to wait for your car service to come and get you.”

Her stomach twisted tight. Today was her last day with Michael. Tomorrow it would all be over and they would part.

CHAPTER 13

Lara felt tears stir in her eyes and the next thing she knew she was wrapped in

Michael's arms.

"We'll make the most of this day," he whispered, "a memory to last forever."

She didn't want just a memory of him; she wanted him forever.

"I need tea," she said and fled the room, fearing she'd burst into tears and make a fool of herself in front of him.

The phone rang again, preventing him from following to her relief. She needed time to get herself together. How the hell would she ever manage to get through the rest of this day, knowing tomorrow she would have to say good-bye to him?

She set the kettle to boil when a thought struck her.

Tell him you love him. What can it hurt? He could possibly feel the same. At least this way you'll never regret not taking the chance.

Don't you think he already knows? He hears your thoughts, and he's said nothing. What does that tell you?

Her heart felt like it plummeted off a steep cliff.

How did one stop from thinking? It wasn't possible. Her mind was always going, though she could keep it busy with nonsensical thoughts. The kettle whistled and Lara made herself a cup of chamomile tea.

Michael entered the room.

"I should get in touch with my car service and see when they can pick me up," she said with what she hoped was a passable smile.

“I’ve already taken care of it,” he said without a trace of a smile.

Her heart plummeted again. He had already made plans for her to leave. “Thank you,” she said, trying to stretch her smile, though she had no desire to smile, and kept her thoughts from going where she didn’t want them to go.

He looked ready to step toward her, and she couldn’t let him kiss her. She just couldn’t. She quickly switched her thoughts to packing her suitcase, thinking of item by item that needed to be folded and packed. She kept the image steady in her mind, fighting back the one that tried to break through...her sobbing uncontrollably in his arms.

“I should pack and make sure I’m ready for tomorrow,” she said, stopping him in his tracks.

“You have plenty of time,” he said and inched closer to her.

No, not near enough time, she thought, though said, “Tomorrow will be here before you know it.”

His arm hurried around her waist, snagging her before she could slip out of his reach. “Then let’s not waste a minute.”

He kissed her and she was soon lost in a haze of delectable sensations. One thought and one thought alone penetrated her foggy brain, and she couldn’t stop it no matter how hard she tried.

You’re forever mine. I love you.

The next thing she knew she was once again up against the library ladder and just as wet and throbbing for him to be inside her as she had been before.

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“Don’t answer the phone if it rings,” she said while shoving his sweatpants down.

“No worries,” he whispered, “I have no intentions of answering it for the rest of the day.”

She grabbed hold of him, and he was just as silky and hard, perhaps harder, than before. “I don’t want to wait,” she said and stepped up on the bottom rung of the ladder so that she could fit him to her perfectly.

A satisfying groan ran from her lips as he slid into her with ease.

He dropped his forehead against hers and struggled, as if in sweet agony to say, “Damn, you’re so snug and warm, your scent so strong. I can almost taste your...” He raised his head and his eyes glowed red, much too red.

“Michael?”

His lips curled back, and his fangs began to appear. “I want so badly to taste you, to show you how making love can truly feel. One taste and?—”

She shoved at his chest. “No!” She couldn’t, wouldn’t surrender completely to him. She had already surrendered her heart to him, if she allowed this—she knew he would have her soul.

“No,” she said again, shaking her head. “No, Michael.”

He plunged deeper inside her, and she fell back against the ladder rungs. He grabbed

the ladder by either side of her head and shoved into her again, his eyes red, though not glowing as brightly, but his fangs still shiny and sharp.

“I’m going to make you come hard.”

“You always do.”

“Not like this,” he said and lowered his mouth to her neck.

She knew he wouldn’t bite her without permission, but it didn’t stop him from tormenting her. And good Lord could his fangs torment. He stilled his penis inside her while he ran the sharp points along her neck. It was as if he caressed her all over at once. Her nipples tingled, her clitoris throbbed unmercifully, and her hips began to gyrate trying to get him to move inside her.

And not once did he touch her, his fangs did it all and she knew he was showing her only a tiny portion of how it would feel if he bit her. She feared she would soon surrender and beg him to bite her, and so she reached down and toyed with his testicles as she moved against him, stirring his penis.

He grabbed her hand, stopping her, his forehead coming to rest against hers, his breathing labored. “Soon, Lara, soon,” he whispered as his fangs disappeared. He then lifted his head, planted his hands on her hips and held her tight as he drove in and out of her.

She came in a blinding explosion of senses that had her grabbing onto his arms tightly and screaming aloud. She squeezed his muscles even tighter when he made her come again, along with him this time.

He would have collapsed on top of her if he hadn’t planted his hands against the ladder, his muscles taught with tension as he kept himself braced a mere inch away

from her. She tried to calm her breathing, but it wasn't easy since little bursts of pleasure continued to tickle her senselessly.

His breathing was as labored as hers, his chest rising and falling rapidly. It took a few minutes for them to regain their senses. Then Michael stirred, stepping back, though not before brushing his lips over hers, and quickly pulled up his sweatpants. He then took hold of her waist and gently lifted her off the ladder, her skirt falling to her ankles as he eased her to her feet.

"You've yet to have your tea," he said with a smile. "Sit. I'll go get it for you."

He didn't wait for her to respond. He left her standing there, and she wondered if he needed a bit of distance from her as she did from him. No, not from each other—from the situation. She braced her hand on one of the ladder rungs and took a deep breath.

A mistake.

His scent was heavy on her as was the scent of sex and damn if her body didn't quiver at the memory. She chased thoughts of him from her head and hurried to scoop up her panties off the floor and slip them on. She then went over to the couch, but chose one of the single chairs, and snatching up the throw, wrapped it snugly around her as she sat.

Michael returned and handed her a mug of hot tea and gave the throw a slight tug. "Didn't we already determine that shields don't work against me?" He sat on the edge of the ottoman table directly in front of her. "Still feel the need to protect?"

"You did show your fangs," she reminded before taking a sip of the chamomile tea and wishing it was something stronger.

"It's a testosterone driven, male vampire thing."

She had to laugh, his dark eyes filled with humor.

“I have said it before to you and I will repeat it as many times as necessary. I will never hurt you and I will always protect you—even from me,” he said with a playful wink.

And again, she laughed.

“Now, I think we should enjoy the day. We can do any number of things besides making love frequently, read together, watch movies together, have a delicious lunch and nice supper together.”

“I take it the theme is togetherness?”

“A good theme, don’t you think?”

“I do,” she said, wishing their togetherness could go beyond today.

“So, after you finish your tea what would you like to do?”

She was quick to answer, “Play in the snow.”

His brow knitted, though humor remained in his dark eyes. “I have to warn you. I make a mean snowball and my aim is perfect.”

“Not as perfect as mine,” she said, puffing out her chest.

“Now that’s a challenge I can’t ignore.”

They talked and laughed and as soon as she finished her tea she went to her room and changed into leggings and a knit top. Michael had more clothes and fur-lined boots waiting for her when she met him in the foyer.

He had changed into jeans, a heavy sweater, and boots.

He held two pairs of sweatpants out to her and a sweatshirt plus a sweater. Once she put them and the boots on, he wrapped a knit scarf around her neck and playfully tugged her up against him.

“You will let me know if you get cold,” he said and kissed her.

“I won’t get cold; I have your kisses to warm me.”

He kissed her again. “Does that mean if I kiss you enough, you just may melt the snow?”

She brushed her cheek against his and whispered, “Touch me and we’ll both be so hot the snow will evaporate in no time.”

“Don’t tempt me or your backside will get frostbite.”

She stepped away from him, snatching the knit hat that stuck out of his jean pocket and pulling it down snugly on her head. “Not if I ride you.”

A hint of red popped in Michael’s eyes, and she quickly yanked the front door open and ran out, falling into a mountain of snow.

They were like two teenagers making the most of a snow day. They made snow angels, a snowman and had a snowball fight that to Michael’s surprise Lara won.

At first Lara was concerned that Michael would get cold, having added no other clothes to what he had on. Then she realized that he didn’t feel the cold like humans did, and yet he appeared so very human.

Kisses intermingled with their fun and laughter and Lara fought to keep the thought of what a wonderful life she could have with this man. She warned herself to think and live only in the moment, not to go beyond, for if she did, she knew sorrow would strike her heart.

Lara’s grumbling stomach warned it was passed lunchtime and brought their play to

an end. Lara made hot chocolate for herself, and they took their plates, veggies for Michael and a hearty soup for Lara, into the room off the kitchen to enjoy.

Lara once again was in her skirt and knit top and Michael had slipped out of his jeans, wet from the snow, and into black sweatpants and left on the light gray knit top that had been under his sweater.

They talked and laughed, no longer the strangers they had been upon meeting, now—not only friends—but lovers.

“I was thinking,” Lara said when they finished eating.

“Hopefully, the same I’ve been thinking,” Michael said with a smile.

“Staying out of my head, how very nice of you.”

His smile faded. “More that you’ve been keeping me out of your head.”

“I’m learning,” she said, sticking out her chest proudly.

“So, you have, though I miss being there, miss you calling out to me.”

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Strangely enough, she missed him being there as well. His absence from her thoughts had left a void, left her feeling alone.

An awkward silence hung over them, as if each were waiting for the other to speak first.

Lara finally did. "I would like to have a look, in bright daylight, at the room of torture."

"Whatever for?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Curiosity? Perhaps to view history up close with someone who has lived it?"

"It wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

"Once we're done, your bedroom is only a few steps away and I did mention a ride." She smiled, stirring her libido that had been simmering ever since she had suggested the idea.

Michael was off the couch in a flash, tugging her up along with him. "Let's go."

Lara laughed softly as she followed him, though her laughing smile died when she stepped into the room of terror. The room was brighter than she had expected, though it was more from the daylight shining through the bare windows.

Michael must have heard her thought, since he said, "My grandfather insisted that the

windows be left unencumbered so light could always shine on this room. It was his way of exposing evil.”

Lara reached out and took hold of Michael’s hand, as if needing his protection from the awful devices.

He held her hand firmly and guided her around the room, offering explanations of certain ones, while others were self-explanatory.

Lara cringed when Michael pointed out the breast pincers, though did not go into detail how they were used, the name saying it all. A pear-shaped device hanging on the wall caught her attention and when she looked to Michael, he shook his head.

“You don’t want to know, though I’m sure the shape tells the tale.”

Lara turned away from the device, only to cringe when she saw the spike-studded chair she had accidentally sat on. She had been lucky to only catch the end of it.

“Who does this sort of thing?” she asked

“Those who believed themselves righteous people,” Michael said. “You have to realize the time period, the ignorance, the fear, and the righteous who believed they could save everyone from evil. Unfortunately, evil had yet to be justly defined.”

“Your grandfather was caught up in this madness?”

“He and countless others and even when rules were passed to ban the use of torture, it continued in secret. And while my grandfather left his homeland for many reason, the driving force had been the torture that had been inflicted on my grandmother.”

“Your grandmother? What happened?”

“It had been a harsh winter between weather and wars, leaving food scarce. My grandparents had taken their two small children to hunt for food when soldiers came upon my grandmother. She mentally warned my grandfather to get the children to safety and she would join them shortly. Unfortunately, the soldiers managed to subdue her, since she was so weak from not feeding. They beat her unconscious, so my grandfather heard nothing from her. And when her captives saw how quickly she healed, they hurriedly chained her and began the torture.”

Michael paused for a moment and Lara could almost feel how much the thought of what his grandmother had suffered upset him.

“If only my grandmother had fed, she would have been able to defeat them, but she made sure her children fed before she did, leaving her vulnerable when they attacked. But as soon as she regained presence of mind, she reached out to my grandfather.” Michael grinned. “You have to hear the pride and love in my grandmother’s voice and how it shines in her eyes when she tells this tale. She swears two of her captives died of fright when my grandfather burst into the room, his eyes glowing a fiery red and his fangs dripping with the blood of themen he took down to get to my grandmother. Needless to say, there wasn’t a man left standing, and my grandfather got her out of there and fed right away. As my grandmother proudly says time and again, you can always count on Valaine men to protect their women. And she’s right. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to protect the woman I love.”

Love me.

She hurriedly chased the thought away, not wanting him to hear it, not wanting him to know how she felt, but wanting to make love with him, but when didn’t she not want to?

She tugged at his hand. “There’s someplace else I’d rather be.”

“Where’s that?” he asked.

“On top of you.”

She was up in his arms and out the door in the blink of an eye.

CHAPTER 14

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Night came much too fast for Lara and though there were hours left... they weren't enough for her. She didn't want to leave him, say good-bye and never see him again. But he had made no move to tell her how he felt, and he had to know how she felt. He had told her often enough how she was an open book to him. She could not believe he hadn't heard her thoughts on how much she loved him. Yet he had said nothing about loving her, so what was she to do?

Enjoy.

She almost laughed at the thought, since she had been doing just that. Right now, she lay snuggled in his arms pretending to read a book just as he did, though he didn't pretend. He was actually reading.

They had lingered in his bed talking after more than an hour of making love. Exhausted, yet more than satiated, they had talked of their childhoods and memories that brought laughter and some that brought tears. It had been so very intimate in more ways than one. And, of course, the sex had been...

A silent sigh spread through her, recalling how she had felt slipping him into her and riding him with such abandoned pleasure. And after she had an explosive climax, he had flipped her on her back and drove into her making her have one of those mind-blowing ones. She couldn't imagine a more powerful climax, but then he hadn't bitten her so she couldn't really say.

“Your thoughts and your grinding softly against me will have you naked beneath me very soon.”

She stilled, and then with a smile continued to move against him.

He dropped his book along with hers and did exactly as he promised. And she wondered how it was that she could want him so frequently. Never, ever had she felt this way about sex. She could take it or leave it, but not with Michael. The more she had him, the more she wanted him.

They lay naked wrapped around each other on the couch when they finished, a blanket thrown across them.

“We should just stay naked for the rest of the night,” he said with a laugh, “since we’re both ravenous for each other.”

She wondered then if she had vampire blood in her somewhere since she realized that he was right. Her voracious sexual appetite matched his. And how she would appease it once they parted, she had no idea.

“Though I do think a nice formal supper in the dining room would be a good way to celebrate our time together.”

Our time together.

This was it. The hours were ticking away. Their time together would be done.

“Let’s make it a bit formal. Go have yourself a soak while I see to details and wear that lovely long skirt you look so delicious in.”

“Why? Do you plan on eating me?”

“Sweetheart, I intend on tasting every single inch of you tonight.”

How could her passion stir after she had just climaxed twice? Damn, if he hadn't infected her with his insatiable sexual appetite and damn if she didn't care—at least for the moment.

He roused them up off the couch and pointed her toward the door. “Go and meet me in the dining room in an hour.”

She scooped her clothes up, though didn't bother to slip them on. She did, however, make sure to wiggle her naked butt at him as she walked out of the room. He was behind her in a second, and she let out a yelp when he slapped her bottom lightly and whispered, “This is the first place I intend to taste tonight.”

Her body quivered as it always did when his touches tempted, or his words excited. She didn't say anymore, she hurried off and up to her room.

While her long, gray skirt was nice, she wished she had the little black dress she took everywhere with her when she traveled. She had two. One with long sleeves, low neckline, and snug to mid-thigh and the other was almost identical except it was sleeveless. Black high heel sandals went with it, both items fitting easily into her carry-on.

Carry-on!

She had brought her carry-on suitcase, and she hadn't fully unpacked from her last trip. Could she have left the black dress in the zipper compartment in the back? She had thrown only a few things in the suitcase when she had packed for this short trip and had never bothered to check the back compartment.

She unzipped the section she had neglected to check before packing and smiled. Her long sleeve black dress and her shoe bag with the high-heel sandals were there. She pulled them out, shaking the few wrinkles as best she could from the black dress, then

draping it over the chaise.

A smile spread across her face as she entered the bathroom to take a shower. At least she would leave him with a memory of her, that he just might not be able to forget.

Lara stared at herself in the mirror when she finished. She looked different. Did she dare say sexy? She had never thought of herself as sexy, but seeing herself now, she actually felt that she looked sexy. Or was it that she felt sexy, truly sexy, for the first time in her life?

It wasn't her body that had changed; it was how she thought of herself that changed.

She wasn't seeing her faults; she was viewing herself with confidence.

She ran her fingers through her auburn hair and gave it a shake, leaving it looking a bit untamed, and then she added a bright red lipstick to her lips. A last spritz of wild honey body spray and she went to join Michael for their last meal together.

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His back was to her when she entered the formal dining room and she was glad of it, since the atmosphere caught her by surprise.

Romantic.

The whole room was scented with it; dim lighting, flickering candles, a fire crackling in the fireplace, a bottle of white wine chilling in a silver bucket, the table set for two with fine china and white linen napkins and soft strands of light classical music drifting in the air.

While it strummed her passion, it stirred her heart much more.

He turned then and seeing how his eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw her was the best complaint she could have ever gotten.

“I’m rendered speechless. You’re too stunning for words.”

Okay, maybe that was the best complaint she had ever gotten.

He held his hand out to her and she walked over to him, wondering how he could appear more handsome each time she saw him. Of course the expensive black suit he wore with the cobalt blue shirt and black silk tie no doubt added to his good looks.

“That dress is lethal,” he said as he took her hand and drew her close. “And so are those red lips of yours. I’m going to enjoy kissing them bare.”

She playfully turned her head away when he went to kiss her. “And here I thought to

paint your whole body with my red lips.”

He took hold of her chin and turned her face to claim a sharp kiss. “Tempt me with such an image and—” His eyes began to glow red and he quickly shut them.

Lara gulped back the lump that rose in her throat. She realized that he was fighting back his vampire side more and more when it came to sex. While she trusted him, she also thought it would be foolish of her to add to his struggle.

“Later,” she whispered, pressing her hand to his chest.

His eyes opened to reveal a spattering of red that faded more slowly than usual. “You can count on it.”

He held out the chair for her to sit and he took the seat at the head of the table. Conversation flowed naturally between them as it always did. They never seemed to lack something to discuss. Tales of his travels fascinated her, and tales of her work intrigued him. And always underlying their discussions, or anything they did, was intimacy.

It came in a simple touch, a laugh, a smile, an unexpected kiss, a playful poke, or a look that had them both knowing that soon, very soon, they would make love.

It was a lovely meal, though Lara wasn’t concerned with the meal as much as she was with the time left to her with Michael. She had been enjoying herself so much that she hadn’t realized several hours had passed, bringing morning that much closer.

She finally asked the question she had been putting off. “What time will the car service be here tomorrow?”

“Not until after lunchtime.”

She smiled, keeping her thoughts quiet.

He reached out and took her hand, caressing it lightly. “Do you feel you have everything you need for your chapter on sexual appetites of vampires?”

She had to smile. “More than I thought possible.”

He turned her hand over, his thumb gently tracing circles on her palm. “I’m surprised that your curiosity hasn’t had you wanting to experience sex with a vampire firsthand.”

“It’s tempting,” she admitted and chose her words carefully, making sure she didn’t once let the word loveslip in. “But if I did, then I would completely surrender to you.”

“And you don’t want to surrender to me?”

“It’s tempting,” she said again and battled with the thoughts that wanted to rush into her head and scream, it isn’t surrender it’s love.

“Perhaps I haven’t tempted you enough,” he said and leaned in to kiss her.

“Perhaps you haven’t tempted me with just the right thing,” she whispered before his lips met hers.

“Tell me,” he said and his lips encouraged with a kiss.

She sighed, loving the taste of him. “That’s for you to find out.”

“Then I intend to explore.”

He stood and she was up in his arms before she realized that he had scooped her up. She wrapped her arms around his neck and drank in his unique scent as she rested her head on his shoulder.

He walked out of the room and the candles extinguished as he passed each one. She looked up and saw his eyes rimmed red, and worried that she would not be able to resist the vampire within him.

Once in his bedroom, he lowered her to her feet and began to undress but stopped her when she went to do the same.

“No,” he said, brushing her hands away. “I want to undress you.”

She stood and watched as he dislodged his shoes with his feet and cast them aside. Then he pulled his tie from around his neck, slipped out of his suit jacket, yanked his shirt from his trousers and unbuttoned each button, not tossing his shirt aside fast enough for her. She loved his naked chest, loved the feel of it, the taste of it, loved resting her head on it.

Her glance followed his hands as they undid his belt, unhooked his button and unzipped his trousers. They went down along with his underwear and were off along with his socks in a flash.

He stood naked, his penis jutting out proudly and after her heart took several quick beats, he approached her.

His hands went to the bottom of her dress, and he inched it up slowly along her body.

The knit material was soft and hugged her almost refusing to let go, causing a tantalizing friction as it eased up along her skin. His fingertips skimmed her flesh sending more goosebumps running over her.

She lifted her arms without being told and he yanked it off the rest of the way, his mouth kissing the flesh of her breasts just above her black lace bra. His hands were at her back and had her bra undone in seconds and when slipped it off her, his mouth captured one of her nipples, teasing it with his tongue.

After treating her other nipple to the same teasing, he stepped back and let his eyes wander over every inch of her. His dark eyes heated with passion as he did, though not a hint of red surfaced.

Lara stood proud in her black lace bikini underwear and her high-heel sandals. Another time she might have felt exposed and vulnerable, not anymore. She felt sexy and ready to make love.

“You are so beautiful,” he said and once again scooped her up and carried her to the bed.

He approached her from the bottom of the bed, kissing along her ankle and leg as he took off her shoes. He kissed and nibbled along every inch of her flesh, and she thought she would go mad as desire shot through her.

When he worked his way between her legs, he kissed her black lace underwear, already moist with passion. The sensation was so erotic that she feared she’d come, and she didn’t want to, not yet.

Whether he felt her impatience, or it was his own, didn’t matter, she was just relieved

when his fingers took hold of the band of her panties and pulled the flimsy lace down, stripping it completely off her.

He turned her over quickly, nipping along her firm bottom and she had to smile recalling his earlier words in the library. He was a man of his word.

After his tongue drove her to climax, he got to his knees and slipped his arms under her thighs to lift her up so that he could slip his penis easily into her. All sound reasoning was lost after that. She didn't know how many times she came, though it amazed her that she came hard each time. For someone who had been accustomed to flaccid orgasms, this was a dream—no—fantasy come true.

They rested afterwards, talked some, dozed some, and later Lara left his side, against his protests, promising him it would be worth it. When she returned to his room, the only thing she wore was her bright red lipstick.

He smiled and his smile grew and turned to groans as she left red imprints over every inch of him.

The night wore on and so did they and sleep finally claimed them, and the time they had left together.

CHAPTER 15

Lara woke, stretching herself awake. She never felt so satisfied in her life. It was like waking Christmas morning and finding that Santa had been more than generous. She turned and discovered she was alone in bed. She listened to hear if the shower in the bathroom was running. It wasn't.

Santa hadn't come after all.

Michael had woken before her, leaving her to wake alone, a sure sign that their time together was over. She hurried out of bed and grabbed her clothes off the floor. She thought to slip into his sweatshirt that was lying on the chaise, but didn't want his intoxicating scent embracing her.

She slipped her dress on and peeked out into the hall. It was empty, so she hurried to her room. All she wanted to do was take a shower, pack, and get out of there, and if she could leave without seeing him, then all the better.

Her eyes caught sight of the clock...11 a.m. and her heart sunk, though relief flooded her. She'd shower and pack and wait outside for the car and if she was lucky, she wouldn't have to see Michael at all to say goodbye. She would leave him a note, thanking him for everything.

How did a woman thank a man—vampire—for giving her the best orgasms ever?

But then he had never made love to her as a vampire, only a human male, and she was glad for it. Or was she? If she had let him bite her, he would no doubt have felt the love she had for him and she still did not quite understand the depths of it herself. Then how would she have been able to leave him?

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She fought back her tears as she showered and fought thinking of him at all, though the thought that he had yet to wake her when she had only an hour before her car service arrived annoyed her. Had he let her sleep hoping she would wake and have to hurry off?

Well, if it was what he wanted, he was about to get it. She didn't bother to dry her hair. She slipped into her gray leggings and black knit top, got her boots on over a clean pair of polka dot socks that she didn't think she'd be ever able to look at again without thinking of Michael, and then packed.

Normally, she folded and packed her things neatly, not this time. She wanted to be done and finished with time to spare, so she could get outside, away from this house, away from Michael, before she wept uncontrollably. She wrote a quick thank you note and stuffed it in her pocket.

She wrapped her plaid scarf around her neck and hurried into her jacket. With one last quick glance in the bathroom and around the bedroom to make certain she had everything. She went to the door and took a deep breath.

Please don't let him be out there. Please.

She sighed with relief to find the hallway empty. With rapid steps she was down it and the stairs in a flash, carrying her suitcase so that the wheels wouldn't make noise. When she reached the bottom, she scanned the area. It was as empty as the hallway. She hurried to the front door. It was close, yet seemed miles away as if she would never reach it.

Her heart beat madly in her chest, her stomach fluttered nervously and tears threatened her eyes. And just as her hand was about to grab the doorknob, she remembered the thank you note. She turned, wanting to be done with it, out of the house and far away.

Michael stood on the bottom step, looking god-awful handsome in dark gray trousers and a white button shirt, opened at the throat. His sexy scent wafted through the air over to her, and she almost gasped as it filled her nostrils.

“You were going to leave without?—”

She waved the slip of paper in the air. “A note?—”

“Nothing more?” he said and stepped off the stairs, approaching her.

Her back was to the door, she had no place to go.

“No kiss good-bye?” he asked a few feet from her.

Don’t let him kiss me. Don’t let him kiss me. Oh, God, I want him to kiss me.

She grabbed hold as best she could of her raging emotions and held her hand up, unexpected words slipping from her lips. “You didn’t wake me.”

“I didn’t want to bother you. After all, we did have a busy night last night.” He ran his finger gently over her lips. “Would you really leave without?—”

She thought for sure her heart would pound right out of her chest. How was she ever going to say?—

I love you.

No. No. That wasn't what she was going to say.

No, it's what I'm saying.

Her eyes rounded, her brow knitted, and she stared at him unsure.

"Now, you will let me finish."

It was a command, not a question, though it didn't matter, she was too stunned that she had heard him so clearly in her head to reply.

"Would you really have left without telling me you love me, after all the times I've asked you to let me love you?"

"Make love to me."

He smiled. "I intend to do that for the rest of our lives."

Her legs went weak, and she reached out to grab hold of his arm. "I thought all the times you said that that you meant make love to me."

He took her suitcase from her hand and set it aside, then he unbuttoned her red jacket and slipped it off her, dropping it atop her suitcase, her scarf followed. His arm went around her waist, and he tugged her close.

"You should have listened closer to your thoughts. I was there often, letting you know how I felt."

"That wasn't just me when I thought of loving you?"

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“No, you felt my love for you as well.”

“So you’ve known how I’ve felt about you all along?” she asked.

“How do you feel?”

“I love you,” she said without hesitation. “God, that feels so freeing to admit it aloud, almost orgasmic. I love you. I really, really do love you.”

His eyes began to glow red, and his fangs dropped down. “All of me?”

“I can’t say it doesn’t frighten me to see you like that.”

“The question is can you love that part of me?”

Could she love that part of him? “There’s only one way to find out,” she found herself saying.

His eyes returned to their normal dark color and his fangs disappeared, though his crafty smile surfaced ever so slowly. “It sounds as if you’re sacrificing yourself.”

“Hmmm, and here I thought I challenged,” she said with a playful tap to his chest.

He laughed softly. “You challenge a vampire?”

“Well, if you’re not all of what you claim to be, I may just have to walk out that door, get in the car, and drive away,” she said with a dramatic wave of her hand and a grin.

“First of all, I’m never letting you go. I’ve loved you since first meeting you, loved you even more when you fainted in my arms, more than that when I first kissed you and when we made love the deal was sealed...you were forever mine. Second, there’s no car service coming for you. I cancelled it. And snow removal will not commence until tomorrow. I wanted this day with you so we could sort things out between us, since you were being so stubborn.”

She stood speechless, though not for long. She gave his arm a light punch. “Why didn’t you tell me right off how you felt? Why did you let me suffer the tortures of hell thinking it was just lust you felt for me and nothing more? And I am not stubborn, merely determined.”

He laughed, not so softly this time. “And would you have believed me?” He pressed his finger to her lips when she went to answer. “I tell you I’m a vampire and a short time later I tell you I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you. You had been debating about my sanity while thinking I was a vampire. I can’t imagine what you would have thought if I told you I loved you and always would.” He gave her a quick kiss. “And stubborn versus determined is a debate better left for another day.”

“So, you left it for me to say first?” she asked.

“Willing, no restraints, no coercion that was how you needed to love me. And that was how I wanted you to love me—all of me.”

She brushed her lips over his, and said, “Then it’s about time I do.”

His eyes turned such a fiery red that Lara could see herself reflected in them and as his fangs dropped down, their tips seemed to grow ever sharper and his arm around her waist grew ever tighter. And she couldn’t stop herself from shivering.

“I need you to be sure about this, Lara,” he said. “I will not do this if you are not sure.”

A loss so devastating flooded her senses that she thought she would weep. She wasn't sure if it was his feelings she felt or her own, or perhaps it was both theirs combined. She only knew that she never wanted either of them to ever experience it again, and she knew that they would if they ever parted.

She kissed him, the tips of his fangs brushing her lips, sending a quiver through her, though not one of fear, and she whispered, “Let me love you.”

He had her up in his arms and was climbing the stairs when she realized that his vampire skills could have them to his bedroom much faster. He was giving her more time to think it through, to make certain this is what she wanted.

She kissed his cheek and with a heavy sigh, making sure her warm breath tinged his ear, said, “I'm going to come right now, if you don't hurry.”

The next thing she knew, she was in his bedroom.

“Tell me again you want this,” he urged as his hands quickly tore at her clothes.

“I want you,” she clarified, “all of you.”

She soon found herself naked in his arms and he just as naked.

“I'm going to love you, Lara,” he whispered and nipped softly along her neck.

She shivered at the feel of his sharp fangs teasing her flesh, anticipating the moment he would drive them into her, the moment that would unite them more strongly than ever.

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They floated to the bed together. At least it felt like they floated, Lara unable to feel the floor beneath her feet. Still in his arms, they came to rest on the bed, she stretched out beneath him. His body felt so warm and tantalizing against her, but then it was her blood consuming his cold, though it was her fiery passion that would soon have them boiling hot.

“Feel me, Lara, feel all of me.”

She understood then that it wasn't only her own sizzling passion that jolted her senseless, but his as well. Good God, he wanted her with such fierce intensity that she found her own passion shooting to new heights—heights she didn't think possible. And they had barely started making love.

His one hand took hold of her two, securing them tightly and preventing her from touching him as his fangs skimmed over every inch of her flesh. He'd stop for a fast nip or a luscious lick that left her breathless, then he'd continue. She had thought he had already kissed every inch of her, but it had been nothing to how he coveted her body this time.

It was as if he was marking his territory, claiming every inch of her, and he did so with love. She could feel it in his every touch and taste. It almost brought tears to her eyes being loved so strongly and to be able to feel that love—actually feel it—was beyond believable.

When his fangs skimmed her inner thighs, her body arched, and she was ready to come, and she let him know it with a shout.

“Not yet,” he urged, and with a gentle touch of his hand on her stomach, he somehow eased her passion enough so that her climax was held at bay.

“Not fair,” she said with a breath of disappointment rushing out of her.

“Not time,” he whispered and continued until she wanted to scream out for mercy.

And she did, her need unbearable. “Now, good God, Michael, please.

He rose up over her then, hunger in his fierce eyes, and thirst in his gleaming fangs.

A twinge of fear gripped at her stomach, and she silently reminded herself, he won't hurt you, he won't hurt you.

“Never, never will I bring you pain, only pleasure.”

His whispered words settled around her like a protective shield and she felt him move, hard and ready, between her legs, though he had yet to enter her. She grabbed tight onto his muscled arms and said, “I love you, Michael, I always will.”

Lara's body jolted as she felt him drive into her at the same moment his fangs penetrated her neck. She cried out, not in pain, but sheer pleasure as she felt him sink into her. Sensations assaulted her body in the most exquisite ways. It was as if all her senses were amplified to the utmost degree.

She felt him sheathed deep inside her, pulsating hard, titillating her with his perfect rhythm. Then there was his rush of passion that filled her every pore, his urgent need for her igniting her need for him even more. But the emotion she felt that surpassed all others, that penetrated down to the deepest core was his love for her. It whirled around her, igniting everything in its path, grabbing hold and not letting go. And she knew then that she wasn't only sharing in his emotions and sensations, but he was

also sharing in hers.

Tears rushed in her eyes, and she wrapped her arms around Michael wanting to feel it all, wanting to share it all, and never wanting to let him go.

He climaxed before she did and feeling what he felt, the rush and release of such intense passion made her explode in an orgasm that had her screaming out his name and digging her fingers into his back. It was so intense that she didn't think she'd come again, though it was a common occurrence that she did whenever they made love. But then she felt his fangs at her neck, going deeper, sending her own blood rushing through her with lightning speed, and she felt as if she imploded with passion that consumed every inch of her right down to her soul. The climax went beyond mind-blowing, leaving her weak and completely mindless with pleasure.

Her whole body quivered with contentment as he withdrew his fangs slowly, and then licked gently at her neck.

"Lara?" he said with concern when his eyes met hers.

Why did he look so fuzzy to her and why was his eyes scrunched with worry?

"Lara, talk to me."

He was growing hazier, and she lightheaded, but she didn't care since her body was still rippling with tiny orgasmic sparks.

"Damn it, Lara, talk to me," he urged.

She tried to, though found it difficult.

Michael muttered a curse, which surprised her since she had never heard him swear,

he seemed too much a gentleman to do that. Her gallant warrior of old, she thought.

A cold cloth to her face brought a gasp to her lips and had her body jumping.

“Lie still,” he ordered his voice rank with worry.

She did as he said, enjoying the feel of the cold wet cloth caressing her face. It took a few moments to regain her senses and when she finally did, she said with a weak smile, “Wow, orgasms so unbelievably fantastic that I almost fainted.”

He shook his head. “I knew I should have stopped after your first orgasm, but I felt your second one coming and I wanted it —”

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“Beyond mind-blowing,” she finished, her smile growing. “You are the best, most unselfish lover.”

“You almost fainted,” he reminded her. “And as your future husband, I’m warning you, don’t dare do that again. You frightened the hell out of me.”

Her grin grew wider. “I don’t know which startled me more. That you just proposed to me or that I actually frightened a vampire.”

His eyes glowed red and his fangs appeared.

Lara patted his cheek, “Darling, that doesn’t frighten me anymore. It just makes me hotter for you.”

He laughed, his face returning to normal and patted her face with the wet cloth again. “You’re insatiable.”

“Good, then we match.” Her smile faded some.

“A troubling thought?” he asked.

“I love you very much, Michael, all of you. And I would give my life for you if necessary.”

“No, I forbid it. Never say that again,” he ordered.

“But you would do it for me.”

“I can’t die as easily as you can. You will never put yourself in harm’s way for me,” he said sternly.

“I won’t debate that with you now.” She held up her hand when he went to argue. “What I wanted to say was that I don’t think I want to become a vampire, at least not yet. I like food too much.”

He scooped her up into his lap. “I don’t expect you to become like me. The choice is there if you want it, but it will always be your choice.”

She ran a finger over his perfectly sculpted cheekbone, “Though I don’t want to grow old too fast, so I guess we’ll have to make lots of babies.”

“I always hoped for a large family.”

“Being an only child, it’s always been a dream of mine.”

“Sweetheart, I’m going to make all your dreams come true.”

She smiled and whispered across his lips, “You already have.”

THE END