

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

# WINTER WINDS

## Missouri Dalton

## Contents

Love Has No Boundaries .....	3
WINTER WINDS .....	6
CHAPTER ONE.....	7
CHAPTER TWO.....	15
CHAPTER THREE.....	22
CHAPTER FOUR.....	30
CHAPTER FIVE.....	35
CHAPTER SIX .....	43
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	49
CHAPTER EIGHT.....	59
CHAPTER NINE .....	67
CHAPTER TEN.....	75
CHAPTER ELEVEN .....	80
CHAPTER TWELVE .....	88
CHAPTER THIRTEEN .....	97
CHAPTER FOURTEEN.....	105
CHAPTER FIFTEEN.....	113
CHAPTER SIXTEEN .....	119
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.....	126
Author Bio.....	138

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## WINTER WINDS

By Missouri Dalton

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

A young man with impossibly blue eyes stares out at the viewer. It's the eyes that have it, because this man cannot hear, a disability gained only after he was turned—into a vampire. It's going to take one hell of a man to bring out the master vampire within.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Forever young.*

*Forever beautiful.*

*Forever outcast.*

*Forever lonely.*

*Life as a deaf vampire is hard. It's seen as a flaw.*

*Being deaf is viewed as a weakness. They're foolish to underestimate me. Like Rudolph, I was never invited to play in any vampire games.*

*Then one foggy winter's night, everything changed.*

*My beautiful Black Irish vampire has a difficult life, some angst, and strong emotions, but he gets his HEA.*

*Sincerely,*

*Susan65*

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** paranormal, fae/fey/fairies, vampires/undead/immortals, disabilities, contemporary, mystery/murders, age gap, tattoos

**Content warnings:** very light spanking

**Word count:** 41,124

# WINTER WINDS

By Missouri Dalton

## CHAPTER ONE

*Cillian*

With two fingers I tapped the back and then the front of my right hand and then splayed the fingers out on both and waved them. *I don't understand.* The police officer blinked at me. He'd pulled me over and started talking before I could get a look at his lips. I honestly didn't know what he said. Probably something about how fast I was going, but I didn't want to make presumptions.

He spoke again, slowly, which I disliked. I could read lips without such accommodations, but I figured out what he said anyhow.

“You were speeding.”

I nodded, just as slowly, and then shook my head like a contrary horse. I pointed at the speedometer and then shrugged. I didn't feel like talking to the man. I could have, I just didn't want to. It wasn't one of my better personality traits.

“Yes, speeding.”

I shook my head again.

He looked like he was about to get irritated, so I stopped acting the fool and looked him in the eyes. The police officer's eyes dilated, the black subsuming the brown. His mouth opened and closed and then, without another word, he walked back to his car and drove away. I smiled to myself. Too easy. There were some things I really loved about being a member of the undead.

The list of good was shorter than bad most days, but I was feeling optimistic today. Never a good sign.

I rubbed the small glass vial I wore around my neck. It was filled with grains of precious earth from my grave back in Ireland, more symbolic than anything as it had never held my body, but it was a good luck charm stronger than any witchcraft. Not that witchcraft had anything to do with my—transformation. Maybe if it had, I wouldn't have ended up an outcast in a society full of underwear models, geniuses and savants. You don't meet vampires like me—that survive. I'd been a perfect enough specimen when I was alive and first plucked from the wake of mortality to walk amongst the marble-skinned creatures of the night.

But something went horribly wrong. Ignacio Suarez, former duke of Feria, had been the one to bring about my rebirth. He couldn't have known what would happen that night, no more than I could. It didn't matter. I had a bad dose, and when I rose it was to a silent world. As if being a vampire wasn't bad enough, I had to be a deaf vampire.

With the recent, relatively speaking, invention of modern sign language I found myself speaking less and less. I didn't see much point in opening my mouth when there was no one to talk to. (Not that anyone could understand me anyhow.) I was avoided by the other vampires, discouraged from politics and left to die like a deformed Spartan child on the hillside. Nothing says "I love you" like total rejection. I hadn't survived for over five hundred years without getting thick-skinned, fast. Ma used to say that was the only way to live.

I hadn't wanted to believe her, and look where it got me.

I spent most of my time doing odd jobs for the vampires not *too* disgusted to deal with me. The rest of my time was divided between my current pursuit of knowledge—a master's degree in Conflict Resolution, which I thought might come in handy some day—and finding beautiful things to look at. I had a lot of degrees, from a lot of universities, some of which still existed.

I still think those harpsichord lessons were a good investment, but then *I* don't have to hear myself play. Or sing. I was never a very good singer, but it didn't bother me anymore.

I shook myself and started up my car again. I had to get home. The sun was rising, and I wasn't depressed enough to kill myself. Not today.



\*\*\*\*

My living arrangements at the time were less than ideal. It was always cold, and the neighbors on the floor below played music so loud my bedside lamp vibrated its way off the end table on a nightly basis. I'd resorted to duct tape. I used duct tape to put black plastic over the windows as well. Plus a layer of cardboard stapled over top and then plywood. If it couldn't look pretty, I was going to make sure it was solid.

Every once in a while one of my kindred got it into their head that I was a blemish in need of removing. It was better if I didn't draw attention to myself, and that I made my domicile as sunlight-proof as possible. At great personal risk I'd put up crosses, coated the windows in garlic oil and done my best to vampire-proof the place.

Sometimes that made it difficult to get inside.

I climbed out of my bed, cracking several vertebrae back into place, and shuffled through the darkness of my apartment to the fridge for a pint of squirrel. Squirrel was really the only thing that stayed fresh-tasting after being frozen. That, and if I was caught hunting around here I was a dead man. All right, poor choice of words, anyhow, I didn't usually have the cheek to go around hunting for real food. I wasn't stupid. Every other half century or so Ignacio would send someone out for my permanent death. He seemed to get the dodgiest folks, though, especially lately.

I liked to send him their ashes in a box. Just my little way of saying "thanks for biting me and leaving me for dead, you asshole".

Sometimes I sent a note. Last time I sent a photocopy of my ass. I liked photocopiers and I liked to remind Ignacio of what a fine ass I had.

I hoped he appreciated it.

I pulled off the top of the glass bottle I stored blood in and chugged it like cheap beer. I felt the familiar blood lust roll over my shoulders and my fangs sprang out like a morning erection. Which was also a problem today. Bloody hell. I took a deep, unnecessary, breath and put the bottle back in the fridge

and headed for the bathroom for a shower and a rub down to solve that problem.

I'd been the only one rubbing me down for a while now, a long while. I couldn't seem to get the juices flowing, as it were, with human lads. There was no edge there. No harm they could do to me. It was boring. The last time another vampire and I had relations it was because he was young, had never heard of me, and I could play off that I wasn't deaf as a doorknob pretty well if I tried hard enough.

And I had been exceptionally motivated at the time.

After my sinful shower, I managed to get myself dressed and wriggled out of my apartment. It was winter break, so there were no classes to attend this evening, but I did find myself desiring company. I couldn't spend all my time holed up or I'd go crazy. Sometimes I wondered if I hadn't already gone crazy.

I had most recently made my residence in the cultural sink of Boston. On nights like this, where the cold and fog kept sane people in their homes, I liked to stalk through the streets and muck-ridden alleyways and feel some kinship to my perfect brethren. When that got boring, I would let myself into a museum and wander the exhibits, grateful for the beauty.

It wasn't just surface beauty, either. I could see the brushstrokes. Feel the depth of each individual bristle as they had pushed through the viscous suspension of pigment in oil to create their own sort of poetry that no one else could see as I could see. When I had my fill of the individual strands of color I could draw my gaze back and experience the piece in its magnificent whole.

This was a bloody, roaring painting. It reminded me of sounds I could no longer experience, bringing them to echo about my mind. The sun burned on the horizon of a bloody sea where bodies flung from a sinking ship floated and thrashed in the gray blue waters, a wave cresting to drive those still living deep into the murk, and predators circling just out of sight.

I could put myself into that painting. I could smell the salt and the blood. I could feel the slick surface of the ship's deck as I tumbled over it. Gulls were circling overhead, waiting for the larger predators to finish before they

scavenged. I knew their cry as a memory, that piercing shriek that I had so hated as a boy.

“Declare the Typhon’s coming...” I spoke aloud for the first time in many nights, the memory of what the words sounded like echoing in my mind. I stepped away from Mr. Turner’s painting. I always came back to this, bypassing Titian and Renoir, Gauguin and Rembrandt for this painting. It was alive for me. A subject matter so bloody... it reminded me of times long past. Of how I came to this country so many years ago, on a leaking ship, stuffed in a barrel and praying to St. Patrick I would make it.

Winter always serves to make me maudlin.

I felt a sudden hint of vibration beneath my feet and turned around. I had attracted attention from the night watchman. Bloody... I intercepted him quickly and looked deep into his eyes. I had never found it necessary to speak in order to bring someone under my spell. My eyes seemed to always be enough. Sometimes a bit of touch helped the process along, but voice was never a part of the equation.

The watchman, a portly fellow of middle years, was quickly soothed and wandered off under the assumption that he had simply *thought* he had heard something. I smiled to myself and meandered into the sculpture gallery before leaving my little sanctuary for a visit to the seaside. I think it was the ocean, more than anything else, which drew me to Boston. It reminded me so of home in Ireland. I’d lived along the coast with my family in a small village that wasn’t there anymore. My da made his money with fishing. It had been a peaceful life, boring.

So I, being the fool I was, joined up with an army and ended up in Spain where I met Ignacio. I could still remember his voice. It was a common enough brain wave. That spicy, sweet sound—the last sound I ever heard.

The ocean was very still tonight. The moon was dark. I sat down in the sand with the stars for company and stared out at the near-invisible horizon. I could not go back to Ireland. The Families would never allow that. Here in the “new” world they had little foothold, but the old world was theirs, no contest there. I was not welcome in the Families. There were others like me, loners

who wandered this continent. We stayed well clear of one another, but they had territories, those other vampires. They were settling now. Making new pseudo-Families and bringing the old world in. The old Families were investing here, buying property, but none had settled here.

I heard stories that one was already making a move on Miami. Hard for me to believe a Family would want to move to the land of sunshine and oranges, but there you had it. There was a little vampire I knew who had the state to himself. I hoped he would find sanctuary as I could not. There were not many of us here. There had been a time when a single vampire could have a state all to himself. Those times were changing and unless I wanted to move to the Yukon, I was stuck sharing territory.

Boston had me, and a fledgling family calling themselves the Blades. They were young and stupid, but there were four of them and one of me and... I didn't feel like challenging it. I wasn't a proper vampire after all, I couldn't take four. Two probably, but they were always together, like a pack. A pack of dimwits in leather. That didn't stop them from being strong and fast and—whole. They let me be for the most part. Probably because their taunting only engendered a singular piece of sign language in response.

One that most everybody knew.

I grew tired of the ocean when I started to feel the sun. It's an innate response in me now. A sense of fire at the back of my mind. I picked myself up out of the sand and brushed it off the seat of my pants.

A hand clamped down on my shoulder and I whirled around, brain switching to aggression. I snarled, a response I'd never managed to break myself of, at the man behind me, his hands held up in peace and his eyes wide.

"I'm sorry, I thought you heard me come up." He was babbling, I could tell. Babbling has a specific sort of glazed look about the eyes. The man was bigger than me, not an especially great accomplishment. I'd been considered tall enough in my day, but every century saw bigger men than I. He was not only tall, however, but muscled in the way of a man who uses his strength every day. He wore jogging clothes, explaining his presence on the beach.

He was—captivating. His skin a soft golden tan, much like my own had been once upon a time. His face had the same strength of beauty as Greek sculpture. Eyes like burnished bronze framed by dark lashes and thick eyebrows. His hair wasn't dark, but as pale as raw silk, long and pulled back from his face in a tail. He smelled like fresh air and rain and... *home*. I was not sure what to make of him, an inhuman creature staring at me, babbling at me, handsome and so very—odd.

He didn't fit in this place. On this beach. Or even this time.

I shook my head and pointed at my ears and then shook my head.

He seemed to understand. "You're deaf?"

I nodded.

"Sorry."

I shrugged. The fire in the back of my mind twinged. I had to go. I cast one more look at the incongruous man and then hightailed it out of there before I became another pile of sand on the beach.

What a very strange man.

\*\*\*\*

I picked up my mail, mostly correspondence from the university, and went back to my apartment to spend the day. Sorting through it, however, I found something unusual. A heavy lavender-colored envelope with my name and address written in thick India ink on the front. I ran my thumb across it to feel the subtle raise of lines drawn with a dip pen.

*Cillian Doone*

I swallowed. I had not gone by that name in... many years. My proper name.

I broke the wax seal on the back of the envelope and removed a thick card. It smelled like honey and death. Another vampire. Given that I could count on one finger how much friendly correspondence I'd gotten from other vampires, I found this suspicious. And the previous only counted as friendly because they hadn't made a single death threat.

*To the Child of Ignacio Suarez, Family Cortez, Cadiz*

*The Cortez family mourns the loss of Ignacio Suarez, who greeted the sun this December and has gone on to the Netherworld. You are invited forthwith to the House of Cortez to receive the holdings of your Master, of whom you are his only surviving blood. Please respond forthwith.*

*Our deepest sympathies.*

Underneath was a glyph, the personal sign of a vampire, this one for the head of the Family Cortez, Elena. I'd never met her, but I had heard the stories. Debaucheries in blood-soaked villas were the norm. I heard she'd traded her bloodlust for corporate takeovers, but I didn't see how that was much different. That sort of supreme bitch doesn't change the thing she loves most, and in Elena's case, that was power.

Whatever Ignacio had, I did not want. Besides, this could be some elaborate ploy to get me into Spain so he could kill me. I wasn't taking that sort of chance. No I was not.

I was going to bed.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER TWO

*Donal*

There were many things I expected when I went out before dawn to run off the weight of the world, but this was not one of them. The water was gray in the predawn, and the waves lapped gently against the cold beach. At the water's edge, sitting in the sand, was a young man. His back was to me, arms gripped around his knees as he stared out over the ocean like he could see across to the other side.

His hair was sable, short and soft looking. He held himself like a child does, contained into a small space as if afraid to attract attention. His shoulders were slender, and his T-shirt stretched across the bones and muscle so much I thought it would rip. It looked a size too small, even for this fellow. There was a thin leather cord around his neck. I thought he had to be cold, sitting in the sand in a thin T-shirt and jeans, but he didn't seem to mind.

I noticed his feet were bare, but saw no shoes lying nearby. Had he walked here? Had he driven?

I hadn't seen any other cars in the parking lot when I arrived.

"Hey, are you all right, kid?"

He didn't even twitch to acknowledge I'd been heard.

"Hello?"

I started walking toward him as he stood up, and I was greeted by someone a bit taller than I expected. He was built along small lines, but there was plenty of muscle packed into his lithe frame. I put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

He spun around, and I got a glimpse of anger as his lips curled back into a snarl. He bared white fangs at me.

"I'm sorry, I thought you heard me come up." *Vampire*. Damn it all. How had I not noticed that?

*He was breathing. Vampires don't typically keep that pretense up.*

He stared at me for a very long moment and then pointed to his ear and shook his head.

He... could he be? “You’re deaf?” That was more than just strange. That was—unheard of.

He nodded.

“Sorry.”

This vampire was—he was beautiful. His eyes were like an October sky after the clouds had gone, so blue it took your breath away. His eyes were framed by long dark lashes that only made them stand out all the more. And it wasn't like the rest of him was any less breath-snatching. His lips, now that he wasn't snarling, were the sort that make you think of all sort of lustful things, of red satin sheets and candlelight. He smelled of the ocean and old wood with a hint of garlic. Strange thing for a vampire to smell of. The leather cord around his neck held a small glass vial filled with—dirt. A talisman?

He gave me one last look and then took off running like he was being chased by the devil. He was damn fast, too. How—very strange. I had encountered many a man in my life. I had keened for kings and soldiers, I had swung a sword in battles no one remembered, but those eyes made my knees quake.

I gulped in a breath. *I have to know.* Who was this boy? How had he come to be what he was? And how had a vampire with such a flaw survived? *I have to know.*

\*\*\*\*

I am not a stalker by nature, and that lad moved faster than even I could follow. In all my years I'd never encountered a vampire who moved that fast. He had to be old. Older than I thought by far, but I couldn't help but think of him on the beach, arms around his knees. He'd looked like a lost child. Perhaps he was.

I'd no proper leads, so I did what any law-abiding citizen does, I let it go—for now. If he lived in Boston, there was every chance I'd see him again. If I



did, I'd be sure to get his name. He had piqued my curiosity, and it took a lot to get my interest up. I think the job was making me jaded. After I got myself cleaned up after my run, I went to work. There was no rest for the wicked and certainly no rest for an assistant medical examiner in Boston.

Becoming a coroner was a fine fit for me. The men and women who passed through our morgue deserved the lament as much as anyone else, and there weren't any other banshees lining up to give it to them. It was the calling of all my kindred. We keened for the dead not yet dead, and we lamented for the dead who'd gone on. No one seemed to mind much my singing.

It was much better than the music Doctor Gordon played. Whoever came up with the bastard mix of polka and rap ought to get drawn and quartered and sent on to the afterlife without a whit of music.

"Good morning, Dr. O'Neil," Jenna said. The sweet twenty-three-year-old was my intern. Our chief medical examiner, Dr. Avery, had no patience for interns, so I had humored the girl. After so many years on this earth, patience was something I had in spades.

"Good morning, Jenna." I took the clipboard from her, noting her new lemon yellow manicure with a raised eyebrow.

She took note, "Stickers, Dr. O'Neil. They come right off." She demonstrated.

"All right." I had a rule about nail polish. "They come off before you touch a cadaver."

"Yes, Doctor."

I nodded and looked over the intake log. "Number Five is up first, would you roll her out for me?"

Jenna nodded and hurried off. The girl was very enthusiastic, I'd give her that, though I'd no idea why such a vibrant child would want to work with death. I'd had no real choice in the matter, it was what I was born to do. Perhaps I could gently steer her into another line of work. I had done it before.

Staring down at the clipboard, I couldn't help but recall again those eyes. Practically impossible, those eyes. Like something out of a story. I had never

seen eyes like that before, and I had seen the eyes of the fairies. The eyes of the dying and dead. I had seen all manner of men and beast and fey and vampire in my life, but none of them had made my knees quake.

“I have Number Five, Dr. O’Neil,” Jenna’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Yes, all right.” I picked up the corresponding file and flipped through.

*Jane Doe, found near Beacon Hill.*

Hm. I set the file aside, folded open to the space for my notes, and unzipped the body bag. Jane Doe was a pretty girl. Her dark hair was damp, and her clothes—club clothes—were bloody. I put on a pair of blue nitrile gloves and took a quick look for the source of the blood before we moved her out of the bag.

There were two puncture wounds on the inside of her right thigh, and another at the neck. They’d bled heavily. Strange. The injuries were certainly vampire bites, I could practically smell them, but they did not leave a kill like this, bleeding out. A vampire’s saliva was an anticoagulant, much like the substance in a vampire bat, to keep blood flowing freely even from minor injuries. There was no need to go for major blood vessels.

But they had, and then they let her bleed to death. I checked her hands. There was blood and tissue under her nails. She’d broken a couple of them, even. There were visible postmortem bruises on her hands and legs.

This girl had fought. I took a breath. This was a sport kill. Not something you saw in the old country. The Families wouldn’t allow this sort of thing. At least, you wouldn’t find the body if they did. The local group was young, which was another reason the one on the beach had surprised me. I knew about the Blades, the fledgling wannabe Family, but that vampire had been much older and much stronger. Even with his disability, I was very surprised he allowed them in his territory at all.

Especially when they were doing things like this. I sighed. Perhaps he needed to be reminded of his obligations. A vampire his age, letting babes run wild in his territory. I wasn’t about to let that go on. I might have to keen and lament, but I enjoy the loss of life about as much as I’d enjoy a hot poker up

the arse. No, he and I would have a chat. If I could find the lad, that is. I'd gotten a taste of his spirit last night, but it might not be enough.

The Blades would know him. I'd pay them a visit then.

"All right, Jenna, let's get the poor girl out of the bag."

"Yes, Doctor."

\*\*\*\*

That evening I dressed myself for vampires. A black button-down shirt with silver crosses on the buttons, a thick wool coat with extra pockets for a stake and a short blade a bit longer than my forearm, and a good scarf to relieve them of my tempting neck. I didn't get particularly cold, being a bit of the Netherworld myself, but it generally paid to look human. Last were my gloves, black leather, and I was off. I had already tucked knives into my boots and braided my hair back from my face.

I hadn't had a proper encounter with the vampplings, but that was out of distaste. They might not know what I was, but they would find out. A banshee of my age could deal with more than just four such creatures. I had no intention of killing them, not yet. I knew full well that for every light in the world there must be a dark. My Lady Morrigan was a darkness, and a necessary one.

We banshee were her clarion call and her warriors. A role I had not filled in many lifetimes. I had found my way to serve her in this new world, without bloodshed. I would give the little vampires a chance to behave themselves in the place I called home. I would give the strange older vampire a chance to put them in line. If that failed, I would kill them.

The Blades made their home in a warehouse near the docks. The sort of place where rum runners used to hide their goods nearly a hundred years ago. And hundreds of years before that it was where slaves came in to the city to be sold. A place with very bloody history. Appropriate for such creatures as these.

I didn't bother announcing my presence as I walked inside, ducking under a half-fallen piece of timber to use the side door it seemed they'd not noticed. I couldn't blame them, only my history in Boston gave me the knowledge. It

was one of the smuggler's doors. From there, I wound through the warehouse, listening carefully for the sound of them.

I could hear laughter bouncing off the walls. There they were. I concentrated for a moment, phasing myself into the half-solid state called the *taibhse*, a gift of my birth. I drifted along silent as death herself until I reached the room where the Blades had made their little nest. It was deep in the heart of the warehouse, safe from sun and nosy people. I'd seen a few traps along the way, but I was far too old to be caught by the traps of children.

I freed my short blade from my coat and settled back into my corporeal self before walking into the nest, blade out and a no-nonsense expression on my face. "Uh-hum." I cleared my throat to get their attention.

All four, in various versions of Goth attire and makeup, turned to me. There were snarls all around. One, a skinny girl, started toward me but was stopped by a hand on the shoulder. The one who stopped her was definitely the eldest in the group. He wore a ridiculous top hat decorated in skulls. His dark eyes narrowed.

"You're not human."

"No." I shook my head. "I'm not."

"What do you want?"

I'd start with my mystery man. "There is another vampire in Boston. Blue eyes, strange. I want his name and how to find him."

Skull Hat frowned. "You mean Cillian, the freak?"

*Cillian... an Irish name.* "Yes."

The girl snorted. "He eats *squirrels*."

I raised my eyebrows. "Nevertheless. Where can I find him?"

"He has an apartment," Skull Hat said. "Keeps it covered in crosses and garlic. He's totally paranoid. Doesn't talk much. Sometimes he does jobs for us. Takes out the trash."

By the expression on Skull Hat's face, I was guessing he considered me "trash". "I see. Does he have a surname?"

Skull Hat shrugged. “I think it’s Molloy. It’s Irish.”

I nodded. “All right. Then we come to my second reason for visiting. You will not kill for sport in my city.”

The girl laughed, and I noticed the other two were starting to move.

“You can’t stop us,” Skull Hat said.

“This is just a warning,” I replied. “Do with it what you will.” I went into the *taibhse* again. To their eyes, I looked like I was made of smoke. “But it is your only warning.”

There was a lot of shouting as I drifted out of the warehouse. I’d definitely managed to spook the jaded little brats. Good. Now I just had to find my mystery vampire. *Cillian, possibly Molloy.*

Because it wasn’t like there was more than one of those in the Boston phonebook.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER THREE

*Cillian*

My mail, and the invitation to Spain, mocked me from the kitchen counter when I got out of bed the next night. I drank some blood and went to sort through the mail I hadn't gotten to when I went to bed.

Bill.

Bill.

Ad.

Coupon for bikini waxes.

Letter from the *Oxford Journal*.

Bill.

I stopped and went back to the letter, opening it up on the short end and tearing the letter free. I'd been waiting for a response back for three months now.

*Dear Mr. Molloy,*

*Thank you for the submission of your article, "The Sound of Art". We are pleased to accept it for publication in the March edition of the Oxford Journal. We will follow up with a contract at your request.*

*Sincerely,*

*Alistair Godfrey*

*Editor*

I got into the journal. I got *in*. I did a little dance, which I was certain looked ridiculous, and then hurried to retrieve my ancient laptop computer from my bedroom and compose a reply. I emailed it off to the editor and, with my mood set to pleasant, set about getting dressed for an evening of celebration.

I was going hunting tonight.

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I only owned one good set of clothes. I needed to break into my cache and sell off some of my things again. There was a trick to that. Buy new, stash away, and then sell a hundred or so years later when the price skyrockets. That was about as investment-oriented as I got. The Families had their hands in all the banks. I didn't, *couldn't*, trust them. I preferred my assets in silver and gold, or furniture, or art.

My good clothes, a blue silk shirt and black slacks, meant I had to wear shoes. Given that I spent the better portion of my days barefoot, this was a slight annoyance, but I wanted to blend in. You could not blend in without shoes if you were wearing slacks. Well, that, and it was pretty cold. It wasn't snowing, but the sky threatened precipitation as I got outside, wrapping my scarf around my neck in a pretense of humanity.

I wanted something fresh tonight. I wanted—company. Cravings for company were usually best served by me holing up in my bedroom until the sensation passed, but I was in too good a mood to do that tonight. I was feeling a bit cocky even, probably not a good thing, and instead of my usual destination of the park, I went to the nearest club.

A long look at the bouncer was all it took to get me inside. I couldn't hear the music that set the young men and women inside writhing with passion, sweat on brows and eyes locked on partners or closed in ecstasy, but I could feel the vibration of it through the soles of my shoes. I slipped into the center of it all and let the emotions of the crowd carry me.

It was not long before I was joined in my abandon by another. A young man with hazel eyes and dark hair. He smiled at me in a way I'm sure he thought was predatory. I smiled back. He took my silent invitation and we began to move together in the oldest dance of all—courtship. Of course, courtship in these days was more about sex than souls, but that's all I wanted right now. He ran his hot hands down my sides, sending little shivers down my spine.

I kept smiling, and he took the opportunity to steal a kiss from me.

It had been so long since I'd been kissed. I put my hand in his hair and kissed him back. Being with him wouldn't be near as interesting as someone more like me, but I had been alone too long to care in that moment and he was young and vibrant. He had his whole life ahead of him. I let him tug me into the dimly lit area off the dance floor and we began a more involved session of lips and tongue and teeth and skillful hands.

I just wanted to drown in sensation. I wanted to take all of that passion and be consumed by it. My self-destructive streak always came out when I decided to have a human lover. I grabbed his shirt and pulled him deeper into the darkness of the club, down a short hall to a more private nook. I was not concerned about voyeurs, or security. I wanted this youth, and I wanted him *now*.

He was quick on the uptake, shoving me against the wall and fumbling with the button of my trousers as he continued to work his tongue against mine. He pulled a condom out of his pocket. I held back a smile. How thoughtful, if unnecessary. I like a cautious lad, though. He got himself ready as quickly as I'd ever seen, and I helped out by getting my trousers down. He turned me around roughly after another kiss and started nipping at my neck, kissing and sucking to mark territory that he would never see again.

I braced myself against the wall and gave affirmative noises until he took me. I hadn't gotten a clear look at his size beforehand, but I could feel it as he moved. He gripped my hair tight with one hand, and my stomach with the other. He kissed me roughly and then ran a hand down to my own heated piece. I grunted as his hand gripped around the stiff shaft.

I had my hands flat against the concrete wall, and left them there as he continued his assault. He seemed content to run this encounter, and I was more than content to let him. He picked up his pace and continued leaving his mark on my neck and shoulders, releasing my hair to pinch and tease at my nipples.

I took breath in short bursts to moan and grunt and make all manner of lustful sounds until, at last, we found release. Shuddering, I held myself against the wall as he turned away from me. I pushed off and looked him in the eyes. He drew closer to me. I smiled at him and brought him in for a kiss.



I kept my eyes on his as I pulled away, watching as his eyes dilated a bit more. I kissed his neck and then made a small incision with the sharp edge of my fangs and licked to get the blood flowing. It was like I had found water after a trek through the desert. I did not drink to kill, but to fill my stomach. At my age, I found that to be far less than when I was just born into the dark.

After, I pricked one finger against my fangs and spread the blood over his wound to stop the bleeding. I gave him one last kiss before putting my clothes to rights and heading out of the club feeling full and a bit dozy. It was a delightful sensation, such that I didn't care one way or another if the Blades saw me or not. I was feeling—strong.

That was never a wise feeling in my experience, but right then I couldn't have cared less. I could have gone back into the club for another round. I even considered it briefly but decided not to push my luck. I started to wind my way back to my apartment. There was still a whole lot of night left, but I couldn't think of anything better to do than what I'd just done.

It wouldn't be my first early turn-in.

I arrived at my apartment building a little after one in the morning. I was about to go up the steps when I sensed something—another vampire. I took a sniff of the air. One of the Blades, I was certain.

Specifically Damien, their leader, who emerged from the shadows to leer at me. He was wearing his ridiculous skull decorated top hat. "Hey there, freak," he said.

I flipped him off to acknowledge that I understood.

"Some guy is looking for you." He smirked. "He's not human, either. I bet he'll slice you open. Get rid of you once and for all. That'd make everybody happy."

I bared my fangs and snarled at him. He flinched, and I could smell a touch of fear. I took a menacing step forward and he stepped back. Over the last couple years the Blades had picked up a few of my signs. None of them seemed to understand me when I spoke, so it had been necessary. With my

hand raised to one side of my body, I touched the four fingers to my thumb, like a clam. *Go.*

He wrinkled his nose and let me be. Someone looking for me? Not human, but not vampire. Damien would have said if the man was a vampire. I was headed up the stairs when another presence interrupted me. I turned my head. It was—the man from the beach, in all his handsome golden glory.

He waited until my attention was on him. “Cillian Molloy?”

I nodded.

“We need to talk.”

I gestured for him to continue.

“Privately.”

I took a breath and nodded. “Come in,” I said carefully.

He quirked an eyebrow and followed me inside. If he wanted to kill me, I’d be better armed in my apartment. He had no difficulty getting inside, which lowered the number of possible creatures he could be significantly. Not undead, not vampire...

He took a seat at my kitchen table after I turned on the lights. It had been a long time since I turned them on, but the bulbs were still good. I sat down across from him.

“My name is Donal O’Neil.”

I nodded.

“I am here because the Blades are killing for sport.”

I blinked. He was here for that? That had nothing to do with me. I wasn’t in charge of them. I shrugged broadly and made the sign for *I don’t understand.*

He gave me a look.

I tried saying it aloud, but the more words I had to use, the less likely someone was to understand me. “Why is it my problem?”

He frowned. “Say that again,” he said. He didn’t say it in English, though. He said it in Gaelic. Old Gaelic.

I blinked. “Why is it my problem?” I spoke the language I’d grown up with tentatively, but the shapes were easy to remember.

He gave me another look. The sort of disappointed look Da used to give me when I did something really stupid. “Are you kidding me? They are in your territory, and you are the most powerful vampire in Boston. You could kill them easily and you let them run roughshod over your city. Why?”

I was powerful? Me?

He must have seen the confusion on my face. “How old are you?”

“I was turned in 1483,” I said.

Donal blinked. “Those children are less than a quarter of your age.”

“There are four of them.”

“And you are a master vampire.”

“I’m what?”

“Master. Vampire.” He gave me a long look. “An old, powerful vampire.”

“I’m old but...” I shrugged. “Not strong.”

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing. He took a moment and then looked at me again. “How long have you been alone?”

I considered the question and decided he probably wanted to know if I’d been with other vampires. “Always.”

“Always? What of your maker?”

“I am deaf. It happened—during the change. Imperfect. I was discarded.”

“You became deaf *because* of the turn?” he asked.

I nodded.

Understanding dawned on his face. “I see. The one who turned you, how old was he?”

I shrugged. “Three, four hundred?”

Donal nodded. “Vampires lose their potency to make children as they age. I suppose you are an example of why that is true. You have—a rebirth defect. I’ve never heard of this. Of course, I’ve never heard of a vampire who was so...” he made a gesture of exasperation at me.

“So?”

“You. You could kill the Blades, easily.”

I shook my head.

“Don’t shake your head at me, I know of what I speak.” He licked his lips. “I am banshee. A servant of Morrigan. I know your kind. I know what you can do, even if you do not.”

Banshee. I was sitting across the table from a banshee. I felt—dumbstruck.

He tapped my arm. I blinked and returned my attention to him. I had the feeling he’d been talking and I hadn’t seen it. I felt a little embarrassed.

“Cillian,” he paused. “You are a like a babe in arms, aren’t you?”

I made a face. “I know things.”

Donal raised his eyebrows. “Oh? Really?”

“I can—” I wanted to say hypnotize, but I wasn’t sure what the word for that was in Gaelic, and more, I wasn’t sure he’d understand if I said it. I pointed at my eyes and then made a gesture with my hands like a stage magician casting a spell.

“Are you trying to say hypnotize?”

I nodded.

“All right. What else can you do?”

“Run.”

“And?”

I thought about that. “Isn’t that enough?”

He slapped his forehead with his hand and shook his head. He looked a lot like my da when he tried to explain sex to me.

“You—you have all of this power, and no idea what to do with it... do you even fly?”

I laughed. I'm sure it didn't sound all that much like a laugh, either. “Fly?”

“All right. From this moment forward *I* will teach you.”

“You are not a vampire.”

“No, but I can't in good conscience leave you untaught.” He shook his head. “We of the Isles, we are kindred. I will help you, I give you my word as a banshee.”

I grabbed a piece of paper and a pen. “Then—my name.” I wrote it out. *Cillian Doone*. “You should have it.” I slid it across the table. “My proper name.” He had given me his, I could tell by the way he said it, the way his eyes looked, and the ease of his lips. It was his name. I would return the favor.

He looked at the paper and smiled. “Thank you, Cillian.”

“This,” I touched my hand to my mouth and moved it away and down, palm up, “means ‘thank you.’”

Donal smiled and repeated the gesture. “You can teach me this. Fair trade.”

I found a smile working its way across my face and nodded.

I made a fist and extended my first two fingers, curving them slightly, and touched them to my neck. “Vampire.”

He mimicked me. “Vampire.”

The banshee were not anything to sneeze at. For one to take an interest in me—especially one so attractive—that was like an impossible dream. Or a nightmare. I suppose it depended on whether the banshee was keening for you or not. This banshee, this Donal, he wanted to help me. He was a son of Ireland, just as I was, a servant of the Morrigan. One did not doubt the intentions of such a creature.

Not even someone as jaded as myself.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

*Donal*

What I was expecting to find in Cillian was a typically powerful, lazy master vampire. The loners got that way often enough for it to be a stereotype. This *master*, however, was... endearing. He spoke English with an Irish accent thicker than a peat bog, putting my mind back to the time he'd been human. His Gaelic was the same, but easier to follow. He spoke his first tongue with ease enough, a person could forget he was deaf. But with the drastic changes of the times, it was clear that beyond short sentences of similarly short words, he had found it more and more difficult to communicate vocally, the poor thing.

When I signed back to him, he'd lit up like a child at Christmas. The honest smile had sent that familiar quake through my knees. *Cillian Doone*. How lonely had he been? Did those that pushed him away have any concept of the power they had shelved because of his disability? A power anyone could see, looking into those impossibly luminescent eyes.

And now I had signed on to teach this master child, because I swore to. I had no real idea why.

Before leaving, I pressed my phone number on him and made sure he knew how to text message—and had a damn phone—and made an appointment to see him again the next evening.

In the meantime, I made a few phone calls. I wanted a better handle on where he had come from, the Family that had abandoned him, and the general attitude of the community towards him.

There was an O'Brien in the Dublin Family whom I had tea with every other decade. He would have no issue gossiping. Housewives have nothing on Irish nobility. I made an appointment to see him in Dublin and prepared myself to walk the Ways, called in sick to work and cleared my appointment book for the next week.

I had the strangest feeling that things were going to get more bizarre from here.

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I could not step foot in Dublin without remembering how it had been once. When I was born, there was no city here, just a small village occupied by Northern invaders. How it had grown since those roots. How Ireland had changed, how it stayed the same.

I felt my history walking down the brick paved street to meet with a former King of Ireland, Seamus O'Brien. "King" was something of a misnomer. He wasn't in any history books and he'd only been king for about... five minutes before he'd been turned into a vampire, and then his cousin got the throne. Very unfortunate, but the Stone would not accept a vampire. You had to be able to reproduce to rule.

"O'Neil, it's good to see you."

I was still a touch weary from traveling the Ways, but there was no faster way to get to Ireland, and I'd never trusted phones. O'Brien met me at a local tea house that kept late hours. As I sat down, I could feel the music of the land wrap around me gently, so. By the time I sipped my first cuppa, I felt myself again. Being home always restored me.

"And you, O'Brien, so what can you tell me of Cillian Doone?" I toyed with my spoon.

O'Brien, who reminded me more of a cartoon leprechaun than a king, whistled. He always whistled. "I thought he'd died till you called. Does explain the talk from Cadiz."

"Do tell."

"Well," he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "Ignacio Suarez, the lad's maker, was murdered. Oh, they're saying he 'went to the sun', but that's bollocks. Cillian being alive means the old goat's holdings pass to him. Boy was his only living child, you know."

I raised my eyebrows. "What happened to the rest?"

O'Brien sniffed. "He was practically sterile. Never made a single child that wasn't wrong somehow. A couple turned revenant right off, some lost—pieces, and then there was Cillian. To be fair ta Ignacio, he wanted to keep the boy. It was Elena that refused him. Her purity shite is still the prevailing opinion, unfortunately, and she'd kill Cillian before she'd let him take his inheritance."

I'd seen his living situation. It certainly hadn't looked like he cared much about money.

I finished my tea before speaking. "I'd assumed Ignacio was simply too old to make children. Is this sort of sterility common?"

He shook his head. "No. You can believe it looked bad on Elena, too, she brought Ignacio into the fold. As far as age, Johannsen brought Sven over when he was into his fourth century. Seems to fluctuate in the bloodlines, and I'm surprised Cillian lived this long. He can't be much of a vampire."

"He's a master," I said. "Untrained, but the power is there." I shook my head. "I can feel it. I asked him about his gifts, and he named speed and hypnosis as if there could be nothing else."

O'Brien leaned back into his chair, eyebrows up. "Master? So you've spoken to him?"

"He is in my city. A master with all the knowledge of a newborn. He's actually afraid of the local vampires, and they less than a quarter his own age."

O'Brien shook his head. "No one dared take him in after Elena's expulsion. It was the Inquisition, no Family would risk their treaties. We let him down, I'm afraid." He looked me in the eyes. "Do you intend to teach him, O'Neil?"

I nodded.

"Then I should tell you. Ignacio's death was not the first. They say whoever does it leaves no marks on the body. The Families are closing ranks."

"Thank you for the warning." I stood. "I pray I do not keen for you."

"May your glass stay full."



I smiled. “May your wife not catch you with the chambermaid.”

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I made it back to Boston before my next appointment with Cillian. Enough time to shower and change and grab a bite to eat. I had never had much luck getting food when out with vampires. I wasn't going to make an ass of myself by having my stomach growl when I was trying to teach a skittish vampire.

I briefly considered catching squirrels to use as treats, but dismissed it. That would take too much time, and really, the boy needed to be eating fresh *human* blood. The blood of predatory animals was also sufficient, but every vampire needed a human feed now and again. The ones that ate only animals had a twitchiness about them as they aged. Some went mad. That's where Sasquatch stories come from, I'm afraid. A rather large, shaggy vampire went into the forest and never came out again. Sometimes it was werewolves, but usually it was a crazed “back to nature” vampire. The sun usually got those sort eventually. They weren't particularly bright.

Cillian's apartment wasn't any better the second time around. It was dingy and ill-lit, and while I admired his vampire-proofing on the doors and walls, he had no other form of decoration besides the crucifixes, and garlic oil does not make anyone's home smell welcoming. How he could stand it, I don't know. He probably didn't even notice it anymore.

“Welcome back,” Cillian said, opting for Gaelic right off.

I smiled at him. He'd been dressed better last night, but I had the feeling he didn't have all that many clothes. He was barefoot, like he had been on the beach, but in more ratty jeans and a T-shirt advertising a barbeque restaurant from South Carolina.

“So, you should put shoes on. We're going out.”

“I don't like shoes,” he replied.

“It's December, Cillian. Humor me.”

“Fine.” He headed deeper into the hole he called an apartment. I followed and discovered there was a room similar to a bedroom, except the bed appeared to be a wooden box roughly large enough for a person, filled with

pillows and blankets. I was starting to feel that I might have gotten in over my head. Just a little. I tried to remember the last time I'd been called upon to teach a son of Ireland. It had been awhile, and those lads had all been kings in waiting, or lords. This was a vampire in desperate need of contact, touch and understanding. I hoped I could help him, because it had been a very long time since someone made my knees shake.

I waited until he had his shoes on and was once again facing me to speak. "You don't do much housework, then?"

"You're the only person who's ever come inside."

Of course I was.

He held up his hands, closed into fists, side by side and knocked them together twice, gently. "Shoes."

At least he was making considerations. I repeated the gesture. "Shoes. Come on, first thing you and I are going to deal with the Blades."

He went a bit pale. Well, paler. He touched his open right hand to his forehead and pulled it away, closing the middle three fingers.

I took a wild guess. "Because it is your responsibility, Cillian. This territory is yours."

Cillian gulped and then made a face I recognized as the precursor to such declarations as, "I don't want to," and, "You can't make me do that."

"And try to remember that I am a banshee and at least twice your age, and definitely twice as mean."

His shoulders sagged in defeat.

"Come on, then."

He didn't know it then, but this was going to be fun.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

*Cillian*

Being dragged out of my apartment by a bossy banshee to battle the Blades was not on my list of possible outcomes for this evening. Then, I hadn't really expected him to show up again. He was a banshee, he *had* to have better things to do than teach me how to be a vampire. Not that I had anything better to do until classes started again. I was having writer's block on my newest art history research, so it wasn't like my time was being wasted.

I was still having a little trouble reconciling the fact that he looked like he looked and the *twice my age* remark. I mean, really. *Twice*, my age? I hadn't run into anyone older than I was in a long time, and though I'm loathe to admit it even to myself, the prospect was more than a little attractive. I mean, he was a golden edifice of perfection, older, dangerous, and he might even care a teensy bit about my welfare.

That was like hitting the jackpot for a guy whose longest-lasting relationship was with a typewriter. His name was Barry. It was really one-sided. *Sweet Lugh, I'm mad. I'm mad as a box of frogs. I am.*

Donal tapped my shoulder to draw my attention. "We're nearly there."

I nodded.

We'd walked, so I suppose it was a good thing I put the shoes on. I hated pulling glass out of my feet. It didn't especially hurt, not for long anyway, but it was inconvenient. He'd brought me to the dockside warehouse I knew the Blades were holed up in. I knew so I could avoid it. Coming to it on purpose was making my legs feel like jelly. I don't care what he said, there was no way I could take on those four. I mean, there were *four* of them. But Donal didn't seem to think that was an issue.

Maybe he would help. I could take one and he could handle the other three. Easy.

We paused at a stretch of wall where Donal revealed a hidden door. He looked at me and pulled out a long blade and pushed the hilt toward me. “Here.”

“I...”

“Take it.”

I took it. There was no point arguing with the man. He gestured for me to go ahead of him. I was betting that wasn't negotiable either. I went on inside, but waited for him to catch up. As we walked through the maze of decaying wood and metal, it was clear he'd been here before. He moved confidently and easily, like a predator. I wondered if that's what I looked like when I was stalking. Doubtful that I would ever look that majestic, but hey, I could hope. He put up a hand to stop me and placed a finger to his lips and then pointed to an opening just ahead. I could see lights flickering.

He pointed to his ears and made the vampire sign I'd taught him and then held up four fingers and pointed to the opening again. I nodded and we continued onward. I gripped the blade tight. The last time I'd had a weapon like this in my hands, I'd been fleeing Europe. I'd survived, though, so I would have to take comfort in that.

Donal led the way, and I did my best not to turn tail and run back to my apartment. The space we found ourselves in actually looked worse than my apartment, and given that I'd seen cardboard shanties with more style than my apartment, this surprised me. All four of the Blades were settled in, the blood on their chins and hands saying more clearly than words that they had just been out killing and the glaze of their eyes saying they'd fed—heavily.

Damien got to his feet the minute he spotted us. “What are you doing here?” He bared his fangs and snarled.

I swallowed. “You will stop killing.” I spoke slowly and carefully, hoping he would understand. “This is *my* territory. My city.”

Damien started to laugh, at least, there was no other conceivable reason for his mouth to be open like that. “Your city? You don't even come out of that hole of yours, you eat squirrels.”

I raised my eyebrows. *You can do this, Cillian.* I thought of all the haughty, nasty, cruel vampires I'd encountered over the years. The ones that taunted, the ones that hurt me and the ones that pretended to be kind just to hurt me deeper. Beneath all of the pain and rejection, there was a simmering rage I had buried. I was Irish, dammit, I wasn't going to let these no-good hooligans run *my* city.

I snarled at Damien and raised the sword. "You stop, or you die."

With Donal standing there like a sentinel, I was safe. If they started to overtake me, I—I trusted that he would intervene. I don't know why. Because he was a banshee, perhaps. Because he had sworn to help. People didn't make oaths and break them, not people like him.

Damien blinked. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." I hoped I sounded convincing.

He bared his fangs again. "Then kill me, freak." He leapt at me and I moved out of the way. He crashed into the wall behind me and I blinked. Well. While he scrambled to get to his feet, I took the opportunity and went to slash his throat. What happened, however, was his head bouncing on the floor. Vampires only turned to ash in sunlight or fire, but taking off their head was very effective. It did leave a corpse to deal with, though.

Damien's children stared at me but didn't seem eager to join their master in death.

"My city," I said. "Understood?"

They nodded eagerly.

"Good." I straightened. "Take care of that." I gestured at the corpse with my sword. I looked to Donal and marched out of the nest as confidently as I could manage. I peered over my shoulder and spied Donal following me. We made it out of the warehouse before he said anything.

"See, how hard was that?"

"I feel... odd."

“That’s called pride. This city is your territory, Cillian. It is past time you acted in the city’s best interest.”

I felt that deserved some sort of response, but I didn’t have any idea of what that should be.

“What do you want to do now? The vamplings will be wary of you now.”

I frowned, uncertain I’d understood him correctly. “Vamplings?” I was sure I mangled that.

“Vamp-lings,” he repeated. “Baby vampires.”

I shook my head. “Okay.”

“All right. Back to the question. What do you want to do now?”

“Sleep?”

“You sleep too much.” He looked me over. “Do you have money?”

“Why?”

“You need clothes.”

“Why?”

“Because you look like a homeless person. You’re a master vampire, you should look the part.”

I didn’t fully understand that logic. “There isn’t anything open this late.”

He frowned. “I think you just said nothing is open this late.”

“Yes.”

“Then let me prove you wrong.” He took my hand and started pulling me away from the warehouse.

“I don’t have any money,” I protested. “I don’t trust banks.”

I saw him roll his eyes. “I’ll pay.” He looked at me. “It’s amazing what one can make on investments over the course of a few hundred years, you know.”

“Banks are for suckers.”

He gave me another of those looks my father used to give me. “We have so much work to do.”

What was that supposed to mean?

“Come on now, lots to do.”

Clothes shopping with a banshee, another thing not on the list of things I thought would happen tonight. Now, if we had sex, that would be three for three...

Okay, now all I could think about was having sex with him. I sighed. This was going to be a long shopping excursion.

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So it turned out there were actually a few late night shopping locations and for reasons I did not understand I was required to try on *everything*. Why did one need to try on underwear? With that question in mind, I peered out of the dressing room and waved at Donal.

“I—” I considered what I was trying to say. “Why?”

Donal pushed into the dressing room and looked at me. *All of me*. Well, the all of me not currently encased in silky boxer briefs. He tugged on the waistband. “Good fit.”

I blushed. It was a side effect of a relatively fresh feed. If I kept telling myself that, I’d believe it.

Donal wasn’t looking at me like a man checking a good fit. He was looking at me like he wanted me. I knew that look. I wore it frequently and it usually went unrequited. Standing this close to him, so intimately, I was terribly aware of Donal’s size in comparison to me. I felt—delicate next to him. Donal locked the changing room door and put one hand on my shoulder and another on my cheek. Then he kissed me, really kissed me. The kind of kiss that made my bones feel like cooked noodles.

He pulled away from me and smiled. “We should get seven pairs of those. Good fit.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll go get shirts.”

“Okay.”

I watched him walk out of the dressing room. The moment he was gone, I sat down on the little bench in the dressing room with a vibrating thud. I looked into the mirror. I was attractive enough to get Donal, wasn’t I? That kiss certainly felt like a prelude to greater things but... maybe he just wasn’t the sort of guy that had sex in changing rooms.

Did that mean I was the sort of guy? I had recently had sex rather publicly. Did that make me, what’s the word? Slutty? Was I slutty? I was standing in a changing room in underwear that wasn’t mine. When did my life get so complicated?

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Donal and I left the department stores with bags, lots and lots of bags. He called us a cab and took me home. I was in a bit of a daze. A daze colored by my desire to embrace Donal and tear off his shirt. He’d seen me practically naked, I thought I should see him in the same level of disarray. I bet he would look spectacular. I wondered if he had any tattoos. I didn’t. I sometimes thought a tattoo would make me more mysterious.

Of course, a tattoo was practically impossible for a vampire. They healed too fast to stay.

As we sat in the dark of the cab, I kept stealing glances at him. I was so glad, in that moment, that I was deaf and not blind, because I wanted to keep looking at him. And smelling him... he smelled so very good. Not food-good like a human. He smelled like a memory. A wonderful memory. I wanted to make memories on top of that memory. I wanted to rub my scent all over him and show him I could kiss just like he could.

I just wasn’t sure when to initiate contact. He’d made the first move. Was it a move?

*You’re five hundred years old, Cillian, you ought to know.*

*I am so pathetic.*



Donal tapped my shoulder. “We’ve arrived.”

I nodded. “I—will pay you back.”

He shook his head. “I have money. A lot of money. Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t need a... sugar daddy.” I was pretty sure I used the term right. Though I don’t think it came out clearly because Donal looked a bit dumbstruck and then dragged me out of the cab. We gathered up the bags and he paid the driver before he hustled me upstairs to my apartment with the sort of haste I’d only thought myself capable of. Then, he was a banshee. There were probably all kinds of things he could do. That was the sort of thinking that led to dark places.

In my apartment, he gave me a look. “You are very jaded, you know that?”

“How are you not?” I returned. “You are so much older.”

He shook his head. “I have seen the worst and the best of man and woman. If there is one thing I have learned, it is that they will always surprise you.”

I shrugged.

“Now, I will see you tomorrow night for your next lesson.”

“What will that be?”

He looked around the apartment and then back at me. “How to act like a master vampire.”

“Why?”

“This is your territory now. You must cement it. This—abode, is not appropriate.”

I thought he was going to teach me to do vampire-y things. How was apartment décor a vampire problem? I mean, certainly the place was a bit drab, and I didn’t have a proper bed, and the shower didn’t actually work and... All right, I could sort of see his point.

“Very well.”

“Good.” He smiled at me and then did something most unexpected. He touched his open right hand to his lips and then brought it down to cover his left hand, which faced palm down and was also open. *Goodnight.*

I couldn't help my smile as I returned the gesture.

*Goodnight.*

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## CHAPTER SIX

*Donal*

I could still remember the kiss from the night previous. He'd been so vulnerable, so... perfect. I bet he was the lad all the girls chased when he was human. Now I was chasing him and he seemed more than ready to be caught. I just—couldn't bring myself to do that. The kiss was a mistake, but one I wanted to repeat over and over again. That would be taking advantage of him. He was still fragile. He'd been alone so long, any attention was sure to make him happy.

It wasn't right to push myself on him.

Even if he was the most attractive person I'd ever seen.

I went to work that day in hopes that it would distract me from thinking about Cillian, and that I would be seeing him again that night. Jenna was waiting for me as soon as I got in the door and pressed a cup of coffee on me, which was a bad sign.

“Who's here?” I asked, taking a sip.

“Detective Griffin,” she replied.

I took a bigger drink from the coffee. I was going to need it. It would be more useful Irish, but I would take what I could get. Detective Kester Griffin was the most disgusting, loud-mouthed, irritating man I had met in three hundred years, and he knew it. That, and there was that short period of time when we dated.

That had been a capacious misstep on my part.

I finished off the coffee and handed the cup back to Jenna. “If I'm not out in ten minutes pull the fire alarm.”

She nodded, knowing I was serious. “I already have my gloves.”

She was such a good intern.

I walked into the exam room, tugging on a pair of gloves, and quietly looked over the man who had shared my bed, my life, my secrets for so long. Then he went and fucked it all up. I was better off without him, and I had been content in Boston until he showed up last year all aflutter about getting the act back together. I'd responded by dropping him in the bay, tied to a safe.

Sirens don't die that easily.

Where Cillian was shades of soft warm marble and cerulean, Griffin was cold silver and green. His hair was short and fine, the color of a turbulent sea, and his eyes were the green of the Mediterranean. Like all fey I had known, he wore a glamour over himself, but the banshee cannot be fooled by such things. So I saw him as he really was, and even that was hiding something darker. Sirens were kissing cousins to banshee. Except where the banshee had a useful purpose, sirens only cared for fucking and feeding.

I might have a bias.

"Detective," I greeted coldly.

"Doctor." He flashed a smile at me and then immediately went grim, looking down at the Jane Doe I'd looked over yesterday. "So, exsanguination?"

"Cause of death, yes." I gave him a look. "You saw the report, what do you want?"

"This was a sport kill."

"I'm aware."

"Has it been dealt with?" He raised his nearly invisible eyebrows.

"Of course. I do my job."

He grimaced. "I had to know. Is there an identification on our Jane Doe?"

"Not yet. Her soul had passed on. We must wait for conventional methods. That is your department, I believe. I have submitted all of my findings."

He looked at me. "You look different. Are you seeing someone?"

"That's none of your business."

“That’s what you say when you are seeing someone.”

I really didn’t think what was going on between Cillian and I counted as *seeing* someone. I was seeing him, I enjoyed being with him, and I definitely wanted to do all sorts of things to him he’d never even heard of—but I wouldn’t, because that would be wrong. Even if I couldn’t stop thinking about him in that damn changing room.

“Now you’re thinking about him, aren’t you?” He grinned. “You are. I can tell.”

“None of your business. You lost the right to question me when you screwed that Gancanagh.”

“You just won’t let that go.”

“Never.” I snapped off my gloves. “Now, excuse me, I have patients.”

“Dead people aren’t really a high priority, Doc.”

“Higher priority than you are.” The only reason the bastard was still alive was because he was immune to the keening, otherwise I would have sung him into a watery grave. No such luck, sirens and banshees were too closely related for their powers to work on each other. He couldn’t even use the excuse of the Gancanagh’s touch leading him astray, either, as he was immune to that as well. I bet he wouldn’t be immune to a spear through the heart, but I’d mellowed somewhat in the fifty years we’d been apart.

I came back out to the foyer where Jenna was waiting. “I need some condo research, do you think you could find three or four places with open condos?”

“Certainly, Dr. O’Neil. What areas?”

“Oh... Beacon Hill and the Back Bay. I have a wealthy young friend moving into Boston. He needs a place, but he’s absolutely hopeless.”

Jenna nodded, “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you.” After all, if you didn’t give an intern one or two frivolous tasks while in your employ, they’d have nothing to complain to their friends about. Choosing the wealthiest portions of Boston as the new home base for my little vampire was a tactical decision. I thought perhaps I could set him up

as the center of vampire power in Boston. The Families would be making their move soon, after centuries of indecision, and I wasn't keen on them settling in Boston.

I liked O'Brien well enough, and Cillian was ten shades of gorgeous, but I preferred to keep gaggles of vampires out of my city. To do that, there had to be a powerful vampire established in Boston. Cillian could be that vampire. He just needed a confidence boost and a handle on his power. Well, and money. It always took money. I had money, but it would look like the fey were dabbling in vampire politics if I provided the money for him, and that was risky.

I was still waiting to hear from some contacts in the Families. If what O'Brien had said was true, that Ignacio had cared something for Cillian, perhaps there was money there. Vampires seemed to have no other way of showing affection.

*I bet Cillian has ways of showing affection.*

I should have taken a cold shower this morning. A very, very cold shower.

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In the midst of wrapping up my work day I got an alert on my phone for an international phone call. I ducked into a nearby supply room and locked the door behind me before answering.

“O'Neil.”

In a soft, old-French accent that was all southern France, a man spoke. A country accent that was polished up over the years with touches of Spain. I knew that voice.

“Good afternoon, Donal,” Argent said. James Argent, of the Paris Family. He was an unusual specimen in that he was one of only a few vampires I trusted. I had known him when he was still human. He'd made the change willingly, long ago, to defend his country. It was something I could respect. He also made wonderful croissants.

“James, do you have some information for me?” James was the financial expert for his Family. He had contacts all over the world and an investment

portfolio that put some countries to shame. If anyone could find money in Cillian's name, no matter where it was buried, it was James Argent.

"I do indeed. Ignacio built a trust for his child in 1523 with the Swiss. It so happens he handed the funds to me last century when Elena started sniffing around. The bitch was trying very hard to make sure the boy never got a dime."

"I've heard."

"Well, I did my magic and scattered those funds so thoroughly only I would ever find them." James sound proud of himself, and I couldn't blame him.

"How much money are we talking about here, James?" He told me and I nearly choked. "So, what exactly did this boy do to make Ignacio love him so much?"

James laughed. "I have no idea, and I doubt the boy does either. I've heard stories about him. You know he killed three masters? Elena sent them to kill him. She stopped after he killed Santiago."

"Santiago the Red?"

"That's the one."

"I don't think Cillian knows he killed someone famous. He still thinks the number of vampires is more important than how old they are."

"Oh dear. I just picked up a little bat of my own. Poor dear was all alone in the Everglades. Your bat might be more trouble though."

"Do you have advice?"

"Well, Edmund is relatively easy, but if even half of what I've heard about Cillian is true, you'll want to keep him on a short leash. Lonely vampires are like wild dogs."

"He eats squirrels, is that normal?"

There was a long pause. "Is that the only thing he's been feeding on?"

"I'm not sure."

“Squirrels always make me jumpy. Get him on a better diet, and make sure he’s up on modern technology. Get him checked for rabies... you know, the usual.”

“I don’t think he can get rabies.”

“You never know.” James was teasing.

“Thank you so much, James. I should go. Can you arrange those accounts for access? Cillian needs a new abode.”

“I can take care of that. I’ll text you the information. Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

James hung up. Could Cillian get rabies? Or plague? Squirrels carried the plague. Perhaps I ought to check him over, carefully... I shook my head. That train of thought was dangerous. Even if I did want to examine every inch of his skin, and possibly lick it. I was also having a bit of a fantasy about washing him in a big clawfoot tub full of bubbles. Rubbing bath oils over those shoulders...

I shook myself again. Time to pick up Cillian and force him to buy a condo.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Cillian*

I woke up snarling at the person who had dared enter my room. It was Donal, and I wasn't sure how he got in.

“Cillian, there's an outfit in your bathroom. Take a shower and put it on. Then you and I are going to buy a condo with the obscenely large amount of money your maker set aside for you to spite that bitch, Elena.”

“What?”

“Hurry up now, we have things to do.”

He walked out of the room and I was left incredibly confused and slightly aroused at how bossy he was. Or it could have just been typical evening wood. I blinked my eyes into awareness and climbed out of the bed and stumbled into the bathroom. There was a garment bag hanging from the shower rod. I took it down, turned on the water and stripped.

Did he tell me I was buying a condo? And there was something about money in there as well. Was I wealthy? I concentrated on easy things. I showered, dried, and then opened the garment bag. It was a suit. There was a tie. I didn't know how to tie a tie.

I put on the clothes I knew how to put on and went out to the kitchen. There were things—missing. “Where are my things?”

“Boxed. As I said, you're buying condo. Tonight.”

“Can you do that?”

“With the sort of money you have, yes. Also, you're a vampire. Hypnotize the realtor.”

“Okay.”

He stepped forward and helped me with the tie. “Shoes are in that box.” He pointed out a black and silver box on the kitchen table. “We'll get you a bite to eat first.”

“I shouldn’t chase squirrels in this suit.”

“You won’t be chasing squirrels, Cillian.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Eh?”

“Human blood, Cillian. No more squirrel.”

“But it’s...” I hand spelled zesty, but I wasn’t sure he would understand.

“Text it to me.”

My phone was also on the table. I picked it up and carefully typed the word and hit send.

He looked down at his phone and then looked up at me. “Zesty? Really?”

I shrugged.

He pointed to the box on the table and made the sign for shoes. “Hurry along.”

I sighed and put on the shoes. They were leather, and shiny. Very shiny. As soon as the shoes were on my feet Donal had me out the door. I had a terrible feeling I was never going to see my apartment again, and if he had anything to do with it, I wasn’t going to be getting any squirrels for dinner.

That just seemed monumentally unfair. I didn’t think any person should discount squirrel until they’d tried it at least once. Looking at the immaculately dressed Donal, who had shown up this evening in a dark gray three-piece suit, his white shirt pressed and his vibrant gold tie done in a complex bit of knot work, I somehow doubted I could convince him to chase squirrels. The suit I was wearing was of similar caliber, though black, including the shirt, and the tie was blue. The shirt was silky soft against my skin, a delightful feeling, but I disliked the noose quality of the tie.

And the shoes were the sort that would squeak, I was sure of it.

I was hustled out of the building and down to a waiting Town Car. A black and silver monstrosity of Art Nouveau influence. Donal opened the back door for me, and a glimpse at the front told me there was a driver. I pulled out my phone and sent a quick message.

*What's with all of this?*

Donal slid into the seat next to me and shut the door before looking at his phone and then answering, "I said before. You are a master vampire, Cillian. You need to act like one. At least in public."

"Why?"

Donal was considering something, I could tell, and took his time before responding. "The Families are finally making a move on the Americas. If there is no established master in Boston a Family will settle here. I don't want that, you don't want that. Besides, I'd like to be able to keep an eye on you. Make sure you're safe. This is much safer than you wandering the city at night."

The idea of a Family coming to Boston did terrify me, so if this was going to prevent that, I was all for it. But what sort of danger could I be in? I'd killed Damien, the Blades weren't going to try to take vengeance just yet. What danger was I in?

Other than the danger I was typically in, that is.

That was a lot for me to try and say, so I texted him instead.

*What kind of danger?*

He looked at me very seriously. "I talked to some friends of mine. Ignacio was murdered, Cillian. He wasn't the first master, either, and he wasn't the last. Another was found last night. I got the news an hour ago. There's no pattern to these deaths. Anyone could be next. I'll see you safe."

Ignacio was murdered? *You said he left me money*, I texted.

"Yes. Right under Elena's nose. She was the one trying to kill you, Cillian."

I felt very strange. Ignacio had... cared? Now he was dead. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to feel. The only good memories of Ignacio were just before he sunk his fangs into my throat. He'd been so vibrant. A sunnily-disposed man with long dark curls and large eyes. He'd been small, but it had been the mistake of anyone to assume he was weak. We'd spent three days together while I was off ship. I only saw him at night.

On the third night he'd said he didn't want to live without me.

Easy to see where that got us.

"Are you all right?"

*I don't know.* I touched the tips of my fingers to my forehead and swept the hand away like a flimsy salute.

Donal put a hand on my shoulder. "I won't let anything happen to you."

I looked him in the eyes. The strange bronze color was as captivating as ever. Tonight I could see flashes of green like patina. We were so close together. I couldn't help but think of the kiss in the dressing room. I wanted to close the distance between us, press my lips against his and show him what I could do when I wasn't dumbstruck.

He pulled away. "You need to eat."

I clenched my teeth, a touch frustrated, and nodded. I was feeling the familiar tug of bloodlust in the pit of my stomach. I hadn't eaten anything substantive since the boy in the night club. A sip of blood here and there, sure, but I'd been caught up in the whirlwind that was Donal. He was—a force of nature.

The car stopped and parked. Donal poked his head outside and then turned to me. "There are some clubs around here. Go grab a bite."

I flashed a smile. He'd brought me to the South End, Washington Street. There were only a couple clubs here, but I had a feeling we were passing through on the way to another neighborhood from my apartment in Dorchester. South End was a place full of brick row houses and artists. Well, for now. I'd seen fewer over the past couple years. Prices must be on the rise. Not something I usually paid much attention to. I focused myself on a jazz club. There were people loitering outside the brick building's bright red door.

I walked slowly past them, catching the eye of a young man smoking. His eyes met mine and I watched in some amusement as the cigarette slipped from his fingers. He stamped on it quickly and made some excuse to the person next to him before following me. I had never considered my hypnotic gaze all that special, but when I thought about it, I'd never seen another vampire do what I

did. They all spoke to their victims, or gestured. It only ever took a look to bring them under my thrall.

I took the vibrant youth into the nearest alley and drank. I left him weak-kneed but standing, walking back to the car feeling sated and alive. Two human feeds in less than a week, I hadn't done that in decades. I'd forgotten how much I'd missed the taste.

Donal watched me climb into the car. "You have blood on your lips." He reached over and ran his thumb over my lips, coming away with a small smear of blood which he brought to his own lips and licked off. "Good vintage."

The car started to move and I settled into the seat, every bit of me tingling with the desire to kiss him. It wasn't vampires alone who tasted the blood of man, I sometimes forgot. Banshees and other fey were known to partake on occasion. The man could not possibly get any more attractive to me, or so I thought. I wanted him. I hadn't wanted anyone quite as much as I wanted him. He was dangerous and authoritative. He smelled of Ireland. He reminded me that there was humanity in me. Reminded me that I was worth something, no matter what the Families might think.

He didn't think I was a freak.

"Where now?"

"There's a condo at Back Bay I found that should suit your needs."

I blinked, taken out of my lust for a moment. "Back Bay? But it's..."

"Expensive? I know. Don't worry. Ignacio left you enough to finance a small country."

I wasn't sure I could wrap my head around that much money.

"Don't worry, someone very able is looking after it."

That wasn't my worry at all. I was worried I had gone from hole to palace overnight, and that I was way over my head. I was over my head, but that was a typical situation for me. There was the impossibly attractive Donal, the money, my supposed amazing powers, Ignacio, Damien... it was a lot to process.

At least I wasn't processing on an empty stomach.

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The condos Donal brought me to were of recent construction, the steel and glass at odds with the brick of Boston. I raised my eyebrows as I looked the place over, and then spotted something possibly more jarring.

A glyph.

The symbol in question, a circle with three lines, meant the building was constructed with vampires in mind. I hadn't seen such a thing since I was in New York in 1704. The place had burned down, and there hadn't been a vampire construction in sight since. It meant what Donal had said was true, the Families were expressing vested interest in Boston. I couldn't let that happen. I liked this city, and I wasn't going to be shoved out by bigoted bastards.

I'd spent my whole life being pushed around. I was a master vampire. No more.

"Show me the place."

Donal walked me inside where a woman in a pantsuit was waiting for us. She smiled, a slightly off-her-prime—though more due to the horrifying false tan than to age—blonde with expensive jewelry. "Sandy Stokes, you must be Mr. Molloy. Your assistant told me you were looking for a penthouse, and by luck we do have one that just finished construction."

I couldn't help but take a close look at the woman's wrist, just exposed by the edge of her sleeve. A glyph was there as well. I recognized it as the Bourbon Family. They ran Paris under the guidance of a fallen king of France. I hadn't had much contact with them, negative or otherwise.

I nodded to Donal for the woman's benefit.

"Do lead on, Ms. Stokes," Donal said. She smiled and led us to a bank of wood-paneled elevators flanked by marble-topped tables, home to vases of elaborate orchid arrangements. The smell was very strong.

We boarded the central elevator and rode all the way to the top floor, thirty stories up. The elevator itself was a study in taste. The back wall displayed a

tasteful painting of a floral arrangement, Italian in origin and a good couple hundred years old. The walls were oak, and there was a bench on both sides, upholstered in red leather. The floor was coffee-colored marble. It took perhaps a minute to reach the top, which I noted Ms. Stokes had had to use a special key to access. Not a keycard, either. A big brass key with three flanges of complex design.

The doors opened onto a small foyer, decorated with Parisian influence in white and blue. There were two small, well-hidden cameras in the foyer with a fixed view on the double doors and the elevator doors. Interesting. Using another complex key, Ms. Stokes opened the doors for us and gestured us inside.

I took hold of the door and swung it slightly. Steel reinforcement and oak.

Past these doors was a short hall and another set of doors. These took yet another key, and at last we were granted entry to the living area. I took a moment in the hallway to touch the walls. They were thinner than they should be, I could tell by knocking and feeling the vibrations. There was space behind them. *It's a killing gallery.* Very clever.

The first part of the living area was a sitting room. The entire place, it seemed, was furnished and the décor was decidedly English, with an “old country estate meets modern convenience” sort of feel. There were paintings of hunters on horseback, fairly good examples, and a few still lifes of hunt trophies. I wasn't sure what I thought of it.

Donal tapped my shoulder.

Ah, Ms. Stokes had been speaking.

“As you can see, the front room is a wonderful space for guests, and just through there we have the kitchen. Beyond is the dining room, there's an office just there, and this space has three bedrooms and three baths.” She stepped up to a heavy walnut bookcase that spanned half the side wall of the sitting room. With a practiced motion, she pulled on a brass handle and slid the bookcase to the side. It slid down until it just came into contact with the other wall, revealing the aforementioned kitchen.

I peered through the brick and steel kitchen to the walnut paneled dining room. There were more English still lifes in there, plus brass chandeliers and a deer head mounted at the head of the room.

I wrinkled my nose and looked at Donal. I pulled out my phone. *This place is creepy*, I texted.

“A bit,” he returned. “Ms. Stokes. I’m afraid the décor is less than inviting.”

Ms. Stokes froze and turned to Donal, “Oh, well, it can be redecorated.”

*I wouldn’t stay here if you threatened me with evisceration*, I texted.

Donal read my message and shook his head. “We need something move-in ready, Ms. Stokes.”

She looked slightly panicked, but covered it quickly. “Well, there is one other that could suit your needs. Follow me.”

We followed her back to the elevator. She pulled out another strange key and pressed the buttons for the eight, eleventh and twenty-fifth floors. A small niche opened just to the side of the button panel. Ms. Stokes inserted the key and pressed the button for the thirtieth floor three times.

The elevator doors closed and it went up, again.

“I thought that was the penthouse,” Donal said.

Ms. Stokes turned around. “It is, this is—a ghost floor.” She looked at me. “The price is nearly double.”

Donal shook his head. “Money is no object.”

I wished I could seem so confident. I wished I knew what he sounded like. I bet his voice was deep and smooth, like fine whiskey. His kiss had certainly reminded me of that flavor.

The ghost floor was similar to the previous, except for the added security. There were two more sets of doors on this floor, and a winding hall that could confuse the unwary. This place had been designed for a siege. Vampires tended towards the paranoid, after all. I was pretty positive proof of that.



The main living area was brighter than the previous place. The walls were painted in the colors of the ocean, ranging from the gray of the night sea to the green blue of the Mediterranean. The floor plan was relatively open, with wide open doorways that flowed from one room into the next. It was furnished in leather, as the previous condo, but the colors here were old silver and butter, the floors were dark honey-toned wood, and handblown glass balls caught in cast iron cages hung from the ceiling as light fixtures.

There was a reproduction of the painting I so often visited hanging in between the sitting room and a hall to the first of three baths. I thought it was an omen. In spite of the violence in that painting, the terror and the tragedy of what it represented, I always felt a kinship with it. I wandered through the rest of the space, ignoring Ms. Stokes. There were four bedrooms, all of which were furnished in the same oceanic theme as the rest of the home. The bathrooms were blue tile and white porcelain. The master bathroom had a walk-in shower the size of my old apartment, with a waterfall in it. I had never been in someplace so... expensive.

Donal cornered me in the master bedroom, a room dedicated to the work of Ivan Aivazovsky, arguably one of the greatest maritime painters of the nineteenth century. Some were copies, but the breathtaking nightscape of a ship sailing towards the moon high over the horizon, that was the original. I raised my eyebrows and approached it, taking a closer look. I had seen this painting once before in person, and I was certain it was the same surface I had looked upon then.

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket and picked it up.

*Do you like it? – Donal*

I turned to him and nodded.

He smiled. "I'll take care of it."

I looked back at the painting and then to the one across from it. A painting my old favorite, Mr. Turner, had appreciated as well. He'd written poetry about it:

*Reflected in the sea below...*

*Your picture has entranced me so*

Turner was right about Aivazovsky. Donal was right about me. I had let others determine what I thought about myself for centuries. I had let myself be browbeaten into a dark hole in the wall. That wasn't me. I was Cillian Doone, son of Padraig. I had been a sailor and a soldier. I had been shipwrecked and near-drowned. I had fought. I wasn't just some defect. I was Irish. I was proud of who I was.

Boston was my city, and no Family was going to take it away from me.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Donal*

Cillian was very quiet as we went over the paperwork and took care of the money transfers. I called for the moving company to bring up the things that had been salvageable from his previous abode, and took all of the keys and codes from Ms. Stokes. She seemed to find Cillian unnerving. I suppose he could be. He hadn't spoken more than two words the entire time she'd been around. I was certain he had seen the glyph on her wrist.

I left Cillian alone to let Ms. Stokes out and then walked the security installations, checking the camera feeds in the display room and then changing all of the codes. It wasn't that I didn't trust Ms. Stokes, but she was human and already aligned to a Family. Certainly it was a family with more cosmopolitan leanings, but I wasn't going to risk Cillian's safety. I put in a call to a security service—fey run—to see about prices, and went back to see how Cillian fared. It took me a moment to find him.

He was in the master bathroom, stark naked, sitting on the long stone bench in the shower with his eyes closed.

Seeing him that way, he didn't look nearly as vulnerable as he had in the changing room. He looked different, less conflicted. Killing Damien had done something for him. It was the first time he had killed for territory. The other vampires in his long line of kills had been for self-preservation. This was different. There was a feeling one got after protecting their land.

His eyes were still closed as he stood up, and I got a good look at him. I'd gotten a good look before, but this—I felt my heart start to race. The muscles of his back bunched, and I could see a wicked scar, splayed like a spider's web across his left shoulder. It was paler than his skin and raised over the rest of his flesh. He turned, and I saw a small circular scar which must have been the start of the injury. If I'd had to guess, a boat hook or a harpoon had gone through his shoulder. It wasn't the only scar, but it was the worst.

He opened his eyes and looked at me. He turned off the water and grabbed a towel. This place had been stocked the moment it was complete. Vampires aren't big on shopping for home necessities. Cillian dried his hair and then wrapped the towel around his middle before walking out of the shower and toward me.

He made the sign for *thank you*.

“For what?”

He stopped just out of reach. “Everything.” He shook his head and closed the distance between us, snaked a hand around my head and kissed me. I felt it was some sort of retaliation for my kissing him in the dressing room, but he was still the only one naked. I felt my knees quake again and he pulled away and smiled.

“Thank you.”

I nodded. “I should—check on the movers.”

He nodded back, a flash of disappointment in his eyes as he turned away from me.

I was not going to take advantage. The kiss had been a mistake. I couldn't... I wouldn't.

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I left Cillian in the capable hands of the best digital security money could buy, and a pair of pookas I trusted. Pookas didn't lie, and they were fine mercenaries. Some of them even still took payment in food. The O'Hannagain brothers preferred cash, which bothered me little. They would keep Cillian safe as he adjusted. Tomorrow night, I would start teaching him the most important of mastery gifts: flight.

Some masters could raise fog and create fire or ice. Even the youngest of vampires could change shape, something it seemed Cillian had no knowledge of.

Bats were common favorites, but I'd known some vampires to take the form of wolves.

Werewolves were another matter entirely. They tended to live in communes growing their own vegetables, hunting and wearing very little clothing. Most people thought they were nudists, and that was for the best. Werewolves were more territorial than vampires. Luckily, the two species tended to prefer very different landscapes. I think that's where the rumors about werewolves and vampires being at war with one another came from, though it was total bullshit.

Now, fey had gone to war with the vampires, a long time ago. That was over now, for the best. The Families had fought one another for centuries before things came to a head at the Inquisition. The treaties came after that, and poor Cillian got caught in the middle of it. The Cortez Family had been far too powerful to risk alienating, and he'd been left out in the cold.

Once you slipped through the cracks, that's where you stayed.

I'd been born into my life, had family to support me through acquiring my power, training as a warrior. I suppose that was part of the reason I felt so drawn to Cillian. I could not help but try to give him what I'd had. I was a sucker for lost souls. It was a banshee thing, I think. My sister was the same way, she ran a foster home for at-risk youth in Bristol these days. Banshees weren't big on high profile. I preferred the shadows. I did my job, I didn't need special recognition.

That was the other problem I'd had with Griffin. Sirens always wanted attention. They couldn't live without adulation. I couldn't live up to his ego, so it was no real surprise he'd cheated, but still, I'd loved him enough to think he could change. I was too much of an optimist. I hoped I wasn't being too optimistic when it came to Cillian. I hoped it wasn't just lust.

*He makes me nervous, he makes me want him, he makes me... feel young.*

It was terribly hard to feel young when you were as old as I was.

“Donal, what brings you to such a trendy restaurant?”

I looked up at Kes, groaning internally. The smug siren was smiling at me like he was Lugh's gift to all mankind. I had chosen this place because it was still open, and close to my apartment.

The food wasn't bad, either. "Go away, Kes."

"You are out *very* late for someone that has to get up so early." He sat down at my table.

"I did not invite you to sit down."

"Oh, am I being naughty? There was a time when you liked it when I was bad." He smiled again, flashing his teeth. His secondary set of teeth, like sharks' teeth, were just visible. He was feeling amorous. There'd been a time when I'd found that attractive. Sirens could tear a man to pieces.

They fed on man, fish, crabs, man. Kes was very fond of men.

I fingered my fork and considered stabbing him in the eye.

"You seem tense, Donal. What have you been up to?"

I remained silent.

"Come on, we could have fun. Just like old times."

I released the fork and stood up. "Goodbye, Detective Griffin."

He didn't follow me as I walked out of the restaurant. Good thing, or I would I have stabbed him. My restraint only went so far.

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Three weeks later and I was still seeing Cillian every night. He'd come a long way from the ill-dressed, half-feral vampire I'd met on the beach. I'd nearly broken him of his squirrel obsession and he'd finally managed to fly—sort of. What he had managed was a more definite command of his hypnosis, caught his bodyguard on fire—twice—and mastered changing shape. I would have been happier if he'd managed something like a wolf, or a bat, something traditional and in keeping with his new position.

I had to admit he was an adorable squirrel, though.

Tonight we were celebrating his accomplishments by going out and being seen. Cillian wasn't ever going to be a lover of the spotlight, but at least he was getting used to the idea that running the city meant buying his way into

charitable organizations. He'd chosen the Museum of Fine Art. It was the one place in the city he knew like the back of his hand.

During our time together I'd managed to keep my hands off him. There'd been a few kisses, but I wasn't going to let things go further. I refused to take advantage of him. I was twice his age, after all. And if I kept telling myself that was the reason we couldn't be together, I might even start to believe it.

Next we had to find him some solid vampiric liaisons. James wanted to meet him, but I wasn't sure Cillian was ready for that. The remnants of the Blades were still alive and leaderless, listless really. Recruiting them to the family would be a wise move. I just had to nudge Cillian in the right direction.

True to his word, he'd taught me a great deal of sign language as he learned to be a proper vampire. I was competent, if not quick, so we no longer had to text half our conversations when he became unintelligible. I wasn't sure there was any way to help him speak more clearly. His accent was too ingrained.

I made it to the condo at seven thirty to escort him to a benefit at the museum. I didn't even have to pick out his clothes for him anymore. I think he'd been reading GQ and watching Cary Grant movies, it was the only thing that explained the swagger he had whenever we went out in public. Not that I was complaining. I liked seeing him so collected.

He was in the living room when I arrived, fussing with his sapphire and platinum cufflinks and looking—amazing. He wore a tuxedo for the event, and it fit him so well it looked like he'd been poured into it.

I waited for him to notice me, watching him as he bit down on his lip, concentrating on straightening out his bowtie after he finished with the cufflinks. He looked up and spotted me. Cillian smiled and his eyes warmed.

“Ready?”

He made the door knocking sign for *yes* and joined me on my end of the living room. *How do I look?* He signed.

“Marvelous.”

His smile widened. *Let's go.*

“After you.”

Soon enough, he wouldn't need me anymore.

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The museum was an artifact of Greek influence on the American culture. Broad steps led up to a classic column-fronted face and the doors to the museum proper. They'd rolled out carpets, and there were valets and serving staff all about as we were ushered inside after handing over our tickets.

Cillian kept his eyes open, his gaze never settling on any one person as he assessed the danger. He always did that in crowded places, not that I could blame him. One had to make concessions for his paranoia, given his disadvantage. Not that it was much of one. The more I got to know him, the better he gauged when I was nearby. He'd gotten my scent, he'd said. It only took a bit and he would know approximately how far away from him I was.

The vibrations of steps on the floor were usually enough to alert him if his olfactory sense was preoccupied, and past that, every vampire had a keen sense of their own personal space. If someone intruded, he knew. I still managed to surprise him. After all, I was fey.

I stayed within arm's reach of him. There was a part of me that wished I could take his hand in mine and never let go, but I was doing my best to ignore it as well as the way his looks still made me as nervous as a school girl about to lose her virginity in the back of the bus. His growing confidence in himself was only making me more nervous.

Cillian picked up a glass of champagne from one of the servers the moment one passed him by. I don't know that he liked champagne, but if something had bubbles in it, Cillian would drink it. He tried to carbonate some of his emergency blood supply. It did not work out as planned.

The cleaning staff had not been happy about that disaster. Heaven forbid a forensic team ever go over his kitchen and try to figure out how a mist of blood ended up all the way up on the cathedral ceiling.

I kept a close eye on Cillian, picked up my own glass of champagne and took a sip. I wasn't a fan myself. I preferred my alcohol sans carbonation,



amber in color and over two balls of ice. I do not like cubed ice, it's too—pointy.

Cillian paused and looked at me. *How long do we stay?*

I shrugged. “Two hours?”

*One?*

I gave him a look and he sighed and made the sign for *okay*. He was adorable when he didn't get his way. That did not at all put a damper on my less than pure intentions. His eyes might have been what first set my heart racing, but there was so much more than that. He filled out that suit in ways that could make a nun rethink vows of chastity. He set my brain firmly in the gutter with a wide variety of scenarios playing out. I'd been around a long time, I had seen a lot of things and done just about everything you could think of.

I wouldn't mind trying every single one of those things with Cillian. I wanted to make love to him, show him someone could care for him, could... understand him. I also wanted ravage him, dig my nails into his skin and hear him cry out in pleasure—and pain.

I wanted too much.

When I pulled my focus back to the matter at hand, Cillian had wandered off. Of course he had. I knew where he would go, however. His favorite painting was in the European Gallery, a Turner. There was a copy in his home as well, but he preferred the real thing. I'm surprised he had never stolen it.

I found him where I expected, staring at the tragic scene in the painting, the champagne glass touched to his lips. He was speaking to himself, silently.

“Watching him awfully hard, aren't you, Donal?”

I peered over at Detective Griffin and clenched my hand around my champagne glass. I was suppressing the urge to break it over his head. Not that it would do much damage, but after it was broken I could stab him in the throat. He looked good tonight, I had to admit, in his dress uniform. I suppose the police presence was required for some of the loaned pieces on display for just this night.

“If I am?”

“Could it be that’s what’s been keeping you up at night?” He raised his eyebrows. “Are you robbing the cradle, Donal? He looks awfully young.” Kes looked to Cillian and licked his lips. “I could eat him right up.”

“Don’t bite off more than you can chew, Detective.”

“So cold. I’ll go see if he’s any warmer.”

I wasn’t concerned. Cillian wasn’t going to melt for Kes. Especially given that Kes’ typical method operandus was to use his power to seduce and ensnare. This was going to be hilarious.

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## CHAPTER NINE

*Cillian*

I had abandoned Donal, but he had followed me. I could smell him lurking nearby. I could smell something else, too, something that smelled of death and the sea. Salt and seaweed overlain with spicy aftershave. Not pleasant. I wrinkled my nose and turned around to see if I could locate the source of the odor. Donal was standing not far away, sipping at his glass with an amused sort of expression on his face as a man in a fancy police uniform approached me.

The look on his face was predatory.

“Hello, Detective Kester Griffin, enjoying the evening?”

He was not human, this detective. I could see past the glamour he had over his features. He appeared normal enough to the mundane people around us, but I could see the aquatic tint to his skin and the darkness lurking behind those green eyes. *Siren*.

The siren smiled at me. I could see the muscles of his throat working. He could be trying to sing me into a trance, but that wasn't going to work. I glanced at Donal. He was smiling and I had no doubt he knew the siren and knew exactly what the devil was up to.

I nodded.

“I know a quiet little place not far from here, we could get a drink. I bet you like Bloody Marys, eh?”

He knew what I was. I suppose he was used to being able to seduce whatever, whoever, he set his eyes on. I raised my eyebrows and quirked a smile. Thinking he was getting somewhere, he put a hand on my arm.

“Shall we go?”

I smiled wider and dumped my champagne down his front. “Go to hell.”

Donal approached then, laughing. “Sorry, Kes, but that won’t work on Cillian.”

The siren looked at Donal. “What?”

“Cillian is immune to your song, Kester.” Donal shook his head. “You should leave.”

“I don’t have to do anything.” He looked at me and snarled. I looked into his eyes and concentrated on what I wanted him to do. *Leave. Go away. Be gone.* It took a moment, but then I saw the familiar dilation of eyes and they became glazed. He blinked very slowly and then walked away without looking back.

Donal’s face spoke of disbelief. He looked at me. “That was amazing.”

*Thank you,* I signed.

“I—you are really—” He shook his head. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Let’s play a game of chess. How about it?”

I considered that. Donal played chess very well, better than me. It would be challenge. “Yes.”

“All right.” He held out his arm.

I shook my head and then took it, looping my own through his. I wanted more than a game of chess, but Donal didn’t seem to want to push our relationship further. I didn’t understand it, but I had never been one to instigate. I was in unfamiliar waters here. I wanted him, I thought he might even want me, but I wasn’t sure how to progress from there. I had never had a “boyfriend”, really. I had never really been in love. I had liked Ignacio, cared for him, but I wasn’t in love with him.

Donal was different.

I wanted him in ways I had never wanted anyone before. Sure, there was lust, but there was something else, too, and that was what had me at a pause. What kept me from acting on my lust. I wanted so much more than just sex. Too bad I had no idea how to get it.

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Donal had left for the morning, and I was tucking myself into bed after a cold shower. My banshee had beaten me at chess, and the entire exchange had left me more than a little hot and bothered. My bodyguards had locked everything down and bid me good morning. The pookas were an attractive pair, but I couldn't bring myself to make a move in their direction. I didn't want them like I wanted Donal.

I grabbed one of the many soft pillows on my bed and crushed it to my chest. I wanted Donal to hold me. I wanted him to stay with me while I slept. I would have to make do with the pillow. My winter break was over tomorrow, but I wasn't certain if I was going to continue. It seemed pointless when I had so much more to learn about my own power, let alone conflict resolution.

I felt something shift at the end of my bed. I hadn't moved. I rolled over and peered at the end of the bed. There was nothing there. I swore I felt something... I took a deep breath through my nose, scenting the air. There was nothing out of ordinary. Except. A strange chill tingled through the muscles of my back and legs, crept up my neck and over my scalp.

Something was wrong. I threw off the covers and sat up, looking all around the room, but there was nothing there. I felt like a child jumping at the wind but—I could not shake the feeling that something was—

I was slammed down in the bed by an invisible weight. I tried to get up, but the strength of the creature surprised me. It was like an anvil on my chest. An anvil that weighed as much as a car. I thrashed my arms and legs. I screamed and prayed my bodyguards would hear me. I thrust one arm at the ephemeral attacker. I made contact with something. Something—fabric. I gripped the fabric in my hand and brought my knee up. It took a moment for me to get leverage, but as soon as I had it, I threw the thing off of me.

I saw the contact it made with the wall, it cracked. Before the thing could fall upon me again, I leapt off the bed and went for the closet. Donal had insisted I keep a stash of weapons in nearly every room of the house. I thought I was paranoid. I grabbed the closest weapon, a blade shorter than my forearm, and took a defensive stance against the nearest wall. I still couldn't see what had come at me.

I shouted again, keeping the blade in front of me and a close watch for any movement. The vibrations I could feel through the floor signaled the arrival of my bodyguards.

“What is it?” the elder brother, Aidan, asked.

I was about to explain when I was attacked again, thrown up against the wall. I felt it give slightly as my head cracked into it. I pushed off the wall as soon as I recovered and slashed out instinctively. I struck something—blood flew off the blade and splattered onto the floor and the wall.

Something fell against the nearby table, knocking over a plant. I still couldn’t see it, but the pookas were quick to take action, shoving me behind them as they drew their own blades. I couldn’t see well beyond my wall of protectors, but before long, they relaxed and the younger brother, Lucas, turned to me.

“It’s gone.”

*What’s gone?* I signed.

The elder brother shrugged. “Don’t know, but I can’t feel it anymore. It felt—like fear. The sensation is gone though. I have to call Donal.”

I nodded. *I’m going to clean up.*

“Lucas will stay with you until Donal says otherwise,” Aidan said.

*Fine.* I needed to go to sleep soon. I could feel the sun, and even in the safety of my home, its effect was beginning. The longer I stayed up, the more sluggish and temperamental I would become. My strength and my power would wane.

I went into the bathroom and checked myself. I had a couple bruises from impacting the wall, but otherwise there was nothing. I was turning away from the mirror, when something began to change about a section of skin on my chest. A bruise was blooming. It would have taken days to appear on a human being, but my healing was speeding the process up.

The bruise took on the clear shape of a large hand.

I looked at Lucas and pointed at the bruise.

He pursed his lips. “Well, proof we aren’t crazy.” He took a snapshot with his phone. “Donal will want to see.”

I nodded.

What attacked me? Why? I couldn’t help wonder if it had something to do with Ignacio and those other masters dropping dead. Had I made myself a target? Well, I wasn’t dead, so it hadn’t succeeded. If it came at me again, I would kill it.

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“Are you all right?” Donal demanded the moment he was in the doorway.

I nodded.

The brothers were quick to chime in with affirmatives. I was sitting on the large plush couch in the main room when he arrived. I noted with interest he hadn’t taken the time to put his hair back into a braid, and the soft strands fell in front of his face and down his shoulders in a cascade of cream against his tawny skin. He was wearing jeans and a button down shirt which he’d buttoned incorrectly, leaving it bunched midway up and uneven at the bottom.

“What was it?” he asked next.

“We aren’t sure, sir,” Aidan said. “Didn’t get a look at it.”

“It was invisible,” Lucas said. “But it had a fear miasma. Soon as the sensation was gone we put up sigils.”

Donal took a deep breath. “Fear... well, that narrows the field.” He looked at me. “You took a bite out of it?”

I pointed to the sword I’d set on the coffee table in front of the couch. There was still blood on the blade.

“Good. We have an advantage, then. Aidan, call Mr. O’Brien and tell him of the attack. Be vague. Word will spread faster than wildfire and maybe we’ll find out what’s going on. Lucas, put that blade in plastic wrap, we don’t want to lose a drop.”

The brothers were quick to do as he asked, leaving me alone with him. Donal sat down next to me. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

Yes, I signed.

“All right. I’ll stay with you. I—I don’t want to risk that it will come back.”

I managed not to smile, that would ruin the moment. *Thank you.*

“You’re most welcome. Now, back to bed. The sun is already up, you should not be.”

*I don’t want to be alone,* I signed.

He smiled. “I’ll call off work, don’t worry. I won’t let anything hurt you.” He kissed my cheek. “To bed.”

If only he meant that in the way I wanted. For now, though, I would take it.

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I woke the next evening to find Donal was not there, but I could see steam from the adjoining bathroom. I stretched and climbed out of bed. We’d slept in the second bedroom to give the repairmen space to fix the damage in the master suite. This room was a touch smaller, but not by much.

I padded into the bathroom and caught a sight I’d been lusting after since we first met. Donal stood under the shower head scrubbing shampoo through his hair, giving me a wondrous view of him in the altogether. Along his back and shoulders, creeping over his shoulder to his chest, his golden skin was interrupted by thick blue bands of ink that swept into intricate knotwork tattoos the like of which I had never seen before. They were complex and delicate in some areas, bold and simple in others, but the pattern worked together as a unified whole.

There were some scars, fewer than I expected, but he was fey and they did heal much like vampires. The muscles of his back bunched as his arms worked. He was—too perfect. That was a fey trait as well, though. Nothing could ever be as beautiful. I wasn’t sure I could live up to that, now that I’d seen him.



*You are over-thinking this, he kissed you first.* Very true. Great, now I was talking to myself in my head. Better than out loud, probably, especially given that I couldn't hear myself any more than I could hear anything else.

He rinsed the suds from his hair and turned enough so I could see his face. His lips were moving, but it wasn't words I knew. He was—singing. Even though I couldn't hear it, I could *feel* it. An overwhelming sadness. The sort of emotion a man feels when he loses someone. He sang the lament of the banshee, but why?

I continued to watch him, frozen by the melancholy of his silent song until he opened his eyes and stopped.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

I tapped my ear and then placed a hand over my heart. “What—I felt that.”

His brow furrowed. “You felt the song.”

I nodded.

“Forgive me, I mourned for the past. I did not think it would affect you.” He turned off the shower and stepped out, throwing a towel over his head to catch the water dripping off his hair. “I suppose some magics are greater than any disability.”

I did not know what to say to that. There had been the barest moment where the feeling had seemed to echo—like a memory, it had played through my mind. A song I had never heard before, but its notes were there in the recesses of my soul.

“I'm starved,” he said. “I'll get dressed.”

What had just happened?

“Donal.”

He paused. “What is it?”

I was too afraid to say out loud what I was feeling. It was one of those moments when my throat felt frozen. So I held up my hand, with the two middle fingers close down to my palm and looked him in the eyes.

He swallowed, and I could see indecision written on his face. I turned away, unwilling to see pity there too.

Warm arms wrapped around me, still damp and smelling of spicy soap. He kissed my neck gently. He crushed me to his chest and I felt his warm breath next to my ear. He brought a hand up to my neck and slowly traced the letters. *I L Y.*

He turned me around in his arms and kissed me properly. He gripped my neck in one hand and placed the other at my back and pulled me close. He broke away for a moment and looked me in the eyes.

“I love you, Cillian.” He traced the contours of my cheek with his thumb, and smiled wistfully. “I’m too old for you.”

I shook my head. “I’m over five hundred years old, Donal. I know what I want.” I kissed him. “I love you.”

It was like the floodgates opened. He pulled me to him, pulling off the shirt I’d slept in to press more of his skin to mine. I liked the feeling. His skin was soft and smooth and warm. He was so warm. Donal was the sun in my dark world. He made me think of music for the first time in centuries. He made me feel things I had thought I forgot.

Oh, I loved him.

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## CHAPTER TEN

*Donal*

It was foolish, perhaps, but the moment I saw Cillian's hand form into that silent confession, everything else went away. I loved him, I couldn't stop myself from saying it aloud. I held him close to me, still just kissing, just touching—I wanted to get to know every inch of him.

Every inch.

I pulled him into the bedroom. I wanted this time to be gentle, memorable, but Cillian was a bit more demanding than I could have imagined. His hands were slightly cool, and his nails were sharp. His eyes practically glowed as he pressed kisses along my neck and shoulders.

“Slow down.” I held him back. “We have plenty of time.”

He panted slightly and shook his head. “Don't want to go slow.” He grabbed the back of my head and kissed me. He bit down on my bottom lip and sucked, drawing a bit of blood as we tumbled back into the bed.

I thought I understood. It must have been some time since he'd had someone he didn't have to be afraid he'd hurt in bed. Had someone that made him nervous. Made him bold. I liked seeing him this way, wild. I stripped the drawstring pants off of him and kissed the skin that had been under his waistband. His skin was so smooth. It was like kissing silk. Silk covering lean, firm muscles.

He tasted sweet. I kissed my way back up to his neck. I braced myself over him and smiled. Cillian raised his eyebrows at me and smiled. It wasn't his typical, nervous smile, but a predatory smile. The smile I knew he flashed to those he hunted. The smile he had never directed toward me.

It made my already hardening piece twitch.

I pressed myself to him and kissed him, returning the bite he'd given me earlier, nipping at his lower lip. He made small noises, his breath catching as I ran my hands over his chest, winding circles around his nipples before

brushing over them, teasing. He gripped my back, his nails digging into my skin.

I grunted and went for the crook where his neck met his shoulder and kissed it gently before biting down. I liked a bit of blood now and again, just like any other banshee. Vampire blood was a delicacy to the fey. I drew only two beads of blood and licked them up. The blood made my heart race. Electricity brushed over my tongue as the blood rolled down my throat and warmed my stomach like good whiskey.

He was hard, and the velvet heat pressed against my stomach. Cillian growled and grabbed the back of my neck, and bit me back, just as carefully as I did. I growled back. He brought his knee up and rolled me onto my back, tossing his head as he took the upper hand. He flashed his fangs at me.

“I love you.” His accent was so thick.

I sat up, pulling him into my lap, legs straddling my torso. “This is how you say ‘I love you.’” I pulled him in and pressed my lips to his, and then slipped my tongue past his lips and slowly, carefully, made the shapes. “I love you.”

I kept making the shapes, running my hands down his strong back to rest on his very fine ass. I pulled back. “Now you say it.”

“I love you.”

I gave him a smack on the ass in encouragement.

He growled, but he was still smiling.

“Again,” I said.

“I love you.”

I belted him harder. “Again.”

“I love you.” He kissed me. “I love you.”

I couldn't wait any longer. My blood was still dripping from the bite, his saliva doing its work. The warm beads of blood rolled down my chest and my back. I licked the palm of my hand, it being the only lubricant nearby, and gave myself a couple quick strokes before lifting him up.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“When you are.”

I gave him a third slap and pulled him down onto me. He moaned and I saw pain flash across his face, the predator in him so very near the surface. Cillian smiled and began his own rocking rhythm. The kisses didn't stop, and neither did our exchange of love bites. I wanted to mark him as mine. I didn't want anyone else to have him. I think I knew that the moment I looked in his eyes.

*Lady Morrigan, I am such a fool.*

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Cillian tried to make me breakfast, which was sweet, but I took over before things could go too wrong. I would have made enough for the brothers, but they'd ordered out, and besides, there was never really enough for a pair of pookas.

He settled for watching me, perched on a barstool and dressed casually in jeans and a zipped-up blue hoodie. He hadn't eaten yet, and a few of the bites I'd given him hadn't quite healed. I liked that. I'd always liked marking my lovers, but this was different. He was different. He was a contradiction. Predator and prey, damaged and exceptional. His powers of persuasion were so much greater than any vampire I'd ever seen.

His master powers were developing so quickly. More quickly than I ever could have hoped. Gods, he made me feel young and old and... mad.

My back was turned for a moment; something struck the back of my head. Something soft. I turned around and spotted a balled up piece of bread on the floor and looked at Cillian. I raised my eyebrows. “Are we feeling bold?”

He leaned on his elbows and grinned. It made him look like a Puck. He shrugged and balled up another little piece of bread, weighing it in his hand. He looked me dead in the eye and threw the ball at my head.

I let it hit me, watched it fall and then looked back at him. “Feeling playful?”

He made his “maybe” face, and tipped his head to one side.

I laughed. “Throw another one and I’ll pull you over this counter and show you that those little smacks earlier were just love taps.”

He balled up another piece of bread.

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Later, much later, I was stretched out on the couch while Cillian watched the news and complained about the poor spelling on the closed captioning when my cell phone rang. I picked it up. “O’Neil.” A perk of being with someone who couldn’t hear, my phone conversation wouldn’t bother him.

“It’s O’Brien.”

“Tell me you know something.”

“I can tell you that when one of those masters died, one of their children was in the building. They said they were overwhelmed by fear.”

“That’s news.”

“Aye. Now, there’s something else you ought to know. The masters that have been killed, they’ve been of the same bloodline. The line of David.”

I looked at Cillian. “I see. Then someone is holding a grudge?”

Serious for once, “Could be. Could be someone from a rival bloodline. I’m not sure. You must be careful, Donal. The line of David bore very few progeny. I had no idea Ignacio was one of them.”

“All right. Thank you for the information.”

“No problem.”

O’Brien hung up and I put the phone down. The line of David was a vampire line of rather mystical origins. There were more legends around it than truth, which was typical of all vampire bloodlines, but the David line was even more clouded. The descendents were all supposed to be exceptional. Special, even among vampires.

Cillian was certainly special.

I tapped his leg and he looked at me. “Yes?”

“We need to start building your family.”

He raised his eyebrows. *Excuse me?*

“You know, vampires. Other vampires. You should recruit.”

He wrinkled his nose.

“Come on. The vampplings you left high and dry probably need direction, and you need minions.”

“Fine.”

“That’s the spirit.” I patted his leg. “You’ll be an annoying, overbearing vampire in no time at all.”

He rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the news. Now I just had to figure out what could induce fear in a vampire to the point that they died without a mark on their body, and why Cillian hadn’t felt it when he felt the sorrow of my lament even though he couldn’t hear the song. I could do all of that, but could I do it with Cillian as a glorious distraction? I would just have to suffer through it.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Cillian*

The evening after my energetic first and second—and later third—rendezvous with Donal, I woke in his arms. It was an amazing feeling. He was so strong, so warm so... He was everything I never dared hope for, all those long lonely years in the dark. He was my glorious sun. He was also still the bossy banshee he always was, which meant this evening I was going to meet with what was left of the Blades and bring them into my fold.

I didn't think it would be all that hard, given how they'd been living. That warehouse was worse than even my apartment, though I'd lived in worse. I'd spent twenty years in a rotting shack by the seaside. A wonderful twenty years, actually. I'd hunted sharks. It was mildly suicidal, I admit it.

I wore my least favorite suit, a dark gray Armani that made me feel like a mobster. I didn't understand why every suit in my closet had to be Italian. If I was going to play the wealthy vampire overlord, why couldn't I do it in jeans and T-shirts? That would really shock the other masters. At least I didn't have to go to them this time. I had people for that, apparently. Well, I had pookas. The brothers were more than a match for the young vampires.

I met them in the sitting room.

The girl seemed to be in charge now. I guessed she'd been too young to drink legally when she'd been changed. She was skinny, all elbows and knees. There was a sort of awkward beauty about her, but it was decidedly unconventional. She had a beauty mark on her chin, underneath pouty lips colored in with black lipstick. Her eye shadow was smeared, and her mascara had run. It looked like she'd been crying.

The boys, one tall and one short, were also made up in dark makeup. The taller held his right arm gingerly. There was blood on his sleeve. I supposed he must have put up a fight. His eyes were his best feature, practically silver in color and wide. His face was round, and his Native American heritage was clear in the cut of his bone structure and the long braid of sleek black hair that



went down his back. He'd been a bit older than the girl when he became a vampire.

The last boy was the youngest of the group, trapped in the youthful glare some boys had between fourteen and twenty-two where they seem not to age at all. His hair was curly and blond, his eyes a murky green. He had freckles, which he had tried to cover unsuccessfully with makeup. He was slender, and I had the horrible feeling from the way he avoided my eyes that he had been a victim most of his life.

“What are your names?” Donal asked.

The girl stood in front of the boys, like a wall against us. “Are you going to kill us?”

I looked at Donal and then at the girl. “No.”

“What are you names?” Donal repeated.

She frowned. “I'm Wi—” She paused and shook her head. “My name is Joanne. This is Zach,” she pointed at the freckled boy, “and Adam.” The taller boy.

“It's nice to meet you,” I said slowly and carefully.

“You, are you really deaf?” Joanne asked. “Damien always said so, but...”

“I am.”

“But you're a master,” Zach blurted out. “You're powerful.”

“Yes.”

“You can protect us?” Joanne asked.

“I can and I will.”

“Why?” Adam asked.

“Boston is my city.” I took a moment. “You are in it.”

“But Damien—we all were mean to you,” Zach said. “He said you were a freak.”

I shrugged. “I don't care.”

Donal looked at me, eyebrows raised.

Right. “I mean. You are forgiven.”

Donal rolled his eyes. “We should move along, then. Were you all children of Damien?”

Adam shook his head. “I was not.”

“Then this process is familiar to you,” Donal said.

The boy nodded. “It is, and I’ll go first, if that’s all right.”

I gestured him forward. What we were about to do was something I had never done. Just as I had never made a child of my own, I had never claimed any orphans. There had been no reason to do so; I had not the means to support them, and it would not have been practical to take any on. I knew the practice, though, and now I had plenty of means. I could give these children a better life. The child to be claimed would take blood from the master and the bond would form between the pair.

It was common practice, especially when a vampire was claiming territory from another master. I slid my fingernail over the palm of my hand and held it out to Adam. He came to me tentatively, but took my hand and kissed it, taking a lap of the blood. It did not take much. He straightened and blinked. This was the moment that concerned me. Donal had explained that the binding of children to a master could include—changes. In the children. If the master was powerful enough.

Adam’s eyes changed from practically silver to completely silver. His expression was calm, but his eyes widened slightly and a smile quirked at his lips. “You taste—like strawberries.”

“Thank you.”

Joanne stepped up next and took her turn. There was no visible change in her, but there was a difference in *feeling* to her.

Zach came last, nervous. His eyes changed also, going from murky green to a bright apple color. He looked more—alive. With all three bound to me, I was starting to feel them, the connection between us. It was in the back of my

mind, letting me know they were all right, safe. It would warn me if they were in danger, as well.

I stood up and smeared the blood on my palm along the gash and watched it heal. I looked at Donal. *Can we buy the building? This one*, I signed.

“Of course. If that’s what you want.”

*Yes.*

I looked at the former Blades. *They need a place. It will be safer.*

“True. I will see to it. Joanne, Zachary, I will show you where you will be staying. Adam, go with Cillian.”

There was a moment when it looked like one of them would protest, but they remained silent and went off with Donal to the wing of the condo with two of the spare bedrooms while I took Adam to the secondary bedroom. I’d had clean sheets put on the bed, but the room still smelled like Donal. At least the master bedroom was repaired now.

Adam looked around the room. His eyes went wide. “This is swank.”

I made a face in agreement.

“Is this mine?”

“For—now. I am buying the building. You can—have any space you like.” I went slowly.

“Your accent, it’s Irish?”

I nodded.

“How—how old are you? I mean, Damien was a hundred or so and he was the oldest I’d ever met. I’ve only been this way for thirty years. I can’t imagine what a hundred is like.”

I smiled. “You know the Inquisition?”

“Like in Spain?”

“Yes.”

He nodded.

“I died then.”

He blinked. “You’re... really old.”

I shrugged. “Yes.” I smiled. “Donal, though, is older. He is fey. They have long lives by nature.”

“Like a fairy?”

I snorted. “Don’t say that to Donal. He is a banshee. Not a fairy.”

“Okay. I’ll remember that.” Adam took a deep breath through his nose. “This place smells like you and him.” He peered at me. “Are the two of you together?”

I considered that. “Yes.”

“Cool.” He sat down on the bed. “You are—very strange.” He chewed on his lip. “Will you teach me how you talk with your hands? I bet that’s easier than trying to slow down so I can understand you.”

I smiled. “Yes.” I brought my hand to my mouth and pulled it away. “Thank you.”

He returned the gesture with a shy smile.

After five hundred years, I’d become a parent. Da would be so proud.

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“I finished the paperwork for the building purchase,” Donal said. “The O’Hannagain brothers put in a call to their cousins. We’ll have the building covered within the week. New codes, some more cameras.” He rubbed my shoulders in a way that made me feel like my whole body was being rocked in a warm ocean of marshmallows. I nodded and turned my head back to face front and looked to my lap. His fingers were magical.

All of him was magical.

He even hit me in a way that made me swoon. It had been a long time since someone did that to me. I’ll admit, I thought my proclivity was unusual when I was younger, but those concerns had melted away as the years went on. There were far stranger interests in the bedroom than mine.

Right now, however, I was content with the massage.

It helped me put my mind off the fact that hiding from whatever had attacked me wasn't a long term answer. We had to find out what it was, and kill it. I wasn't going to hide anymore.

“Do we know what attacked me?”

Donal paused and came into view, sitting down on the bed next to me and then lying back. “Not yet, but we will. I promise.”

“You think it is what killed Ignacio.”

“I do.”

“Then I want to kill it.” I'd decided I'd hated Ignacio for far too long. Even if I hadn't loved him, I would miss those days we had together. I would miss that we never reconciled. Right now, however, I just felt angry. I felt the anger of a child whose parent had been killed. I wanted revenge, not just for Ignacio, but for myself. I wanted to kill this thing and show all of those stuck-up masters, show Elena, that I wasn't damaged goods. Show them I was a vampire you crossed at your own peril.

I had Donal to thank for reawakening that part of myself.

Donal nodded. “You will.”

I leaned down and kissed him. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He ran a hand through my hair, expression wistful. “Your vampplings are out. The O'Hannagain took them clothes shopping.”

“Oh?” I raised my eyebrows and caught my lip between my teeth.

“Oh.” He kissed me with bruising force, and gripping the back of my neck and the small of my back, leveraged himself up, slamming me into the bed. His expression made me think he was growling. I wished I could hear it properly. I wished I could hear the sounds he made when he came. I wished I could hear his voice. I wanted that so badly.

But I would settle for watching his face, looking into his eyes and touching him. I would just keep touching him. That, at least, I could do. He unbuttoned my shirt with deft hands. It delighted me that someone with such large hands

could be so dexterous. They were just the right amount of rough, strong. I could admit that those hands made me squirm like an eel. As he moved his hands under the fabric of my shirt, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket, demanding attention.

“Gods...” I reached into my pocket and fished the thing out. I had a text message.

*You will die when I next come.*

I raised my eyebrows. “Donal.”

He paused what he was doing and took a look at the phone. “Well, your mystery attacker?”

I shrugged. “Should I reply?”

“Sure.”

I typed, *Try it you coward*, and hit send. I tossed my phone way. “Where were we?”

Donal smiled. “I think I remember.”

\*\*\*\*

Sometime in midday, I did something I had not done in a very long time. I woke up. I felt—scared. Not from any outside force, but from a dream. Vampires do dream. My dreams usually were of songs I remembered, or my father’s voice, my mother singing as she sewed. Cherished memories of the ocean crashing against the beach. Of laughter.

This dream had been different. I had been alone, at the bottom of a deep well, and the water was rising and rising and I couldn’t swim. I was drowning. I was weak.

It was expected. I had spent so long as a kicked dog. The strength of my blood, the defense of territory, the binding of those children—Donal—those things were pushing me toward a destiny I had never imagined I could have. I had that dream because I was terrified I would fail them all. Deep down, I still didn’t think I was worthy of it. You couldn’t erase all those years in a few short weeks, but Donal was certainly trying his damndest.

I wanted to believe that I was everything he saw. I wanted to be that man.  
Donal woke when I did. *What's wrong?* He signed.

*Bad dream.*

He put his arms around me and kissed my neck. He didn't have to say anything to let me know he was there. He just had to touch me, and I knew he was comforting me. There was so much between us that would always go unspoken. So much I couldn't say. So much I wouldn't hear.

I closed my eyes and curled back into Donal's arms. *Donal believes in me.* That would have to be enough, because I never wanted to let him down.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Donal*

There were most certainly doubts circling in my blue-eyed boy's mind. He doubted himself, but he was putting up an amazingly convincing front for the vamplings and his new horde of bodyguards. Buying up the building was an interesting move on his part. Bold, decisive, and it made it clear to the watching Families that he was putting down permanent roots.

Our current discussion was over the change of glyph marking the building. All masters had their own mark, but Cillian had yet to decide on his. His attempts thus far had been—problematic. Either they were already in use or they were incredibly offensive. To be fair, those symbols were at the end of the list.

“I'm bored,” he complained.

“We have to choose something dignified and appropriate. And we need to do it today, Cillian. The stone cutters—”

“I know,” he interrupted. He pulled the piece of paper he'd been sketching on toward him and looked at me. “Does it have to be simple?”

“It's not a rule or anything.”

“Good.” He flipped it over and picked up the pencil. He frowned for a moment and with a confident hand, drew a profile of a ship in remarkable detail.

“This is very good.”

“I want this. My mark. The ship I sailed on, all those years ago. The *Esmeralda*.”

“All right.” I touched his face. “You draw well.”

He shrugged. “I paint better.”

“You paint?”

“Of course. Maritime scenes, mostly. I have *many* degrees, Donal.”



It was easy to forget how well educated Cillian had made himself. I suppose burying himself in academia had made him safe. He was a very unique creature, and making any assumptions as to what he could or could not do was a vast miscalculation on anyone's part.

“I wrote poetry for a time, as well.”

“One should have a passion.” Perhaps one of the rooms could be renovated into a painting studio for him. I could imagine him dabbed in bits of paint, a paintbrush between his teeth and frowning at a work in progress. There were other, more daring, visions I could imagine with the two of us and paint.

And then washing it all off in the shower.

I shook my head. “Well, then. Put on something nice, you and I are going dancing.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Dancing?”

“Dancing.”

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I knew of an establishment for a more dignified sort of dancing than what passes these days in the dance halls of the young people. It had better music as well. The wood floors were done to a high polish, and every man wore a suit. The women were in gowns. The music was waltz and the dance, of course, matched. We were not the only homogenous couple, Cillian and I. I led our dance, tapping the beat of the music on Cillian's shoulder.

He danced well, not that I was entirely surprised. I found dancing very calming. Kes had never enjoyed dancing. Cillian was smiling, though, his body relaxed and his eyes closed, his head resting on my chest. It was a moment I would preserve in my mind always. As a banshee, I could feel the coming of death. I knew there was blood in the water. It was only a matter of time before Cillian was attacked again.

I only wished I knew what had attacked him. I was not used to being in the dark. I very much did not like it. Cillian nuzzled my neck. “You are distracted.”

“Forgive me.” I kissed him. “I am not usually prone to distraction when so occupied.”

“You are worried.”

“I am.”

“Do not be.” He smiled. “The next time he attacks, I will kill him.”

“Him?”

“I think it is a him.”

I trusted that instinct. Unconsciously, Cillian had given his attacker a gender. There could be other things he could remember about the incident under the right circumstances, things he hadn't processed at the time.

“All right. In the meantime, I believe it is time for the Spanish portion of the evening.”

He raised his eyebrows and signed, *What?*

“The tango.”

“I do not tango.”

“Just follow my lead.” The look on his face promised retribution later. I ignored it and spun him out as the music started. I tapped the hand I still held with the beat. I pulled him back to me and grinned. “See? This is fun.”

He shook his head, but continued to follow me through the steps of the dance. He might not have ever tangoed before, but a vampire's grace was not something that could be overcome by something so paltry as an unlearned dance.

I had a moment where I wondered why I was there, what I thought I was doing with a creature like Cillian. A moment that passed in an instant when he looked in my eyes. Cillian's eyes would always make my knees wobbly. Even if my brain was confused, my body wasn't. My heart wasn't. When he told me, so tentatively, that he loved me, I had responded in kind knowing full well it was the absolute truth.

I had loved in my life, of course, but this was different. I felt Cillian in my bones when we were together. He sank into me. Dancing with him in public like this made me feel like a teenager again. I wanted to hold onto that feeling. We'd known each other less than a month, but when you were as old as I was, love was something you recognized and you held onto.

It was too precious, I almost forgot that. The only reminder I'd needed was Cillian's admission. I was never good at admitting my feelings, even to myself.

As the dance ended, Cillian tugged me off the dance floor to take a seat at one of the small round tables around the perimeter. He looked... hungry. "Do you need to eat?" I asked.

He nodded. *I forgot earlier.*

"There are plenty of delicious morsels around us."

He made a face. "I want something—" he finger spelled the word *zesty*.

I made a face. "Really? It's ten o'clock, Cillian."

His eyes went wide. "Would you deny my dinner?"

"I do if it involves chasing down squirrels in the middle of the night."

Cillian smiled winsomely. "I'll go with or without you."

"Fine." I shook my head. "Let's go squirrel hunting."

I wanted to be mad, but he looked so damn happy. It was all right, I would get him back for this excursion later. It wasn't like that finely shaped ass of his couldn't take a few red marks.

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If one was unfamiliar with vampire hunting habits, they could be forgiven for assuming the handsome young man in the suit with no shoes or socks climbing into a tree in the middle of winter was insane, or drunk. Cillian wasn't drunk, but I did wonder now and then about his sanity. This was one of those now and thens. I waited, patiently holding his shoes and jacket while he clambered into the tree and clawed into a hollow for his prize.

I considered the evening prior to this moment and wished I could have convinced him to go home and have sex instead. Nope. He wanted to hunt squirrels. Squirrels. Cillian smiled at me and held out the prize, a furry gray squirrel. It thrashed in his grip, and I'll admit, I felt a bit squeamish watching him sink into it like a can of soda, but I took it in stride for the moment.

I waved to get his attention. "Would you get out of the tree now? You've had your snack."

He tossed the drained creature aside and hopped out of the tree. "You just don't understand."

"I don't think I want to. Now you need real food."

*There's some in the fridge,* he signed.

"Fine." I held out a hand. "Shoes, jacket, car."

He grinned like a madman and walked over and took up his shoes and jacket. There was a bit of blood on his cheek. I, however, was not a fan of squirrel, so I plucked my handkerchief from my pocket and wiped the blood away. "You are such a child."

He shrugged. "At least I'm not boring."

"Oh yes, at least there's that." I put an arm around him and we walked back to the car. Cillian refused to put his shoes back on, but his distaste for footwear wasn't something I was going to be able to change overnight. Still, I looked at him in the other seat, lounging so easily in just his shirtsleeves and the fitted vest that matched the rest of the bespoke suit I'd managed to get him into. He'd picked the fabric, a bold, untraditional but subtle plaid of tan on darker tan. His tie was nearly the same blue as his eyes, and the shirt was a blue stripe with a white collar.

He looked like he'd stepped out of an Arrow Collar advertisement. Hell, he could have modeled for an Arrow Collar advertisement. Leyendecker would have loved Cillian. He'd been a wonderful man. A good man. Cillian hadn't known enough good men. I could tell. He didn't talk about those lonely nights often, but his eyes became distant sometimes, and during the day he would have nightmares. I don't think he remembered them. The two of us were quite

a pair. He was damaged and lonely and I—I was angry. I didn't like to think about it very often. I could ignore it for the most part.

Angry at Kes, I had always been one to hold a grudge.

I had to let that go, just as I knew Cillian had to let go of his past. That was the only way to keep moving. I took Cillian's hand in mine. He quirked his eyebrows. I smiled and brushed a stray strand of dark hair away from his forehead.

"I do love you."

His returning smile pushed all those thoughts away. "You think I am... childish."

"Sometimes you are. I still love you."

"Sometimes you are—" He paused and then signed, *overprotective*. "And I still love you."

"Relationships are about compromise."

"Compromise." He glanced at the front seat where our driver—fey—was studiously not listening to our conversation. "I enjoy our—compromises." He put a hand on my thigh and smiled broadly.

"Oh?"

"Dancing, dinner..." He looked down at my lap and then up. "Sex."

"We must work on your pronunciation some more," I said.

"Oh? Your last lesson—left marks." The smile never faltered.

"I'd be willing to leave some more..."

Cillian leaned forward and placed his hands on my face, and kissed me. A strong, heated kiss that sent shivers down my neck and back. He had absolutely no concern for the driver as he shifted from his seat to straddle me, knees on either side of my legs as he sat down in my lap to lean deeper into the kiss. He was warm from his feet right down to his fingertips. It amazed me that such a small amount of blood could warm him.

Perhaps there was something about squirrels after all.

He continued to kiss me, hands moving through my hair. I pulled back and took a deep breath.

“You are a bad man.”

“I am.” He traced small circles at my temples with his thumbs. “But you love me.”

“I do.” I put a hand on the small of his back. “I also love not having to hire new drivers because I’ve emotionally scarred the one I have.”

He wrinkled his nose. “No sex in the car?”

“Not in this car. A limo... maybe.”

“Next time?”

“It’s a promise.”

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One pronunciation lesson later, I went to bed early. I was starting back at work in the morning. Cillian was holding his own now, so I didn’t need to be with him every moment of the day. That would be selfish and we’d get sick of each other. I did not want him to get sick of me. Absence does make the heart grow fonder, after all.

I left Cillian early that morning and went for a run on the beach. I had missed the sunlight, the sand, the ocean. I always missed it. That was a thing Cillian and I shared. A love of the ocean. The smell of brine that stung the inside of your nose, the sound of the waves. The cold spray on your face from the waves that crashed against the shore. It was the most beautiful thing in the world. The most dangerous and the most terrifying. The ocean was everything a man could feel.

Cillian was like that too. His eyes held the depths of the sea. He was so beautiful. He could be serious, he could be whimsical. He was mercurial. He would never be boring. He would never age, I would never see him waste away. Somehow, standing on the beach as the sun rose, I knew in the core of my being that Cillian was the person I had been searching for. That person that

everyone searches for. I wasn't a fool enough to tell Cillian that. I didn't want to scare him away.

I was going to make sure I never lost him.

After my run I went back to my own apartment for a shower and changed into my work clothes, grabbed my wallet and went to the morgue. Jenna was there with a smile and a clipboard.

"Did you enjoy your vacation?" she asked.

"I did." I took the clipboard from her and flipped through it. "Dr. Avery has been busy, hasn't he? I'm left with... two homeless men and a John Doe from Beacon Hill. Jackpot."

"I have the John Doe on the table waiting for you. Our other patients were identified earlier and the EMT's initial report suggests they died of exposure."

I nodded. "Thank you, Jenna. Oversee the autopsy with me."

"Yes, Dr. O'Neil."

I headed inside the exam room and set the clipboard down. I put on a pair of gloves and approached the corpse. The man was young, in his early thirties, and conventionally handsome, though incredibly hairy. I did a cursory examination, but there were no marks on him. No bruises, no abrasions. There was no sign of any exterior damage. There was a sort of smile on his face, and on a hunch, I pried open his eyelids.

"*Gura féis ic faelaib do chorp,*" I swore.

Jenna looked at me blankly. "What language *was* that?"

"Gaelic," I replied, stepping away from the body. "I have to make a phone call. Take a few clear shots of his iris, would you? I'll be right back."

His eyes had been so dilated they were near black through, the smile, the lack of marks... There was only one thing I knew that did that and I smelled it all over our John Doe. I walked out of the room and ducked into my office before pulling out my phone and calling the one person I would much rather not be calling.

"Donal, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Kes answered after the third ring.

“You killed. I thought you weren’t doing that anymore.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Kes. The hairy fellow. Siren kill, I’m surprised at how sloppy you were, leaving him to be found. I thought you would have eaten him. Plenty of meat on the bones.”

“If I had killed someone, I would have,” he returned.

“You really think I believe you’d let another siren in your territory?”

“Believe what you like, Donal, but it wasn’t me. I have to go. Work to do and all. *Ciao.*”

I should have tried harder to kill him the last time.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Cillian*

That day I dreamed of Ignacio. It was not the first time I had ever done so, but it was strange nonetheless. In my dream we were on the golden beach where I had met him so many nights ago. I had been watching the sun set, thinking of the green shores I had left behind and tracing shapes in the sand.

So it was that my dream started, except it was not at night, the sun was high and the waters were blue. Ignacio smiled at me, his long dark curls a mess around his face as always and his dark eyes warm. He sat down next to me. He wore knee length Bermuda shorts with a pattern of birds, no shoes and no shirt. I hadn't ever seen him in anything like modern attire. Given the length of our estrangement, it was a bit jarring.

“Hello, Cillian.”

It was a dream, and so I could hear his soft, smooth voice with its Madrid accent. “Ignacio.”

He shook his head, and his smile was sad. “I am so sorry, for what I did to you. Abandoning you. I feared Elena.” He sighed. “I should have fought harder for you.”

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

“This thing, this thing that killed me and the others of our blood. Cillian, there was—a sound. It was some sort of song.” He looked out at the ocean. “It reminded me of the sea. It reminded me of my humanity. It reminded me of death. I do not think I was ever so scared in my life—except once. The night I made you what you are.” He looked over at me, and I could see the tears in his eyes. “You were so perfect. Your eyes were clear, no madness. It shouldn't have mattered that you couldn't hear. You are perfect, my child. I am so sorry.”

Ignacio placed a hand on my cheek. “Perfect.”

And then I woke up, feeling a hundred years younger. Like some of the weight I'd carried had been lifted away. I took a shower and dressed before I went to the fridge for food. The vamplings were watching television in the living room. I grabbed a few gulps of blood and then went out to join them. I should spend time with them. Bond. That was important.

“What is this?” The screen was occupied by puppets. One of them appeared to be a deer, his nose was red.

“It’s a Christmas special,” Adam replied. “Rudolph.”

“Oh. Why is his nose red?”

All three of them looked at one another and then back at me. Adam made a face. “Well—I’ll turn on closed captioning.”

Oh good, I was bonding.

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Shortly after the film, Donal arrived. I could smell death on him. “How was work?” I asked.

“Fine. What have you been up to?”

“Watching television.”

Adam interjected, “Rudolph was on. Isn’t Cillian just like King Moonracer? Adopting all the misfit vampires?” He gave Donal an intense look.

Donal blinked and then understanding dawned on his face. I had no idea what was going on. “He is.” He gave me a kiss. “Have you all eaten?”

The vamplings took that opportunity to make negative assertions and vacate the premises. Well, that was strange.

Donal looked at me. “King Moonracer is what you took out of Rudolph?”

“Yes.”

“All right.”

“Oh, I want to paint again,” I said. I’d been thinking about it since I woke up. I felt—inspired again. A sensation I had not felt in many years. “Could we set up a studio?”

“Of course,” Donal smiled. “Anything you want.”

“Good.” I considered telling Donal about my dream, and then dismissed it. It had been a silly dream, anyway. Just a dream. Except—my instincts were telling me otherwise. I shouldn’t ignore those instincts. “I—had a dream.”

“Oh?”

“About Ignacio. He said—he said the thing that killed him, it sang. A song that made him think of the ocean, of death.” I shrugged. “I do not know what that means.”

Donal smiled. “Well, it was dream.”

“It felt—very real.” I shook my head. “I do not often dream.”

“Then I will not dismiss this. Come, let’s figure out where that studio is going.”

“All right.” I felt, however, like Donal wasn’t telling me something. Why would he do that? We had secrets still, the two of us could talk for a year and never know all the other had done. This was different, though. I put a smile on my face. I had to trust him. If I didn’t trust him, if I couldn’t trust him, there was no point in any of this. I might as well go back to that hole I’d come from. I didn’t want. I didn’t want to lose him.

I had to trust him. I had come this far, hadn’t I? Certainly our relationship hadn’t been very long just yet but... *I love him*. It was uncontrollable, that feeling. When I looked in his eyes, when I felt him near me, when I could smell him on my pillow—I couldn’t imagine my life without him. He made me feel like I was worth something. He made me feel strong. He made me want to be more than I had been.

That was what love was about.

Real love challenged you. Donal—he was a challenge worth risking everything for.

He touched my shoulder and I blinked, coming back to the conversation.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

I nodded. *Thinking*, I signed.

*You think too much*, he signed back.

“I know.”

“So, my king, are we planning on collecting misfit toys?” he asked, a smile lurking at the corners of his lips.

“Oh yes,” it was only half in jest, “this palace shall house them all.”

“Do allow me to pay my respects to your majesty.” He kissed me.

Well, if that’s how he wanted to pay his respects—I was all for it.

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After my second shower of the day, Donal and I were playing a game of chess I was losing when one of the signal lights security had installed for me to alert of a person at the door, lit up. Donal heard the bell, by the expression on his face.

“I’ll see who it is,” he said.

I nodded, looked at the board, knew I was losing, and resigned, tipping over my king. Donal flashed a smile and then went to the security room. I stayed where I was and reset the board. Donal returned a few minutes later with another person—another vampire. He was just shy of Donal’s height, well built. I guessed he’d been turned somewhere in his early thirties, but his hair was completely silver in color and his eyes were very dark, nearly black. He wore a tailored suit the same color as his hair, a white shirt and a bright red tie. He looked dashing.

“Cillian, this is James Argent, the man who’s been organizing your finances,” Donal introduced.

“James, Cillian Doone, Master of Boston.”

My blood realized before my brain that this was a pivotal moment. I remained seated, but straightened my back and raised my head. “Mr. Argent.”

“Mr. Doone,” he inclined his head slightly.

“Welcome to Boston.”

“Thank you, Mr. Doone.” He smiled. “Do we have peace between us?”

“We do.”

“Then please call me James.”

“Cillian.”

With the dance of dominance over, James took a seat on the chair opposite the coffee table where we had set up the chessboard, and Donal sat next to me.

“So, are you here for...” I paused and looked to Donal and signed, *Financial reasons?*

“Financial reasons,” Donal repeated.

“No, your finances are sound,” he replied. “I am here regarding the deaths of Ignacio Suarez, Benjamin Masters, The Dervish and Sally Prior.”

“The masters who have died,” Donal said.

“Yes.” James pulled a packet of papers from his jacket pocket and placed them on the table. “Photographs of the bodies.”

I didn’t want to see Ignacio’s lifeless body. Donal picked them up instead and flipped through them before placing them back on the table face down. “These are unusual kills.”

“Yes,” James said. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“I have not seen vampires killed this way,” Donal replied. He had a look on his face that told me he had thought of something but wasn’t prepared to express the idea just yet.

“I am concerned,” James said. “We have seen bloodlines targeted in the past for a variety of reasons, but typically the person or persons responsible become known quickly. Do you have any leads?”

“The attack on Cillian left a few traces, but nothing we’ve had any luck tracking down. The fellow even texted Cillian, but security had no luck tracing it. Whoever this is, they are smart.”

“Clever,” I corrected. “Smart would have been to not attack me. Smart would have been not to kill Ignacio.” I probably mangled Ignacio’s name, but it had been centuries since I heard myself speak anything Spanish.

“Clever, then,” Donal said. “We are no closer to an answer.”

“At this point we are getting very close to seeing a full council of the families. That would be bad. The last time a council formed—Donal, we cannot let that happen.”

Donal nodded. “We find our killer, and then we kill him.”

“The sentiment is appreciated, Donal. You should know, Elena has made some accusations toward you, Cillian. She thinks that perhaps you have some mastery power that causes these deaths. That you are taking revenge.”

I raised my eyebrows. “If I wanted that, she would be dead.”

“My response exactly,” James said. “Elena is a simple creature, for all her power.”

The children, of course, chose that moment to return home from their excursion for fresh food, and in Zach’s case, another stuffed animal for the growing collection in his room. It was a rabbit this time. My youngest charge was by far the most reclusive of the group, and it was clear to me that Damien had plucked the youth for his beauty and compliant nature.

I thought, though, that given time the boy would show a strong core.

James remained in his seat as the younger vampires crept into the living room, all of their eyes stuck on him like he was a tiger sitting in a field of lambs.

“This is James Argent,” I said. “A friend.”

Adam was the first to relax, and Joanne followed him, but Zach was clearly taking cover behind the older boy, the rabbit clutched in his arms.

James looked at me and then back at the young vampires. “Adopted some orphans, did we, Cillian?”

“They needed a home,” I replied.

“This is Adam, Joanne and Zachary. They were Damien’s children,” Donal said.

James nodded. “Damien, yes.”

I gave Donal a look.

He nodded and said, “Adam, why don’t you and Zachary go clean up? Joanne, that interior designer called, would you call them back?”

I gave them a nod in acknowledgement of the requests and they were off. I looked to James. “They are—skittish.”

“Damien was young, he was not well placed to have so many children,” James said.

“You knew him,” Donal asked.

“Of him. I make it my business to know the vampires in America. There are few enough of us as it is. We must know who is where.”

“Fair enough.”

I considered the question I wanted to ask, realized I probably couldn’t get through it all without mangling four words and turned to Donal and signed it, *Pass this to James. If this thing is another vampire, how is it no one has heard of a master that can become invisible to the eye? What sort of vampire could steal the life of other vampires?*

Donal watched closely and then turned to James and repeated my question.

James considered for a long moment. “Just because no one’s ever seen it doesn’t mean it’s not possible.”

“That doesn’t help narrow the search,” Donal said.

“No. I’ll be staying in Boston, however, until the matter is settled. My presence here should alleviate any suspicions toward Cillian.” James looked at his watch. “I should get back to my hotel. My little bat worries when I’m gone. I would have brought him, but he is so skittish around new vampires, you must understand.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I nodded.

“Then I shall leave you. Donal has my phone number.” He stood. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Cillian.”

“The pleasure was mine,” I returned.

Donal walked James to the door and I looked to the chessboard for inspiration regarding our situation. I did not like waiting for an attack without knowing the warning signs. My mind wandered back to the dream. The sea, death, fear. Just prior to the attack had been my encounter with that siren. Detective Kester Griffin. A man who smelled of death and sea water. A man who sang his victims to their death.

I had never heard of a siren killing vampires, however, that wasn't in their purview. They killed for the meat. They did become invisible. They did not become scentless. It did not make sense. None of this made sense. I needed to clear my head. Do something that didn't require me to think.

Donal walked back into the room. “I think that went well,” he said.

I shrugged.

“You're worried about our mysterious killer.”

I stood up from the couch and crossed the room deliberately, put my arms around him and kissed him.

He pulled back. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes. You can fix it, though.”

Donal smiled. “All right.” He kissed me. “I'll fix it.” He was always fixing me, wasn't he? I never saw him vulnerable. I don't know if I ever would. He didn't seem like the type to cry. “We should move to the bedroom.”

I wasn't going to disagree. I latched onto his tie and smiled before leading him off into the bedroom.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Donal*

Despite Cillian's seemingly endless list of reasons for us to remain in bed all day, I did go to work. My head kept turning around the events of the previous evening. My suspicions kept coming back to the one person that made no sense at all.

Sirens simply did not have the power to do what had been done to these vampires. I wasn't certain anything did. I had a card I could play yet, but I was loathe to do so. I hadn't spoken to Her in centuries. I had hoped to keep it that way. I knew, however, that the fastest way to get the information I needed was to ask Her. She was the reigning authority on things that kill other things.

My Lady Morrigan.

I tried to put the entire thing out of my mind and concentrate on the autopsies I had scheduled for the afternoon, but being surrounded by dead bodies and trying *not* to think about the collector of souls is a difficult task.

And once one started to think about the Lady, She had a tendency to show up whenever, and however, she damn well pleased. So it was with little surprise on my part, when during my lunch break at a local café, I was joined at the table by a statuesque woman in a tailored white skirt suit with pitch black hair straight and long down her back, and eyes the color of crows' wings. Her lips were blood red and her unblemished skin had a golden glow similar to my own.

"Lady," I didn't stand, that would draw attention.

"O'Neil." She took my water glass, drawing attention to her sharp manicured nails, done the same red as her lips. She took a sip and then looked in my eyes. "It's been ages since you called."

"It wasn't much of a call."

“Your brothers and sisters rely on me little, I take what I can get from the old guard. Now, what troubles you so?” She frowned. “I do not like to see you troubled.”

The last time she saw me troubled was the Famine. I understood her worry. “There is a being killing vampires.”

“Hardly noteworthy.”

“He is stealing their life force. The descriptions we have gathered say he inspires fear. There could be an element of song. This thing is invisible, carries no scent. It has killed *master* vampires with ease. Now it is going after someone I care for. The events are sparking something greater, however. The Families wish to call council.”

“Now *that* is a concern.” She pursed her lips and tapped one finger against her chin. “All right. In the interest of preventing the Families from causing trouble, I will look into this matter.”

“Thank you, Lady.”

“You will keep up your good works, won’t you, O’Neil? You are so kind to the souls.”

“It is my nature,” I replied, bowing my head.

She touched my cheek, the sharp edge of her nails catching my skin. “I’ll send word.”

And then she was gone, leaving only the sting of where her nails had cut into my flesh. The Morrigan never could leave without bloodshed. I felt a bit more at ease with her on my side in the matter. She could easily have chosen to wait it out. She was a battle goddess, after all, she could be unpredictable. Her motives were always not quite clear, and there was always the chance she could decide you were her enemy.

I stayed on her good side.

I finished my lunch and wrapped up the work day hopeful we would have an answer soon. I don’t know what I would do if Cillian—I couldn’t even imagine that. If he was gone, I think I would wither away. Banshee may have

been one of the heartier of the fey, but our emotions could draw us to great heights and terrible depths, just as the more fragile fey. There were those men who had learned that the bloody way when I last stood in battle.

There is no greater thing to fear than a banshee who has lost what they love.

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I found Cillian's apartment in a state of some chaos. Joanne seemed to be in the center of it all, with a phone in each hand while she went through sample books and chatted with the pair of interior designers I had called in to help remake the condos for the vampings. The girl could multitask, I would give her that.

She had made quite the transformation from scrawny Goth to put-together young woman. The black makeup was gone, replaced by more flattering earth tones that brought out the dark amber of her eyes, and the black dye job had been stripped away to reveal soft auburn curls that rolled down her shoulders. She wore a green sweater and jeans, more appropriate for the weather than anything that had previously been in her wardrobe. She looked confident. I saw momentary flashes of uncertainty, but given time, she seemed the likeliest of the three to run the day to day of Cillian's tiny empire.

A burden I was happy enough to pass on.

She saw me when I came in the room and put both phones aside. "Cillian is in the shower."

"Thank you, Joanne."

She nodded and returned to her tasks.

I decided to check on the others while I made up my mind about joining Cillian in the shower. I found Adam in the security room with Aiden, who was teaching him the system. I had long noticed that giving out responsibilities tended to make people feel more wanted. I'd made the suggestion to Cillian, and was pleased to see him implementing it. Adam seemed to be a bright enough lad. It would benefit everyone if he stepped up. He would need to learn

to fight, they all would, but Cillian would benefit greatly from a loyal head of security he didn't have to pay.

Not that there was anything wrong with the pookas, they were loyal, but I'd always had a small dislike of mercenaries, no matter how useful.

I had momentary difficulty locating the too-quiet Zach. His introduction to society was going to take more delicacy. He had opted to stay in Cillian's condo rather than take his own, which said a great deal about how attached he had become to his new master. I had not known Damien well enough to judge, but the youngest vampire's behavior made it clear the man had not been an upstanding master for his children.

I found Zach in the bedroom I'd shown him on his first night here, organizing his quickly massed collection of plush animals around the perimeter of the large bed. Which had now been pulled head first into the empty closet, doors splayed out on either side as barriers.

"Zach?" I spoke softly.

The blond looked at me. "Hello, Donal."

"Are you all right?"

"I—just—" he licked his lips, "they were in the wrong order."

"I see." I noticed he had a particular love of rabbits, and oddly, one rabbit, a scruffy yellow one with a missing eye, was off on its own on the far end of the room. "Why is that one alone, Zach?"

The young man turned and looked at the rabbit. "He's wrong, he can't be with the others."

"Because he's missing an eye? We could fix that."

"No."

"No we can't fix it, or no that isn't the problem?"

He seemed surprised I'd continued the conversation. He made a face and then shrugged. "Some things can't be fixed."

“Some things aren’t really broken,” I said. “Cillian does just fine, and he can’t hear.”

“I know that.” He looked me in the eyes. “Cillian is strong, his blood is strong, I can feel it. I just—I don’t know if I’m that strong. Adam and Joanne... they’re different. Damien picked them because they were useful. I was just an accident.”

Accidental children amongst vampires were relatively rare, but I could understand what must have happened after Damien realized he’d turned a meal into a vampire. I had a feeling Zach had not been well treated by Damien because of this, and there was no doubt the boy had been at risk prior to his rebirth. Otherwise he wouldn’t have been out at night for Damien to snack on.

“Cillian chose to take you on, Zachary. He wouldn’t have done that unless he wanted to.”

The lad seemed to consider that. “I’m not—what use could he have for me?”

“That depends on you, lad. Your fellows are finding their place, you will find yours, just give it time. A commodity you have plenty of, I might add.”

He looked down at the plush animal, a cat, in his hands. “What if I can’t?”

“You will.”

Cillian took that moment to appear at my side in a rare show of vampiric speed. He looked at Zach and with an unerring sense of the situation, walked over to Zach and gave him a hug. I had never seen Cillian show affection toward anyone beside myself. The younger vampire seemed taken aback, but then he relaxed.

Cillian pulled away after a moment. “You don’t need to be anything but yourself.” It was clearly spoken, my pronunciation lessons must be paying off. “All right?”

Zachary nodded. “All right.”

“Good. Now, why don’t you go help Joanne? She will like that.”

Zach managed a very small smile and nodded before gingerly getting up off the bed. I moved to let him out the door and watched him go off down the hall. Cillian joined me at the door and put an arm around me.

*He is fragile*, I signed.

*Yes*, he replied. *He will get better*.

I suppose if anyone had an inkling of what the boy was going through it would be Cillian. “You are a good man, you know that?” I pushed a lock of hair away from his forehead.

“You are a good man,” he replied. “I am a vampire.”

“So? I am banshee, that doesn’t make me less a man.”

“There is a lot of you.” His eyes went wide as he looked me up and down. I felt ogled. I was fairly certain that was his intention. His hair was a bit damp from his shower and he smelled like soap and steam.

I suppose I was too late to join him in the shower. That didn’t mean I couldn’t get him dirty again. My encounter with the Morrigan made me want to do something that would make me feel alive. Being with Cillian already made me feel alive, fucking Cillian just made that experience even better.

He placed a hand on my chest, playing with one of my buttons. “You need a shower.”

“But you’ve already finished yours.”

He raised both of his eyebrows and walked away from me with seductive strides. Curious, I followed him down the hall into the other wing of the condo where the secondary living room was being converted into his painting studio. I could smell paint thinner and oil thick enough to mask Cillian’s personal aroma. It seemed he’d started using it already. There was an easel and canvas set up, a sketch laid in on the large surface and some base colors laid in. I watched, bemused, as he walked up to the palette lying out next to the easel, pulled his finger through a blob of blue, and then drew a stripe across his cheek.

Not as though he had to worry about being poisoned by the pigment or the thinner.

“I’m dirty again,” he said with a smile.

“All right, my bold boy, let’s get you cleaned up.” I strode across the room and with more ease than most of my lovers would have liked, I lifted him up over my shoulder. Cillian could have stopped me if he’d wanted to, but he didn’t. My love seemed to prefer me in the dominant role, not that I minded. I carried him into the master bathroom, locking the door firmly behind us and set him down.

I looked Cillian in the eyes and smiled. “Take off your clothes.”

He grinned and stripped off the blue T-shirt first. He still wore that strange vial of dirt, but I’d never asked about it. It was better to leave some things a secret. Your lover should always have a hint of mystery about them. His eyes narrowed, and he put his hands on the waistband of his jeans and slowly undid the button and then the zipper before slithering out of his trousers. He wasn’t wearing any underwear.

“We spent all that time finding you the perfect boxer briefs and you don’t even wear them,” I scolded.

“I prefer less,” he said.

I wasn’t going to admit the idea of him going around without any underwear on at a fancy social event was a turn on. Instead, I put on my best disappointed face and crossed my arms over my chest. “You are supposed to be setting a good example.”

“Why?”

“You are a master vampire, the lord of Boston. You have to act like it.”

He made a face, “No.”

“No?”

“No.”

I backed him into the shower while undoing the buttons to my shirt. “I think we need to start responsibility lessons in addition to your pronunciation lessons.”

His smile would have rivaled the Cheshire Cat as he stepped backward to the shower controls and with malicious glee, turned it on.

“You want to teach, you have to get naked... or get your clothes very wet.”

I chose to strip. I wasn't about to ruin my clothes. I folded my things and set them aside before stepping into the shower where the little imp was waiting for me. I was never going to be bored with this one, was I? He made a game of it, slipping away from me whenever I got too close, but while the shower was large, it wasn't that large. I pinned him near the waterfall and kissed him, getting tongue and teeth in on the action.

I got him hot and bothered before pulling away and turning him around to face the wall with a hard shove on his shoulder. His hands met the stone tile of the shower with a resounding smack, and I followed up the sound with slap to his muscular ass. The smile on his face widened as I delivered several more hard strikes. He made small sounds in encouragement. *Never going to get bored.*

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Cillian*

There were rarely any marks left over by the time Donal and I finished sex to show for my troubles, but this time I got a good look in the mirror at Donal's handiwork in the form of already healing bruises. He came up behind me.

"Wishing the marks stayed longer?"

I managed to read his lips in the mirror. "A bit."

"If you like, I'll give you a spanking every couple hours to make sure the marks stay fresh," he said with a smile.

Tempting. I smiled at him. "Maybe as a reward after that thing is dead."

"It's a promise." He kissed my neck. "Come on, let's check on your children."

"If I must." I frowned. "Speaking of that." *Zach needs a counselor.* I signed.

"I won't disagree. Perhaps James could suggest someone."

"Could you ask?"

"Of course," he replied. "Come on, then." He slapped my ass. "Get dressed."

I followed him back into my bedroom and got dressed for the second time. Joanne was finished with her interior designers, or at least they were gone, and was arguing on the phone with someone about something. The details were inconsequential right then. Zach was reorganizing the sample books intently and Adam was drawing up a floor plan, I thought.

"How goes the remodel?" Donal asked.

Adam looked up. "Slow. You guys know we can still hear you if you fuck in the shower, right?"

I blinked. “You’ll survive.”

Adam rolled his eyes. “Anyway. We’re getting the condo downstairs refitted as a security base. The plan is one every three floors, just to cover our bases. This one will have rooms for security personnel and a full gym. Did you know you have a gym in here?”

I raised my eyebrows. “No.”

“Well, you do. The O’Hannagain brothers have been using it. They’re really nice.” His eyes had a look about them that said he thought at least one of them was more than nice. Well, I wished him luck. I might not know as much as I ought to about vampires, but I was Irish, I knew about pookas, and if a thing could take the shape of a horse, I was fair certain it was probably hung like one.

I’m sure Adam would be fine, though.

“They are. Anything else?”

“Well, most of the building is empty, so all the security stations won’t be staffed,” Adam said.

Joanne hung up the phone and turned around to face me. “I’m arranging one floor to be turned into an art gallery. If you’re going to be supporting the arts, it seems logical.”

“Good thinking,” Donal said. “It will go a long way toward establishing Cillian as a philanthropist.”

“Joy,” I said. Looking at them all, I wondered if the thing that attacked me would go after them to get to me. The idea of it made fear churn in my stomach. I put a smile on my face. “Donal, you must be tired and I have to mark my territory. Best done alone.”

His eyes narrowed, a clear sign of suspicion. “Are you certain?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“All right, be careful.”

“I will.”

I hadn't walked the streets on my own in some time. I hadn't even driven a car. I wasn't sure what happened to my car. The beat up old thing hadn't been worth anything, but I'd been growing fond of it. I grabbed a coat for form's sake and headed down the elevator, passing through the newest layers of security and out the back exit and into the chilly winter evening. It was a clear night, the moon was just a crescent in the sky and the stars were out in full view.

Good night for a walk. To me, it might as well have been midday, as bright as the streets were with the lamps and the stars and the light pollution from the skyscrapers reflecting off white concrete. As I walked, I felt the same surge of instinctual protectiveness I'd experienced towards the foundlings I adopted. The same feeling I had when I killed Damien. The city *was* mine. I was sure of that.

If I'd been uncertain, the response to James' presence made it clear that even if my brain said no, my blood demanded the city as my own. The front of my building bore the glyph of the Esmeralda now, a symbol the young vampires would wear once the custom pendants I'd commissioned came in. I even had business cards now, letterhead and there was a signet ring being made for me.

Nothing said pretentious vampire lord like a signet ring.

I had come a long way from Cillian Molloy, who published art history articles every couple years. I was still proud, my article would be out soon and I would be pleased to see it in print but—something had lost its impact for me. The world I had been shunned from was opening up for me now and I was walking in with my eyes wide open.

Just walking the streets left the impression of my psyche on the area, but it was my blood that would mark my territory. I cut into my palm with the edge of my thumbnail and as I passed through neighborhoods I marked landmark buildings with a thumbprint of blood. I licked my palm once and let the blood drip down my arm. I could not mark the whole city in a night, but I covered the oldest portions of the city and headed home when I began to feel the sunrise in the back of my mind.

These past few weeks had shed light on the things I knew and the things I guessed and the things I was just plain in the dark about in regards to my own world. I had gone from thinking someone like Damien was a threat to my life, to knowing I could kill nearly any vampire that dared come into my territory uninvited. I had taken in charge the very creatures I had feared, and I saw them now for what I couldn't then: children in need.

And Donal, my Donal, he was a bossy banshee, but he was also going only so far. He pushed until I could stand on my own. With every passing day I was getting stronger, the ground beneath my feet was steadier, and before long, I thought I would stand next to him on equal footing. Most of the time, anyway. Sometimes I wanted him to take charge. One day, soon, I would give him a real surprise and show him what I could do when I decided to take charge. I had a feeling he'd enjoy it as much as I enjoyed his "lessons".

I had made it back to the boundaries of the Back Bay when I felt something—off. The sensation of life in the air vanished. I looked around me, but the streets and sidewalk were empty. I took a deep breath, scenting the air, and found it devoid of—anything. The hairs on the back of my neck rose in warning and with instincts bred from centuries of being the victim, I threw myself to the ground as something made a strike for my head.

Something I couldn't see, but I *felt* the vibration of its presence in the air around me. I checked my surroundings. There was a patch of dirt near me, a touch frozen over, but that hardly mattered. I slammed my hand into the earth, pulverizing it in my fist and throwing it in an arc around me as I stood, watching carefully.

The earth met resistance mid-air on my left flank. I lashed out at the invisible attacker with as much force as I could put into my swing. I felt myself make contact with flesh and bone covered by fabric. I followed up by grabbing at the figure dusted with flecks of dirt. The fabric in my hands was thick and slightly rough, a wool coat, I thought. I dug my nails into the fabric and snarled at my attacker.

"What are you?" I don't know why I asked, I couldn't see his lips move to get the answer, but it seemed appropriate.

And then, for the first time in five hundred years, I did *hear* something. Laughter. The instance shocked me into stillness. My surprise gave the thing an opening, slamming me back down onto the concrete with enough force that it cracked under me. I felt my bones break and I screamed.

I wasn't going to stop fighting for a few broken bones. I lashed out, hand arched into a claw as I dragged my nails through skin—I thought it was his face. The blood of my attacker was not invisible, and as it ran down his cheek it revealed the shape of his jaw. I reached up and smeared the blood across his face.

I never would have expected the face revealed to me in red. I had seen many a thing in my life, but this I did not understand. It was Kester Griffin, but as I watched, the invisibility slipped away to reveal the man in his entirety—vampiric fangs and all.

“That’s not possible.”

He dropped the pretense of his invisibility and smiled, showing off both his vampire fangs and the long row of razor sharp teeth behind his human set, like a shark’s. I hadn’t been frightened before—but the sight of those teeth made my heart race.

“Scared?”

“Kester, what are you doing?”

He blinked. “Who is Kester?”

“You are Kester.”

His eyes, which had been dilated and large, changed for a moment. “What?” The vampire fangs disappeared and he stumbled away from me. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

I watched him warily as I stood. My bones were healing, but it was going to take a proper long feed before they were tip top, and the sun was coming. “You attacked me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You did.” I took a step forward and he stepped back, shaking his head. I saw his eyes begin to dilate and the mad look he’d had before returned along with the fangs.

“No, he didn’t,” he said. “*I did.*” He turned around to look at the sky and then looked back to me.

“The sun rises. I will kill you next time.”

He ran off before I could say anything and I was in no shape to run after him. I gritted my teeth against the pain, and started running. The sun was coming.

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I made into the lobby just before the sun’s light broke through the shadows cast by the towering buildings. My late arrival and disheveled appearance were marked by the front desk security as I rushed past them and into the elevator. In spite of my pain and general irritation, I was still somewhat in shock and more than a bit in awe about what I had witnessed.

A fey vampire. My brain felt like mush. I simply was not made to stay up like this. As I stood in the elevator, I found my legs no longer wished to support me and I slid onto the floor. I felt the sun like a lead weight in my limbs.

I watched through narrowed eyes as the elevator doors opened. Donal was there waiting for me. He was there in a flash. I couldn’t see what he was saying, my eyes were closing too fast. I felt him lift me up into his arms. I felt us moving and then—I was out.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Donal*

“I need help,” I said as I carried the unconscious Cillian inside. The vamplings were abed, so it was the pookas that appeared to help me. “I’m putting him to bed, check all of the footage from outside the building, find out where he was—find out what happened.”

They nodded in tandem and hurried off to do as I asked. I took Cillian to his bedroom and laid him out, stripping of his clothes to assess the damage. There was blood on his hands and face, but it didn’t appear to be his. There were deep bruises on his back and as I touched him, I could feel the shifting of muscle under skin that indicated he was healing.

Thank Lugh.

“He is quite handsome.”

Only my age kept me from jumping out of my skin as my Lady appeared from the shadows and took a seat on the other side of the bed. Her sable hair was pulled into a tight braid against her head, her nails were black and she wore a white lace dress.

“Run away from a wedding, my Lady?”

She smiled. “You know no man will ever pledge himself to me. Too fragile, poor things.” She looked at Cillian. “Not like this one. He is strong. Cillian Doone, son of Padraig. Another good strong man.” She leaned over him, running her nails over his exposed chest. I didn’t bother asking for her to stop, she wouldn’t and I didn’t feel the urge to be flayed today.

“Do you know what attacked him?”

She nodded. “Better, I know who.” She looked into my eyes. “Kester Griffin.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. A siren can’t do what has been done to these people.”

“He is not simply a siren any longer. It appears he was reborn—bitten by a vampire.”

“Fey cannot—”

She held up a hand to stop me. “He is not entirely vampire, nor is he entirely fey. He has become caught between the two. I do not know if it is something that can be fixed. I do not know if he even knows what he’s doing. All I am certain of is that his vampire half is hunting the bloodline of the one that bit him. Possibly in the misguided belief that killing them all off will fix him.”

She shook her head and sighed. “Poor boy. He is not strong.”

“When did this happen?”

“I cannot be sure, sirens do not follow my path.” She touched my face. “I am sorry, I know you cared for him once.”

“Once,” I admitted. “But my tastes have changed.”

My Lady smiled and kissed me. “You have good taste, O’Neil. Kester was simply an aberration. This boy,” she glanced at Cillian, “he is more than good taste. He is special.” She took a deep breath. “Deal with Kester, O’Neil.”

She pulled away from me and before my eyes burst into a cloud of black feathers, and vanished. Ever the dramatic one, my Lady. I looked back at Cillian and noticed something strange. Where the Morrigan had touched his chest a pattern had appeared in blue. A pattern of knotwork that was familiar. A warrior’s pattern, much like the one splayed across my own skin.

I touched it gently. The marks didn’t budge. The Morrigan, it seemed, approved of Cillian in a significant way. I’m not sure how I felt about that. It was a bit disconcerting, but also sort of—nice. She thought I was on the right path. I took a breath and laid down next to Cillian, putting my arms around him and pressing my face to his neck.

“I’ll never leave you.”

*Never.*



I woke before sunset to wait for Cillian to wake up. He'd healed slowly while he slept, and I had no doubt he would be hungry. I was willing to let him have a sip of my personal vintage. When he finally woke up, it was thrashing from a nightmare.

I put a hand on his chest and he settled quickly. "Donal. It was Kester Griffin."

"I know," I said.

"I'm hungry."

I held out an arm. "Feed."

"Really?"

"I'm the best you'll ever have."

He smiled. "I know." He took my arm very gently and made an incision with the sharp edge of his nail and licked along the edge before latching on and taking a long drink. When he pulled away, his eyes were slightly glazed and his cheeks flushed. "I feel better."

"Good, because there's a siren out there we need to kill."

"He—not just a siren." Cillian shook his head. "Vampire."

"I know that as well." I swallowed. "I asked my Lady for assistance. The Morrigan."

He blinked. "The Morrigan? Are you insane?"

"Sometimes. Anyway, she told me about Kes. He's... not fey or vampire. He's something I've never seen or heard of. His vampire half is separate from him. He might not even know what he's become."

Cillian pulled himself into a sitting position. "He is still a killer."

"I do not excuse what he's done, Cillian. I only try to understand." I sighed. "Now, let's get you cleaned up."

I still wasn't sure how I was going to explain where the tattoos came from. He was *definitely* going to notice.

Cillian awkwardly climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom. Given that I had taken off all of his clothes the previous morning, I was treated to a fine view of his shoulder blades—and that exceptional ass.

I counted to five silently, approximating how long it would take him to notice, and was rewarded with a shout of surprise. He hustled back into the bedroom, rubbing at the marks with one hand.

“Donal, there’s—” He gestured at the marks, at a loss, and made the sign for *why* sharply.

“You can thank the Morrigan for those. I think she likes you.”

If he was capable of fainting in shock, he would have. “The Morrigan... likes me.” He blinked and turned around, walking back into the bathroom. I heard the shower turn on. It was best to give him space to let it all sink in. While he was doing that, I changed into some clothes I’d left here for emergencies and went out to the living room to see if anyone else was up. Adam was watching the news, drinking from a bottle of blood.

“How is Cillian?” he asked. “Aidan said he came in bloody and the door was locked when I went to check on him.”

“Healed,” I replied. “He’ll be fine. Where are the others?”

“Joanne is in her condo with the interior decorators and Zach”—he made a face—“Zach is playing solitaire.”

“That’s healthy.” Luckily, calling James had been the right idea. We would have someone to counsel the boy soon enough. Thinking of James—I ought to call him and brief him about last night’s events. I felt very calm about the revelation of Kes. We had been apart too long for me to feel any sense of grief and I was still angry, so that was overriding any pity I might have had. Knowing him, he probably tried to transfix the wrong vampire.

I stepped into the kitchen on the pretense of not being overheard and dug through the fridge for a bagel before making my call.

“Donal,” he answered.

“James, Cillian was attacked again last night, and this time he got a good look.”

“Please tell me you have a name.”

“We do. I’ll let you know the moment it’s been taken care of.”

There was a long pause before he answered, “It has to be Cillian’s kill, Donal. You understand that.”

“I do.” Even if I did want to strangle Kes with my bare hands for hurting Cillian. The Families had to know it was Cillian that killed Kes. It had to be him if he was to maintain his footing here in Boston.

“Good. Call me when it’s done.”

“I will.”

This was why I left Ireland, too many fucking politics in the fey courts. Vampires were bad, but the fey were so much worse. I put my phone away, rubbing the palm of my hand against my forehead and shaking my head.

My life used to be so simple.

Cillian walked into the kitchen, eyes lighting up when he saw me. *I was looking for you*, he signed.

“I called James to give him an update.”

He made an *ah* face and leaned against the counter. *What do you want to do?*

“You have to kill him. It’s the only way to appease the Families.”

Cillian nodded and rubbed a hand through his still damp hair, spiking it up into a crest down the middle of his head. “Where?”

“We’ll track him down.”

“All right.” He straightened. “I need a sword.”

“I think I can help with that.”

It was strange to think that, until today, Cillian had never been to my apartment. It was in the more working class part of Boston, not because I

couldn't afford better, but because I didn't need better. It was close to work, and that was the important thing. We took the stairs up to the third floor of the old brick warehouse, which had been converted to apartment space during gentrification some thirty years ago. My apartment was an open plan loft with brick walls and a steel beam ceiling. I suppose nowadays the area had started to become more desirable, but I had bought the place outright some years ago. I wasn't concerned about rising rentals.

"Nice place," Cillian said, taking a look around my sparsely furnished living area. One corner had a rug, a couch and a TV for watching the news and entertaining, another corner had a small kitchen, but the bulk of the space was dedicated to open floor. On the walls hung the weapons I had accumulated over the years. An axe and sword from the Vikings who came to the shores of Ireland when I was a lad. Rapiers and foils from the Spanish and French. Long swords from the English and on and on.

I always kept the weapons.

Cillian took in my armory silently, walking along the walls. He paused on a short blade. One I had used myself once upon a time. It was a light infantry sword, practical. "I had one like this," he said. "Lost it." He turned to me. "You have a large collection."

"I fought in many battles. I like to remember."

"Anything more—new?"

"Of course." I joined him at the wall and led him down to the wooden cabinet where I kept those weapons I'd occasion to use in the last dozen years. One of which was the short blade I'd lent him to kill Damien. It was this that I pulled out of the cabinet and handed to him. "This seems most appropriate."

He recognized the blade with a smile. "Yes. Very." He looked at the wicked edge and smiled.

"Let's find that siren."

I smiled. "It's a date."

I'd had stranger dates. I had no doubt I would have stranger dates with him. Tonight, though, tonight we would cement Cillian's hold on the city, his

position amongst the Families and his safety. I didn't know where we would be in a hundred years, but I did know I wanted to be right next to him the whole way.

Always.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Cillian*

Donal expedited our search by calling Kester's precinct and finding out if he was on duty that night. He was not. In fact, he'd called in sick. Perhaps our siren was beginning to get an inkling that something was wrong with him. The killings had been going on for the better part of a year, little enough time that a narcissist like Kester could ignore minor lapses in time if he so chose. Or perhaps he simply didn't care that there were days he couldn't recall.

I don't know that I would be so cavalier.

Donal drove us to Kester's apartment, but the siren was not there. I had never tracked someone with the intent to murder them before, but I got a good whiff of his scent.

"We go on foot," I said.

Donal nodded, "All right. Keep your eyes open."

"And your ears," I replied.

He made a face and we started off after the seaweed and death scent of the siren. It didn't appear that he was going anywhere in particular. The scent wandered down main streets and side streets, brick paved alleys and empty lots, parks and parking structures until it took us down into the subway. He'd taken the Blue Line.

"Now what?" I asked.

"I would bet he's going to the ocean," Donal said. "We can start at Revere Beach."

I eyed the map and nodded. "All right." We'd bought tickets on the way in and boarded the next train headed to the beach. I hoped Donal was right. I wanted this to be over. I wanted the man who killed Ignacio to be dead. I wanted to start my new life without the old one hanging over me.

It was strange, riding the train, sitting next to Donal. I read the advertisements and the public health notices, watching the other passengers out of the corner of my eye. Donal put an arm around my shoulders, drawing a disdainful look from a middle-aged woman in a faux fur coat even I knew was in poor taste. I gave her a look in return and she moved off without blinking.

Donal looked at me and smiled. “Offended?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t hurt her.”

He shook his head and gave me a kiss. “Bold boy.”

“I wish I knew what you sound like,” I said. “I bet you still sound like Ireland.”

He smiled, “You’d win that bet.”

“Good.”

“I suppose you only date Irishmen?”

“Before you... I had a typewriter and—one night stands.”

“Don’t feel bad, most of my relationships have ended in murder.”

I gave him a look. “Murder?”

“About fifty-fifty.” He shrugged. “I’ve a terrible temper, I admit. I don’t take breakups well.”

“I promise I won’t break up with you.”

“Oh, good.” He kissed me. “And I promise that after Kes’ head is separated from his body, you’ll get an extra special reward.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a secret now, and you won’t be prying it out of me.”

A secret reward?

“There’s our stop now.” He stood up. “Job to do.”

I got up and followed Donal off the train. I wasn’t a fan of Revere Beach myself, it was far too attractive to tourists. I preferred more secluded stretches of coast. Perhaps I could convince Donal to go on a little trip to a private

beach. Perhaps I could buy a beach... I wasn't entirely certain how much money I actually had, but I was assured it was in the range of obscenity. Surely I had enough to buy a beach. I would have to ask James about it.

Then Donal and I could go swimming—naked.

I pulled my focus on the present as we walked out of the station and headed for the beach. I wasn't expecting to catch Kester's scent, so when I did I stopped and took another breath. Definitely the siren. "He was here," I said.

"Good."

I followed his scent from the station down to the water. Things became more muddled from there as the scent of siren mingled with the thick smell of salt water and death that was a natural part of the ocean. There was far too much foot traffic to get any tracks off the sand. I took off my shoes and socks and left them at the parking lot before walking out onto the beach. I really wasn't sure how to follow the trail from here, but I would not stop.

Donal kept close by as I walked down the beach and kept my eyes on the shoreline. On impulse, I picked up a handful of sand and dumped it in my coat pocket in case the vampire half decided to play the invisible man again. I continued to scent the air as I walked north along the shoreline.

The moment I caught a fresh bit of scent, I saw my quarry at the water's edge, knee deep in the tide. About six meters from him, Kester turned to us and smiled. His feeding teeth were exposed, but not the vampire fangs.

"Donal and his pet vampire," he said. "What a surprise. What are you doing here?"

I pulled the blade out from under my coat. "I'm here to cut your head off."

"I'm sorry, your accent is so thick all I got was cut," he replied.

I brought the blade up, motioned it across my throat and pointed it at him. "Clear?"

"Very." He stepped out of the water. "My question is, why?"

"You tried to kill me," I said. "You killed my maker."



The feeding teeth disappeared, the vampire fangs appeared and Kester's eyes went dark. "No, I did that."

I felt a momentary bit of guilt that I would be killing a person who didn't completely know what they had done, but that was deadened quickly. Sirens were killers by nature, Kester was no different. He would have pulled sailors from their ships to a bloody death beneath the waves. As a sailor at heart, I could kill a siren without feeling guilty.

Besides, I didn't know Kester very well, and what I did know of him I didn't like. I reached into my pocket and threw the sand at the vampire as I rushed toward him. Not expecting that, he recoiled. He did manage to slip away before I could cut his head off. I attacked again; I didn't want to give him an opportunity to concentrate well enough to use whatever power he was using to become invisible.

No matter what power a vampire has, they still have to concentrate to use it, and this vampire was not old enough to concentrate on an attacker and use an ability that sophisticated. I had learned a little in the last few weeks. As he dodged my newest attack, for instance, I could use my power and attack at the same time.

A power I wasn't very good at, but I was going to give myself an A for effort as I opened my free hand and brought flames to life from thin air. My mastery power terrified me, and for good reason, but the look on the siren-cum-vampire's face was priceless. He was clearly terrified, and that made me very happy. I threw the flame at his feet and caught his trousers on fire. The expression on his face made me think he was probably screaming. I threw more fire. Creatures of the sea were generally terrified of fire—vampires as well—so it was double the horror for this fellow.

I continued my attack, and he ran toward the ocean to put out the flames. I followed him in. The siren in him was pulling him toward familiar ground. Luckily, I could swim. He kept going deeper, and I followed. I stripped out of my jacket and kept going. When he dove in, so did I. And I sent up a prayer that I would make it out of here alive. After all, I had that reward coming to me from Donal. I put the blade between my teeth and swam as quickly as I

could after the siren. He was born to the water, but I was not. I had, however, been swimming since before I could walk. I was also a supernatural being and hundreds of years old. I wasn't sure how old Kester was. I didn't care, I was only concerned that he didn't live any longer than he had already.

The familiar taste of salt water got into my mouth and nose as I went as quickly as I could after him. There were moments when I got close, but he kept sliding just out of reach. I couldn't use my fire underwater, but I was still a vampire. I was still dangerous.

I focused, pulled the blade from my teeth, got as close as I could and lashed out.

Blood clouded the water and Kester turned on me, lunging forward teeth first. I punched him in the face and grabbed him by the hair, kicking my legs and pushing us both backwards. I kept kicking and held on as tight as I could, getting my other arm around his neck in a choke hold until we got into shallow water and I dragged him onto the beach. I was soaked, but I still had the blade. I tossed the siren to the ground, and before he got to his feet I raised the sword and brought it down onto his exposed neck. Blood soaked the sand beneath his body as it fell onto the beach. I picked up his head and grabbed my soaked jacket, wrapping it up carefully. After all, I was going to need proof.

Donal was waiting, calm, arms crossed over his chest. When I reached him, he put an arm around me and then kissed me. He pulled back and smiled. "Good work, Cillian."

"Let's go home."

"I'll get us a cab."

"Okay." I felt strange. Strong. I felt like the world was mine. Boston was mine. No one, no Family was ever going to take this city away from me.

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One cab ride, one shower, and a change of clothes later, I was the proud possessor of a box with a decapitated head inside it and preparing for morning. Phone calls had been made and the children were in bed. Donal was waiting for me in the bedroom, and I'd put the head box in the fridge.

There was an hour before dawn and Donal clearly intended to take full advantage of that hour. He was naked, giving me a great view of his tattoos. I was still coming to terms with my own recent inking. It was never a good thing for a god to take an interest in you, and the Morrigan was quite possibly the worst of them to do so. Right now, though, I was going to focus on what was in front of me.

A glorious, golden man with pale hair and bronze eyes, marked by a pattern of blue and a variety of scars, and all he was wearing was his dignity. I might have been drooling, but I was still high from the kill and the swim. Now I was getting high off Donal, which was an entirely different, but equally pleasant experience.

“Is this my reward?”

He smiled. “Part. I said I had something special, and I do.” He reached under the nearby pillow and retrieved something I recognized with an electric shock. “I wonder if this will leave more permanent marks?” He held up the implement.

“It’s a bit Scottish,” I remarked.

“At least it’s not English,” he replied.

I couldn’t help my smile, and I went over to him and climbed onto the bed—and over his lap. A striking start to what would become a most memorable evening. I was still riding high on a feeling of dominance and I wanted to ride a wave of ecstasy and pain. Perhaps tomorrow I would go out and eat a couple squirrels, dance in a nightclub, do something to intentionally irritate Donal and he’d put me in this position again.

At least I knew what I wanted.

“I love you.”

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*Two years later*

It had been centuries since I had stepped foot in my homeland, and doing so now made me feel nostalgic. I was coming home, but I was also away from

home. My home was in Boston now, with my fledgling family. It stung, the realization that I couldn't really go back, but Ireland still welcomed me in her green bosom. Half-remembered music played in my mind.

In the days following my dispatching of Kester Griffin, things had changed even more for me. It was like someone sent out the word that Boston was now the place for the lonely, the damaged, the dysfunctional and banished of the vampire world. Not all had been welcome, and more than a few had been put down for the safety of my city. Some, however, had been welcome. Which was how this day came to be.

The numbers of my house had at first doubled, and then tripled, and now I was Lord and Master to a staggering two dozen. The only Family that could boast that number was in Egypt, and they kept to themselves. Cortez had eighteen, and they were the second largest. It did not take many vampires to create a force worth reckoning with. True, most of my new children were accidents of rebirth, or lacking in some way that the others of our community shunned them for.

I would not do that. My home was the Island of Misfit Toys for vampires. The blind, deaf and mute. The broken and the abandoned. We'd had to hire three psychologists to serve in residence, and after one unfortunate incident we'd had to refurbish the basement into a group of cells to hold those having trouble adjusting. I had a system similar to baseball, except three strikes ended with a sword to the throat. I was sympathetic, not stupid. Some people just can't change.

I had left Adam in charge while I was gone. The young vampire had turned out to be incredibly loyal and there was no doubting his dedication. He had protected our home often enough from interlopers and mad vampires. I did, however, bring along a few of my family. It was a necessary risk. Joanne was along to make sure all of the scheduling went smoothly and that I didn't do anything foolish, or so she said. I thought that's why Donal was along, to be fair.

He insisted it was simply so we could use the Ways to travel and avoid airports; that, and he was determined to make sure this trip went well. It wasn't

every day a new Family was recognized. It was a historic occasion. I had chosen the location for the meet with no small consideration. It was by tradition the city of your rebirth, but given that that city was firmly under the control of the Cortez family, I had opted instead for the place of my human birth. County Donegal near the Sliabh Liag. We had chosen a small town to invade for the event. Even Irish stubbornness couldn't be outdone by James with his smiles and wads of cash.

The vampire powers helped, too.

My entourage camped on the north end of the town and waited for the rest of the Family representatives to arrive. Seven of the Families would be sending representation to make my new status official. James Argent would be here for the Bourbons, and a friend of Donal's would be here for the Dublin Family. We would meet in the town hall to hold the ceremony at midnight. Everyone in my group wore my glyph on their person, Joanne as a necklace. All three of my original children had matching pendants.

I wore it as a signet ring, a ship rising off a wave carved into a deep blue sapphire and inlaid with silver mounted on a heavy platinum band. Donal said it was very fitting, I found it ostentatious. I had moved on from Armani and designers to a bespoke tailor named Dave last year in an effort to look less like the other vampire lords. I wanted to stand out. Tonight I was wearing a black suit and shirt with a blue tie that matched my eyes. Upon closer inspection, one would see the black on black embroidery on my cuffs and collar.

The buttons were hand carved ebony.

I'd gotten to know a great deal about clothes over the past two years. It had been quite a learning curve for me. Joanne and Adam and Zach had been in about as bad a state, but without having the benefit of ever having dressed well. They were young. Speaking of Zach, my still quiet protégé had joined me on this excursion. I didn't like to leave him alone. He had a tendency to retreat to his room and start talking to his stuffed animals.

We were down to six animals, which was a huge improvement, but there was still a lot of work to be done there.

“Zachary,” I called. The blond turned toward me. He was decently dressed, Joanne’s doing, but his tie was undone. “Your tie.”

He looked down, “Right.”

I sighed and walked up to him, fixing the tie. “There. We must always present a united front, Zachary.”

He nodded. “Yes, Cillian.”

My accent, I was told, was much improved. It was only a problem when I started speaking too quickly. At which point, according to Donal, I sounded as thick as a peat bog. I was comfortable with that. I didn’t need to be perfect, even if Donal told me all the time that I was. He was perfect, though. My bossy banshee in his gorgeous green pinstripe suit, he looked like sex on two legs.

He was sex on two legs, but that’s beside the point.

After this we were going to take a little vacation on a secluded nude beach. It was going to be amazing.

Joanne waved to catch my attention. “We need to go to the meeting point, Cillian.”

“Right.” I kissed Zachary on the cheek. “Come along, let’s go look important.”

“I’m not important,” he said. “You’re important.”

I shook my head. “You are very important, Zachary. You’re the only person in this place I can count on to be yourself.”

He blushed and I got a smile out of him.

“That’s a lad.”

Zachary and I joined Joanne and started out for the meeting space where Donal was already waiting for us. I’d chosen to hold this meeting out of doors in honor of my roots. Some of the representatives had taken offense, but it wasn’t like it was their day. I wanted to do this my way. The Families needed the occasional reminder that I wasn’t going to toe the company line. Their egos could take it.

All told I had a company of seven, including myself, to stand with me. The other families would match that number, by prior agreement. Keeping things in balance was important. None of them were bringing a banshee though, so I think I was winning. The area had been marked with the same sort of paint we used to mark glyphs. It could only be seen under UV light, but vampires weren't exactly limited to the typical spectrum. My group took our place at the northernmost position and waited.

The Bourbons, as my supporters, were the first to arrive. They were followed by the group from the Dublin Family and then another and another until the final section was filled by the Cortez family. They had contested, but they weren't powerful enough to do anything given how many masters they'd lost trying to kill me over the years.

James Argent stood for the Bourbons, given that their head of family hadn't left France in three hundred years. He called the meet to order.

"I welcome you all, brothers and sisters, to this joyous occasion. It has been over two hundred years since we have acknowledged a new Family, and this is the first Family to ever come from the New World."

He held a hand out to me and I took it, bridging the space between our two groups.

"We acknowledge the Doone family, which shall hold dominion over the American Northeast. The boundaries of which have been determined by treaty. Cillian Doone, I welcome you as Lord of the Boston Family."

By his proclamation I was nearly the highest ranked vampire in attendance, only Dublin and Saint Petersburg's Lords had come along as witness to outrank me. More out of paranoia than disrespect, except in the case of Elena's absence, which was meant as a slight. All of those vampires who were now by definition inferior bowed or knelt depending on their status, and I nodded to them all as regally as I knew how from Donal's coaching.

"Thank you, Master Argent, for those kind words. My Family thanks you for this. We will stand by our treaties as sworn. I see this as a great step forward for our kind. I know we will be close in the coming days. Change is coming to us all, I only hope we're ready."

I could feel Donal next to me. I hoped he was proud.

James nodded to me and then looked to his neighbor. The acknowledgements continued from each family until we reached Cortez. They were represented by a swarthy fellow in a ridiculous white hat called Lubo.

He only nodded, but chose not to speak.

Eventually, Elena and I would come to a head, but that was not to be on this day.

With the ceremony done, our groups splintered off to celebrate, call home and in the case of Cortez, slink off home. I spent some time with the other Families, shaking hands and making enemies, before slinking off with Donal to a secluded cliffside cave I had used to hide in as a boy.

I could remember how the waves sounded when they crashed against the cliffs, and for a moment, that memory was so real. Donal wiped a tear from my cheek.

“Are you all right?”

“Just remembering what it was like to hear the waves,” I replied. “Wishing I could hear your voice.”

He took my face in his hands and kissed me, the low growl emanating from his throat vibrating to my lips. “*I love you.*” I felt the force of his words and the shape as he crafted each vowel against my lips and tongue.

He broke away for a moment. “Hear that?”

I shook my head. “Hear what?”

He placed my hand over his heart so I could feel it beating. “That’s my heart, telling you I love you.”

I closed my eyes and pulled him close for another kiss.

*What did I do to deserve this man?*

He brought me out of my thoughts with a slap on the ass. I opened my eyes and looked at him.

“What?”



“Stay in the moment, you were drifting.”

I smiled. “Then you should make sure I don’t.”

He gave me a grin, an evil grin that showed off his white teeth. “Oh, I intend to.”

*I love you*, I signed.

He returned the gesture and I couldn’t help but remember that first time I had seen him on the beach. He’d been perfect and I thought he was so far out of reach. But he was mine, and I was his.

*Thank you, Ignacio.*

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*Missouri Dalton is a writer of horror/paranormal contemporary fantasy and alternate historical novels. Missouri was raised mainly in transit, slowed down to finish school in one place and was then determined to be as nomadic as possible, if only because that's how things just worked out. She uses writing as an escape from her own neuroses and currently lives with her dear friend Sophia.*

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