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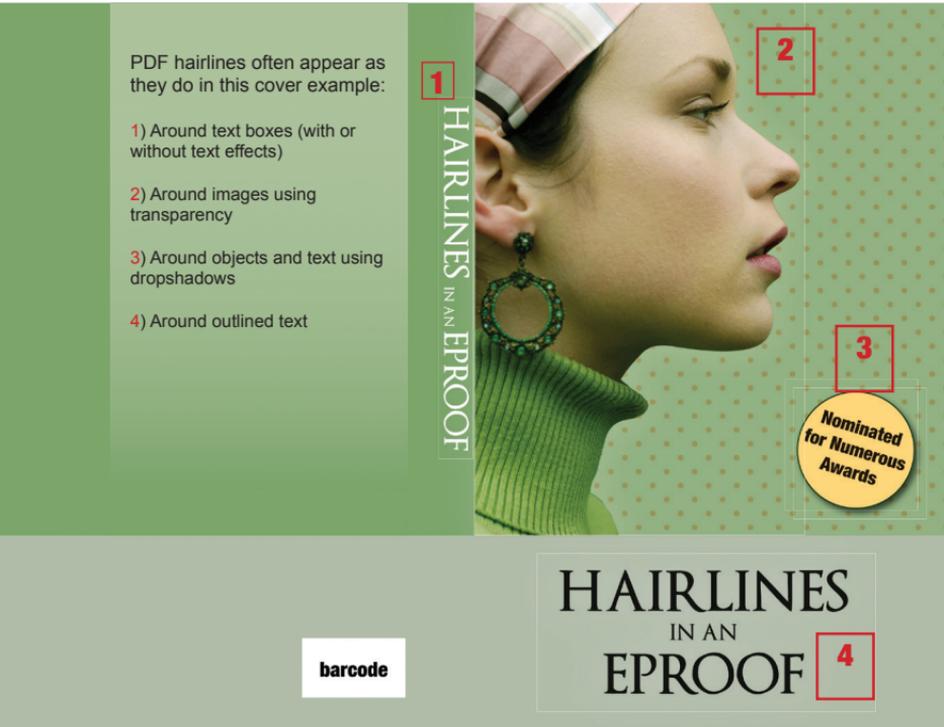
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After fleeing from a vampire witch hunt in Transylvania hundreds of years earlier, vampire Ileana Vladislava lives out a lonely existence in Wightwick Hall, a castle in the Jesmond Dene area of Newcastle upon Tyne, a city in Tyne and Wear, England. Still bearing the scars of her past, she avoids relationships with people and feeds on the blood of wild animals. The likelihood of the vengeful werewolf, Claymor, finding her also keeps her in a state of solitary.

Myrna Ivester spends a lot of time questioning her feelings and what she really wants. When Ileana sees Myrna at the Newcastle City Library, she feels her destiny is to be a vampire. Ileana appears at Myrna's home, places her in a deep hypnotic trance, and turns her into a vampire. Subsequently, Myrna reflects on the deepest meaning of life in her transformation into something supernatural as she develops a relationship with Ileana.

Told with wit and sentiment, this story provocatively explores the mysteries and complexities of the vampire world keeping its fangs in you until the very last sentence.

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ANN GREYSON

The Lonely Vampire



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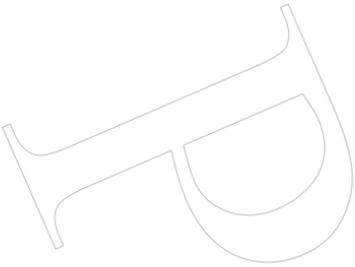


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The Lonely Vampire



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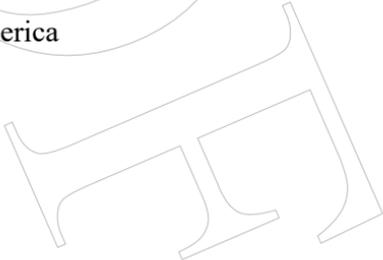
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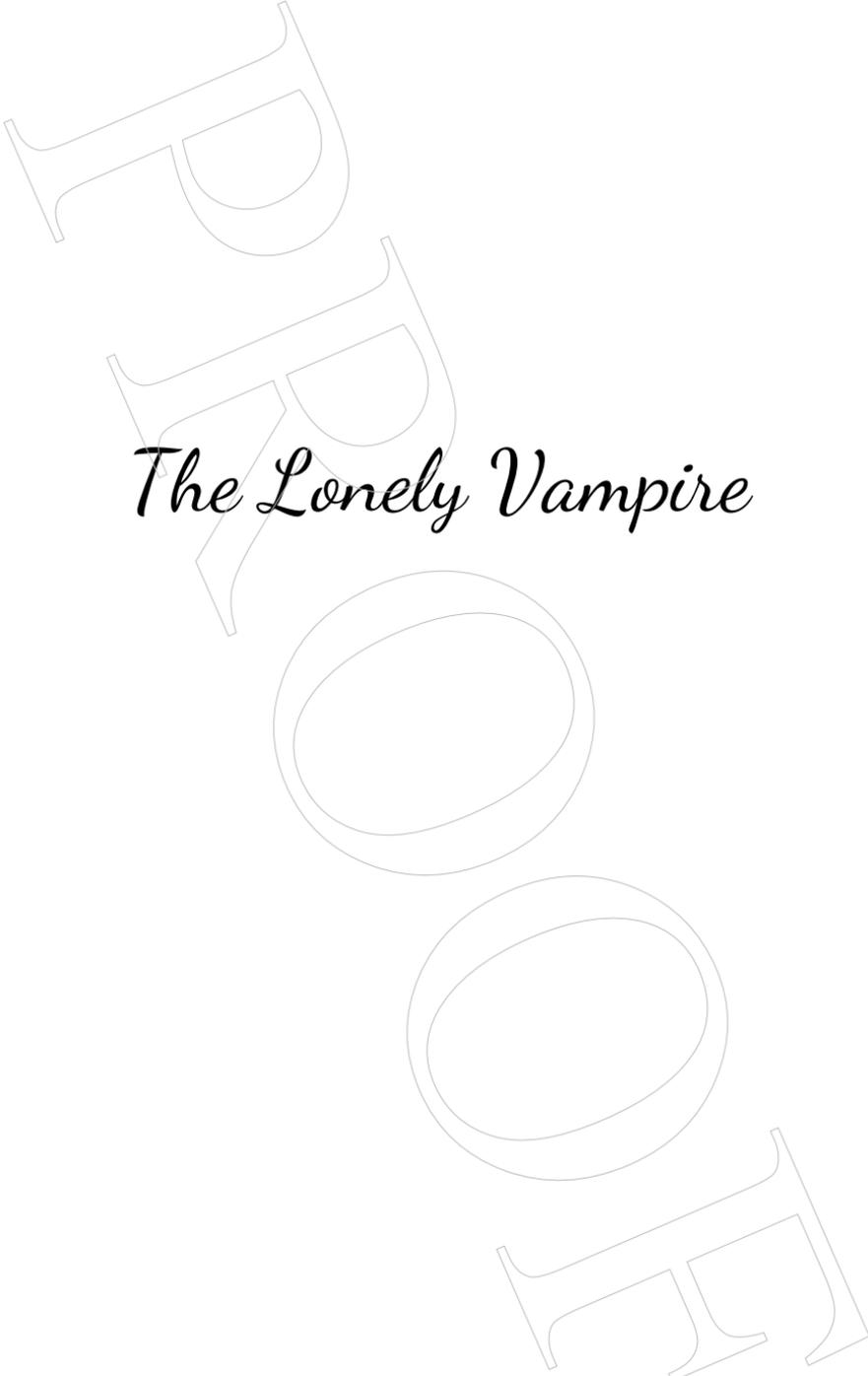
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The Lonely Vampire

Prologue

1578. Gheorgheni, Romania

A GRAY MIST lingered over the horizon of the rural town in the Szekely Land in eastern Transylvania. The light was changing in the sky. At first glance, it was a peaceful-looking scene. But the sounds of low moaning traveling through the air evoked something else — menacing, threatening. Because these spooky sounds were not coming from the grazing sheep in the yards of the farmhouses.

A dark-haired muscular man, about five foot nine inches tall, dressed in a blood stained, long-sleeved white shirt hanging over his black pants and black boots was slowly walking toward Gheorgheni. He dragged a bloody ax behind him through the mud and grass, and then across puddles of water left over from some recent rain, now turned red from drops of blood.

Trudging through the marshy land, the man was weary from wielding the heavy ax as he came to the edge of the rustic town. This was his final stop in his search for the last vampires rumored to be scattered about. Some were in plain sight, and some were well hidden where you really had to search.

His first encounter was with two children. A boy and a girl with pale complexions, both no older than eleven years, stood by a wooden fence. The little girl, holding a doll in her left arm, smiled mischievously. She had long black hair in two braids. And she wore a brown, knee-length dress over a white, long-sleeved shirt, white knee-high socks and black shoes. The boy with dark eyes and wavy hair was wearing brown pants with a matching vest over a white, long-sleeved shirt and black shoes.

To any onlooker, they looked like sweet and innocent children. The ax-wielding man knew they were no ordinary children. They were vampires.

After they whispered to each other in some strange language, they welcomed him with a wave of their hands. The vampire children weren't scared and believed they could possess the slow-moving man. They were wrong.

News of these vampires whipped the people into an all-out frenzy. By a decree of the Hungarian ruling prince, the acts of the vampire were deemed to be criminal and subject to immediate execution. It was even put into law that vampires acted against the laws of Transylvania, which belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary.

The ax-carrying man was on the move again. He came to a farmhouse, where an older female vampire with long black flowing hair down to her waist, wearing a three-quarter-sleeved red dress to her knees, was floating in the air. She growled at him while her red eyes glared with rage. When he came closer, her arms reached out for him as her bare feet dangled in mid-air. She was next to receive his ax.

There was no place left to hide for the vampires. Romanians and Hungarians everywhere united for the sole purpose to end the vampires long-standing presence within the region that had lasted a little over one hundred years.

The man made his way toward a cave opening, seeking a vampire that he knew was hiding there. As he drew nearer, a cluster of bats flew out. He paid no attention to them, thinking that they were a nuisance and just regular bats. There was no way for him to know that he was wrong about this assumption.

He kept his eyes forward as he walked onward into the cave. There he found a young female vampire with long dark hair and red eyes hovering in a corner. She was dressed in a gray short-sleeve-knee-length dress that clung to her perfectly. Her pointy nails dug into the cave wall as she hissed at him and bared her teeth which were like sharpened knives.

“There is no escaping. I will send you on your way,” he told her in Romanian.

The man held the ax high over his head and headed directly toward her. With a swift downward motion, the

man let the ax hit her neck, chopping off her head. Her body collapsed to the ground.

The man left the cave just as darkness covered the countryside. A full moon rose in the distance. He continued his mission.

A bat, with black leathery wings and black marks that streaked its brown fur, flew away from the flock. It swooped down and landed behind the wall of a farmhouse. There it transformed into a beautiful woman in her early thirties in appearance. A scarf around her head covered her raven-hair and concealed her pale complexion. She wore a black and burgundy shawl draped around her shoulders over a frilly three-quarter sleeved shirt with a ruffle around the neckline, a burgundy skirt, and black shoes. She was a vampire.

Her name was Ileana Vladislava and her brown eyes were pierced with pain. A single tear fell down her cheek. Just the thought of her friends being murdered, wounded her deeply. Her mind reeled, but there wasn't time to dwell on it. She needed to save her own skin.

Ileana waited a minute or so longer, dabbed at her eyes, then looked every which way to make sure no one was looking at her. No one was in sight at all. She took off running toward the forest. In a matter of seconds, she quickly transformed into a bat and soared high above the ground near the treetops.

Claymor, the werewolf, arrived on the scene to assist in the massacre of the vampires. An ally of the people and a vampire hunter in his own right, he could snuff out

vampires with his sense of smell and penetrating eyesight. What made him unique from other werewolves was a pinch of gray fur on the left side of his face near his ear.

Over the many years, the vampires had attacked and killed many of his brethren. Now there were approximately the same number of vampires as there were werewolves. This was payback for him. He was determined to rid the land of them.

When in human form, Claymor was like any other man considering that he was born a werewolf. You would never know his true nature. No one knew for sure exactly who he was. He kept his identity concealed and rightfully so.

The ax-toting man found himself staring at the sky where a full moon was in plain view. It was now time to go home. He was convinced that all vampires had been eliminated. There was nothing to worry about anymore — so he believed.

The werewolf was not convinced that all vampires had been wiped out. Sniffing the air, he caught the scent of a vampire in the air near the forest. He followed the trail of the smell locating where it was most concentrated until all faded away. The earlier rain had left the air moist confusing his senses.

Alone in the deep woods, Claymor was disgruntled. He knew a vampire – or vampires – had escaped. Rising to his full six feet three inches, he threw his head back and howled loudly at the full moon hanging in the sky. Its glow threw a blue light into the woods, casting shadows all around him.

The black-eyed, dark-haired beast sank to his knees, lifted his head slowly, and raised his hands toward the moon. Setting his jaw with determination, he vowed to continue searching for the missing vampire or vampires. After lowering his arms, the werewolf raised his head and glanced at the bright full moon before letting out a long high-pitched howl.

Roughly nine hours later, the bat reached a city on the shores of the Black Sea. At a little after four in the morning, all was quiet on a ship docked in the port of Constanta. A few hours earlier, the large wooden vessel had been prepared to set sail in the early morning. The bat flew at it at top speed.

Alone in the darkness on the top deck, the bat peered around with its piercing brown eyes. With its pointed furry brown ears, it carefully listened to the sounds of a bunch of chickens squawking and clucking less than a couple of yards away. On the move again, it flew into the compartment where some farm animals in wooden crates, including many chickens and pigs were being held.

Upon seeing the bat, the animals yelped in fear. When it took a hanging position up in the corner of the ceiling, the animals settled down, thinking they were safe from harm. They were, at least for the time being.

The bat briefly glared at the many small animals that would serve well for feeding, before closing its eyes and drifting to sleep.

Chapter 1

2017. Newcastle upon Tyne, England

I LEFT WORK in a hurry, stepping outside on a dull, late Friday afternoon in mid-August. Walking my usual path toward the tube station, down Thornton Street toward Westgate Road, I just realized that I had been working for a little over a year at Longwood Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. I couldn't be happier helping the elderly with all aspects of their daily care — or at least I thought I was happy.

I couldn't say that it was my dream job, but for the time being I was going with it.

When I enrolled at Northumbria University, I was interested in healthcare, but I didn't want to study medicine. I didn't want to be a doctor or even a full-blown nurse. I remember that day I said to myself: 'Myrna Ivester, you

must do something with your life.' So, I settled instead on a career as a nursing assistant.

I wondered if I was tired of seeing the same streets over and over. Newcastle upon Tyne was the only place I knew in my short lifespan of twenty-three years. Never traveling anywhere, it was like I was holding myself back from life, watching from a safe distance, and not fully participating.

In all the passing thoughts, there was one thing I knew for sure, and that was I was not satisfied with life. Was I expecting too much out of life? I couldn't say for sure. Being young most older people would say there was a whole world in front of me. It was an expression often thrown onto young people of today and no consolation to me.

In many ways, I didn't feel like most girls. Some would say I was beautiful, having long dirty-blonde hair, blue eyes, a fair complexion, and slim figure, though I didn't feel that way about myself. My lack of confidence stemmed from the time my parents died, the worst possible day of my life.

Ever since losing my parents at the young age of five, I had been detached from watery emotion. Despite my sensitivity, you would rarely see me showing my feelings or emotions. Oftentimes withdrawn, the instinct to turn inward and shut everything and everybody out, came naturally to me.

Upon reaching the entrance to Central Station, I descended the steep stairs. As soon as I stepped on the train platform, the Metro appeared in the tunnel. After the train

stopped, the doors opened, and I walked in. The train was crowded, as usual, but I found a window seat.

Staring out the window of the fast-moving train, my thoughts drifted back to my late parents. My life just didn't feel the same after their death, something essential had broken inside me. For the longest time, I wanted my mom and dad back. I knew that wasn't allowed but I just wanted to talk to them. Eventually I faced the fact that they were gone forever.

When my parents died in a horrible car accident in March 1999, everything happened so fast in my life. I remember everything about that day, how I was feeling and what I was thinking. I was pulled out of class at West Denton Primary School because my Aunt Eowyn, my mother's sister, was waiting for me outside on Hillhead Road. Somebody called her to pick me up. She told me I was coming over to her house for a while — and she told me why, too. My parents were in a horrible car accident. They died in a head-on collision with a truck.

It had tugged at me for years even though I had all but forgotten that day, until this moment.

Before I caught up with the events of that time, I was already living in her house. I started a new life under the watchful eye of an aunt I barely knew. In time, I grew to love her deeply. She was a dear soul — so kind and devoted to her family. Eowyn Dymtrow and her husband raised me, along with their son, as if I were another child of theirs.

The clanking sound of the doors opening startled me from my thoughts. It was good that it happened because my stop was coming up next.

As the train settled to a stop, I stood up to leave. A few minutes later, I made my way from the surface level platform toward South Gosforth Station's exit. In the process, I took my Google Pixel smartphone out of my crossbody bag for a quick call to my best friend and roommate Siobhan Mulcahy. I asked her to be ready to go when I got home.

"All right see you in a few," I said before hanging up.

The reason I was in a hurry was because tonight we were celebrating Siobhan's promotion at work, a much needed one at that. She graduated from Northumbria University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing Science, and soon after got hired as a nurse at Freeman Hospital. Today she was promoted to head nurse of her department. It was not because of her wit or beauty, though many male doctors she works with found her attractive. It was because she was exceedingly dedicated to her hospital duties and deserved it because of the sacrifices she had made for her job. It seemed right to reward her as the senior staff at the hospital believed she was the best choice for the management position, despite her age of twenty-four. She was more than capable and seemed to enjoy the new responsibility.

Siobhan was well satisfied with her status in life, and with herself for fulfilling her ultimate goal. I wasn't jealous either watching her obtain all the things she wanted out of

life. Even if I was dissatisfied with my life because it wasn't progressing along like hers. It was fine with me — that I wasn't feeling the way she was feeling. This was something that I didn't share with Siobhan, and I didn't suspect that she sensed it. Perhaps she thought that was the way I was. Like I just went through life without a plan.

Somehow thinking on all of this, I had spent my whole life longing for something that I didn't understand myself. I didn't know if I would ever find satisfaction in anything I do.

These kinds of thoughts had been haunting me and giving me nightmares for days. Even at times, my dreams had been premonitory. Or, at least, I thought they were. There wasn't any point in saying anything about it to Siobhan or anybody else either. I kept thinking it would go away.

Stepping onto Haddricks Mill Road, I turned left and headed down the winding street that lead to my home. I didn't remember much about my near five minutes of walking.

At six-thirty that night, I was home and getting ready to go out. Siobhan was more than ready and had just stepped out of the house to go wait in the car. Now she was the one in a hurry. I couldn't blame her either.

The freehold detached house located on Lilburn Gardens that I share with Siobhan was a modest 3-bedroom Victorian redbrick with a small garden overflowing with plants of every kind. I loved the place from the first day I set my eyes on it.

After I had dressed up for the special evening ahead, I locked up, and headed toward Siobhan's blue five-door Toyota Corolla hatchback. When I slipped into the passenger's seat, she looked at me and her bright green eyes twinkled playfully. We gave each other a fast kiss on the cheek before she turned the key in the ignition. Siobhan and I adored each other, and often showed it.

Siobhan tore out of the driveway on our way for an evening of fun, food, and laughter. That was the way we liked to live our lives. Even though lately, I felt like I was pushing myself through life.

Chapter 2

NOISES could be heard from the Hunan Manor, a bustling Chinese restaurant on Sandhill near the Quayside stretch along the River Tyne and with the Tyne Bridge in the background. There were quite a few people in the place as it was a popular haunt for the locals. Siobhan Mulcahy and I were seated in a moderately luxury restaurant booth. The waiter had just left with our orders of dim sum and Tsingtao bottled beer for both of us.

Looking at the glimmering candlelight from a glass votive in the center of the table, I remembered the very first time we met during our first year at Northumbria University, where Siobhan had been a nursing student. I was in the hallway of the Lovaine Hall residence standing in line, waiting for the bathroom. A girl ahead of me in line started banging on the door rushing someone who had been

in there a long time. It was Siobhan. Already, I liked her spunk and was caught off guard by it all at the same time.

There had been an undercurrent of sparks between us after a few weeks of hanging out together. The two of us became fast friends. By the luck of the draw, we became roommates in our senior year, and we were soon comparing notes about the hospitals we would be working at after graduation in 2015.

Siobhan's cell phone rang pulling me away from my reminiscing thoughts. She grabbed her Apple iPhone from her faux leather Stella McCartney handbag, looked at the caller ID, and announced to me it was her mother calling from Middlesbrough before answering.

"Hi mom," she said joyously. "Thank you, thank you. Dad told me earlier that you would be calling me to congratulate me as well."

Siobhan was born and raised in Middlesbrough, a large post-industrial town in North Yorkshire, but fell in love with Newcastle upon Tyne while attending the university. Most important, she was blessed with a good sense of humor despite the fact that we both came from an Irish lineage. All of this ran through my mind as I sat at the table.

I turned my gaze from Siobhan, who was still talking on the phone at this time, to the Chinese waiter dressed in a white, long-sleeved shirt, black bow tie and black slacks. The tall and lanky man with a thin receding hairline, bushy eyebrows, a Fu Manchu-looking goatee, tufts of gray hair on his face, and dark, beady eyes under dark-rimmed spectacles, was pushing a cart with plates and

stacks of little bamboo baskets toward us. His peculiar appearance kind of creeped me out.

The wonderful aroma of delicious food approaching our table caused Siobhan to take a quick glance over her shoulder. She looked pleased when she saw the dim sum was on the way.

“Mom, I have to run. The dinner is coming,” she said quickly. “Talk to you later. Bye.”

The waiter dropped the bamboo baskets of food on our table to serve ourselves and then said, “If I can assist you with anything else, you be sure to let me know. Enjoy your meal.”

As the waiter backed away, he bowed his head once before leaving toward the kitchen.

I dug in immediately and stated, “Let me do the honors. This is your night.”

Before she could say anything, I had already opened a basket.

“Myrna, you’re too kind.”

I served us both hearty portions of steamed and fried lobster dumplings, jumbo shrimp teriyaki and fried wontons. When our plates were full, I decided to say something.

From across the table I raised a beer bottle to propose a toast and said, “Here’s to your promotion.”

“Here, here! After almost two years working there, it was about time because I’m really a good nurse. And don’t think I’m full of myself when I say that either,” Siobhan said and clanked her beer bottle with mine.

I found myself smiling at her enthusiasm for her job. She was very upbeat as if it were the best thing that ever happened to her. Everything in her life was going exactly the way she wanted. She looked proud and beautiful, and I loved seeing her that way.

“Don’t worry. I don’t think anything of the sort. On another note, now you’ll have some extra money to fix the stereo system in your car, that you keep postponing.”

“How about I finance a new car?”

“Great idea Siobhan, I’m with you on that.”

“My dream car is the F-Type Jaguar.”

“Isn’t that really expensive?”

“Yeah. But I still want to do it,” she told me and went back to her plate.

“You go, girl, that’s the spirit.”

We both laughed and kept chowing down on the wonderful Chinese food in front of us.

Siobhan wielded that kind of energy almost all of the time. That was what first drew me to her, as most people liked her for that reason. She was the most put-together person I had ever known.

“So, what do you think of this place?”

“I really like it. The food is awesome,” I answered.

“So, my nurse friend Alysa was right?”

“Yes, she was right to recommend it.”

“She’s going through a tough time right now.”

“What’s going on?”

“Her boyfriend left her. And now she can’t afford to pay the rent where she’s at.”

“We have extra space. Did you invite her to stay with us?”

“I wanted to wait to ask you before I said anything. And I am waiting to see if she gets a better offer.”

“If you do decide to ask her to stay with us, I’d like to meet her first,” I said, a little bit wary.

“Of course. But I know you will like her.”

Just as soon as our plates were empty, Siobhan looked rather emotional. I didn’t think it was because of the alcohol. We only had one beer.

“Myrna, I want to thank you for a great evening,” she said emotionally.

“That’s what friends are for, sweetie.”

“I’m glad to call you friend.”

“I feel exactly the same, Siobhan.”

“On a serious note. Now that I have more money from my raise at work, do I have to pay for this?”

I laughed when she said that.

“Come on Siobhan. I told you earlier that it was my treat, didn’t I?”

“You did. But I had to ask. Just in case,” she said with a look of relief.

We walked out of the restaurant arm and arm singing “Shut Up and Dance,” a song by Walk the Moon we liked a lot during our last year at university, on the way to Siobhan’s car.

The quiet streets shimmered under the glare of overhead lamps. The still air was filled with the faint odor of tobacco. Following the smell, I barely glimpsed out of the corner of

my eye the light from a burning cigarette. Holding it was a tall, thin man with a hound's face and a curvy mustache. The man wearing a black top hat, long black tuxedo jacket, black slacks and black shoes was leaning against a wall in the shadow of a streetlight. He was holding a wire leash to a cute little monkey.

The monkey with a thick tail, and a coat of rich brown fur, made occasional squeaking noises and clutched the man's pants leg with his little furry hand.

As I was walking fairly fast, I failed to mention it to Siobhan. Yet, I couldn't help looking back to see what he was doing.

When I made eye contact with him, he quickly glanced away. He dropped the cigarette to the ground and left it to burn out on its own. Then he turned his back to me and started to walk away, pulling on the leash.

"Come along, Jasper," his English precisely delivered despite the thick Croatian accent.

I imagined that one day I would look back on this. That happy image of the two of us strolling down the street. What some people would call a Kodak moment. At the time, it felt like one.

Chapter 3

IT WAS an early Saturday morning in August, slightly before five — still dark. Deep in the woods, a low moaning sound was coming from the passing wind through the trees and shrubbery. It wasn't the witching hour — that awful time between three and four in the morning, but it was creepy enough, at that. Because there was something supernatural in the area near Jesmond Dene Road.

Many years had passed since the development and landscape design of the woodland park gifted in 1883 by Sir William George Armstrong for the benefit of the inhabitants of the city. The beautiful golden and crimson azaleas and rhododendrons in Jesmond Dene was a constant, visible reminder of the legacy of Lord Armstrong, a wealthy industrialist and owner of a shipbuilding company.

In the tranquil haven of a narrow wooded leafy valley near the Ouseburn River in the surrounding grounds of Jesmond Dene, a handful of black bears were grunting and feeding on grass and clover. It was a rare treat, seeing bears in these parts. At least Ileana Vladislava thought so — as she quietly watched them. And for what purpose?

One might describe her as a hunter of sorts.

A shadow fell upon a large tree trunk lying on the ground where, on top of it, stood Ileana. She was in a hunting stance. Carefully she observed the animals, anticipating when she would make her move.

Grey wagtails chirped noisily and flew by the bears. One wagtail began to pester a bear nibbling near a pine tree. He grunted as he shook his head about, trying to ward off the pesky bird. Soon enough, the bird flew away to join a flock of its kind on the moss nearby.

Such distractions served a good purpose to what waited in the darkness for the unsuspecting bears. There was no way the bears could tell they were being hunted.

The slim woman, about five foot four in height, dressed in a simple black T-shirt and black leggings, didn't appear to have the strength to overpower a big, sturdy bear. No human should have dared touch him. But Ileana was no ordinary human, but a supernatural being with exceptional abilities. A vampire, yes, that was a fitting word to describe her.

From time to time, Ileana glanced about, over her shoulder, and looking right and left to make sure that she was completely alone in the woods — as she liked it. She

was. It was important to her that no one else was there to see her.

Vampires always hunted in darkness in the early hours before dawn or at night. Being sensitive to bright light, Ileana was rarely out in the daylight, but she could endure it using a high sun protection factor sunscreen.

The question remained: Why was she stalking an animal instead of a human?

The answer was simple: she was afraid. The reason was easy to be found. It was all about the past, many hundreds of years ago.

All these years later in England, she had managed to refrain from contact with most people, engaging in a few obligatory pleasantries, and not attracting attention to herself.

Ileana's greatest fear was within herself, what she was capable of. She was determined to avoid the temptation of attraction to other human beings, for which she would desire to draw their blood from them. Establishing a vampire colony, was a risk she couldn't afford to take. There was a werewolf out there, somewhere, with a grudge against vampires.

Ileana remembered all too well the terrible events in Transylvania. It was a witch hunt. She had lost everyone and everything she had ever known and loved.

Ileana was the last vampire, from Old Romania. And she was lonely.

When it came right down to it, she was no different than anyone else. Deep down inside her, she carried the same

desires, same longings as most people. If she ever found the right person, meant to live the kind of life she was living, would she act on her desires?

A bear wandered lazily from the pack, sniffing at the bare dirt, and chewing on some grass. Ileana kept her eye on that one. She was prepared to go after that bear now that it was isolated.

Emerging from out of the shadows, after so many years she still appeared to be in her early thirties. She was eternally young and would retain the age at which she became a blood-sucking vampire. And that was precisely what she was about to do. She was going to suck the blood, rather the life out of the bear.

Blood was the essential source of life for her, crucial to her survival.

She was hungry for the blood of the bear, who didn't sense her. He had turned his back toward her and was heading deeper into the woods. And that was the moment. She ran amazingly fast. It seemed her feet didn't touch the ground and she was almost flying in her haste to get to the bear.

Ileana easily reached the furry beast who moved sluggishly slow. There was a brief struggle, but within a few minutes the bear was down on the ground. It was no surprise that the animal was no match for her supernatural strength.

She grabbed his head with both hands and jerked it to the side. Ileana hissed, buried her fangs in the bear's throat and succeeded in fastening them in the soft flesh under the

lower jaw. Pleasure came, rising and quaking through her body. The bear gasped and grunted in her ear, and it caused a commotion when it gave a howl of rage.

When she went for the kill, she lost herself completely in the moment.

After satisfaction, she wiped her mouth on her shirt, and then twisted her head in every direction, making sure no one was watching her. There were no signs of any person. Nothing as far as she could see.

Her fiery-red eyes turned back to the rendered powerless, but not yet dead bear. It was running out of time because she was going to take a lot more blood than imagined.

Despite being hidden in the shade of some nearby trees, she paused and glanced around, once again to see if anyone was looking her way. There wasn't anyone there.

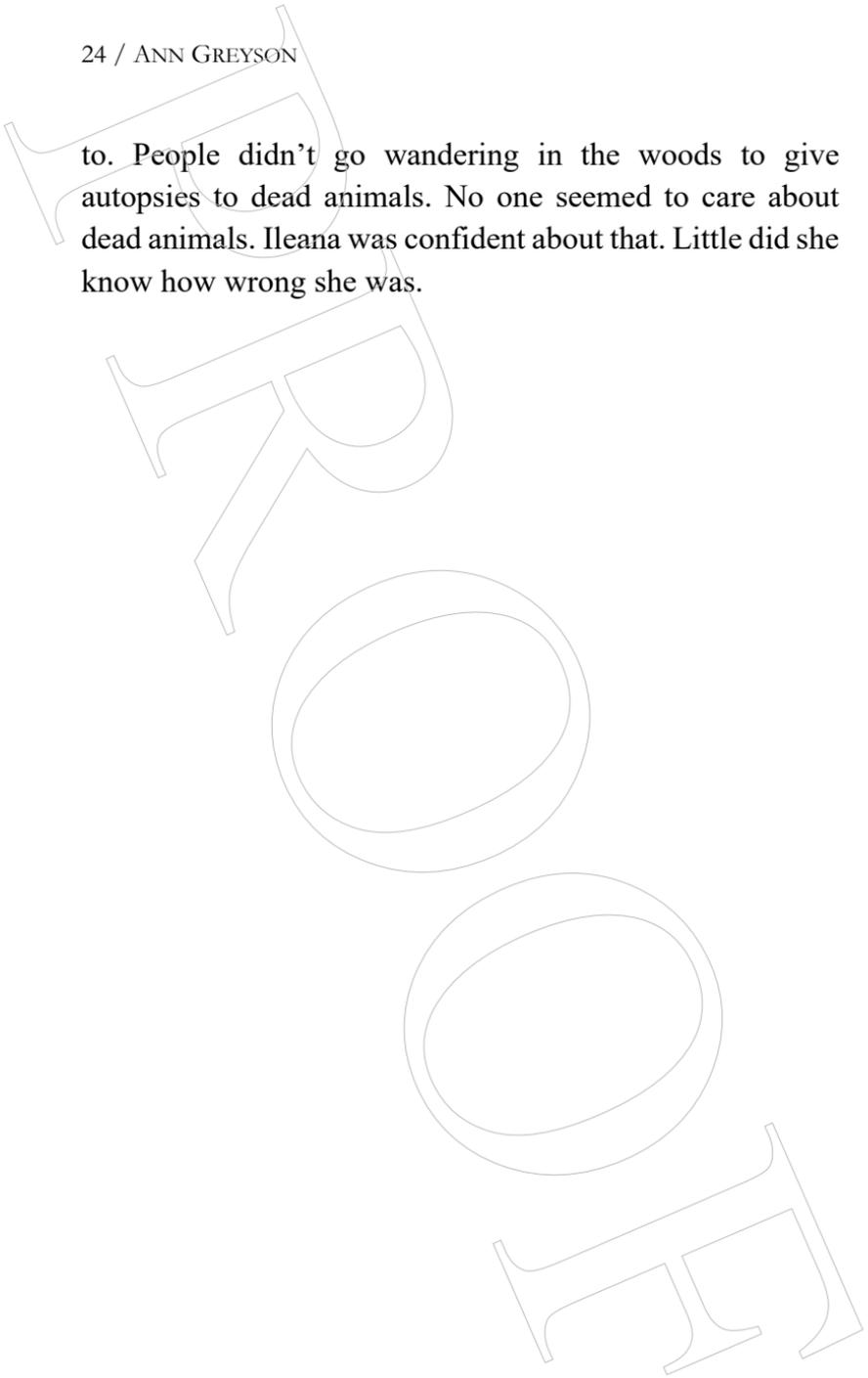
Ileana fished out a needle attached to a plastic bag from her small crossbody bag. She inserted the needle into a vein in the bear's neck and filled the bag completely full of its blood.

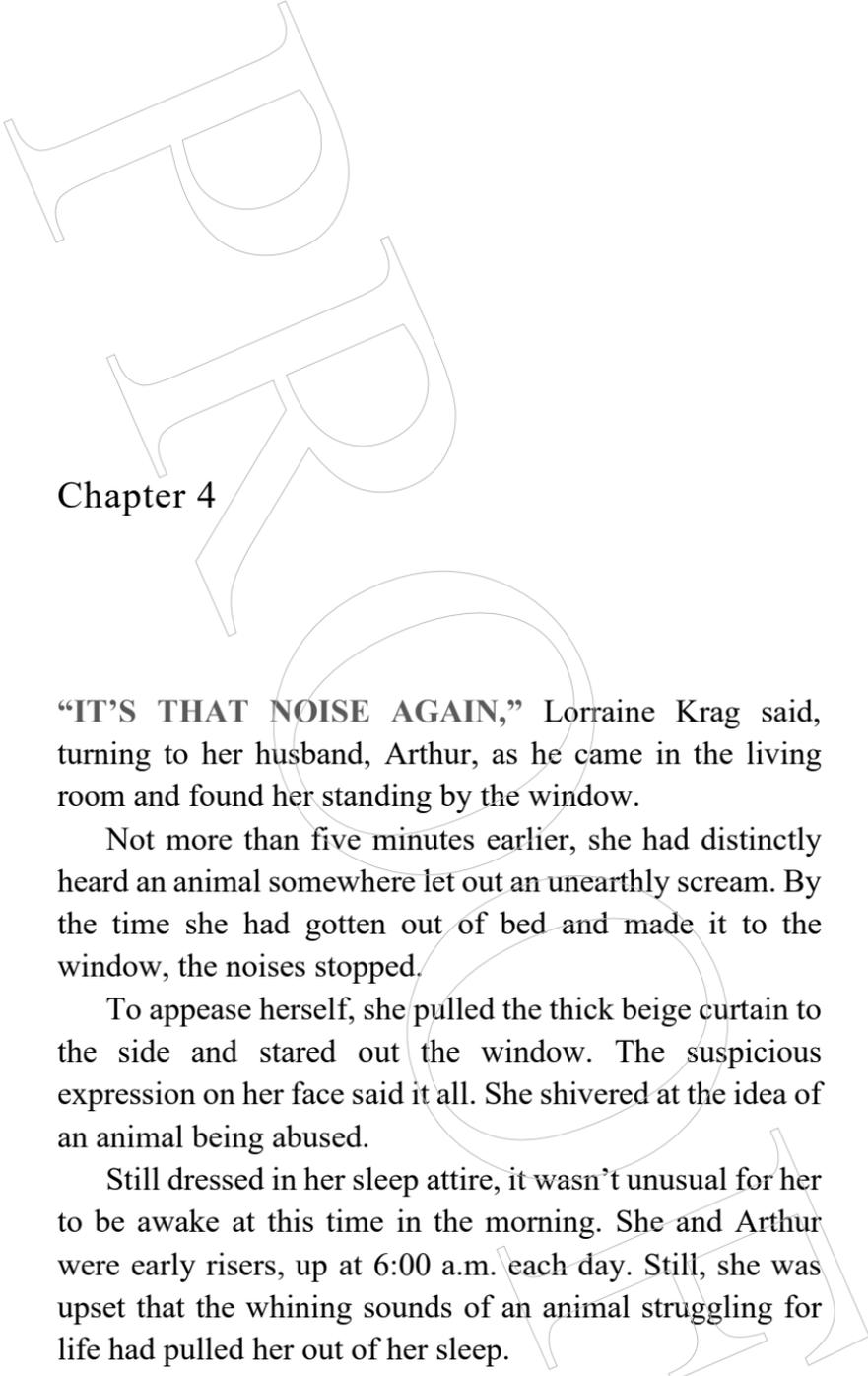
There was no chance for the bear. Not long after she had collected the blood, the animal died. It let out a final bloodcurdling scream of terror before passing into the other world.

She didn't pity the bear. It was her only means of survival — a true example of survival of the fittest. Without a doubt, she was the fittest.

The bear appeared to have died of natural causes. Certainly, no one was going to check. There was no reason

to. People didn't go wandering in the woods to give autopsies to dead animals. No one seemed to care about dead animals. Ileana was confident about that. Little did she know how wrong she was.





Chapter 4

“IT’S THAT NOISE AGAIN,” Lorraine Krag said, turning to her husband, Arthur, as he came in the living room and found her standing by the window.

Not more than five minutes earlier, she had distinctly heard an animal somewhere let out an unearthly scream. By the time she had gotten out of bed and made it to the window, the noises stopped.

To appease herself, she pulled the thick beige curtain to the side and stared out the window. The suspicious expression on her face said it all. She shivered at the idea of an animal being abused.

Still dressed in her sleep attire, it wasn’t unusual for her to be awake at this time in the morning. She and Arthur were early risers, up at 6:00 a.m. each day. Still, she was upset that the whining sounds of an animal struggling for life had pulled her out of her sleep.

Lorraine was a haughty British woman with a prominent nose to match her nosy personality. A slim redhead with some gray starting to show, now in her mid-sixties, she wasn't aging gracefully.

"What noise?" Arthur asked in an emotionless voice, then shrugged his shoulders.

Lorraine turned from the window and sent a defiant glare in his direction. She knew he wasn't interested in anything she said.

Arthur shot her a puzzled look, then he simply sat down in a beige suede chair, still holding *The Journal* newspaper under his left arm that he had just retrieved from the little cement stoop outside the front door.

He could tell from her expressive hazel eyes she was irate. Sometimes, little things got her going. And she displayed it often. Nowadays, it was just her personality.

She was yapping again. "Those horrible sounds of an animal in agony I hear almost every week."

Arthur hardly paid attention to her because it was typical of her to fuss about one thing or another. He was in no mood for any of this. Trying his best to ignore her, he opened up his morning paper. After glancing quickly, he stopped on something that caught his eye.

When they had lived in the city of Norwich, in the English county of Norfolk, she always found something to bicker about. Now living in Newcastle upon Tyne, she found something to complain about again.

Lorraine turned back to the window for another glance. As she caught sight of that castle in the distance, she felt a mixture of horror and fascination. It was so creepy to her.

Her thoughts returned to the sounds of an animal in distress. The sounds that were gone. Something inside of her wanted to grab a pair of binoculars and go outside to explore the environment. But she knew Arthur would try to stop her. And she wasn't in the mood for his discouraging words.

Dissatisfied again, she shook her head as she closed the curtain, turned toward her husband with a frustrated look on her face and said, "Listen to me, Arthur!"

The sixty-eight-year-old, average height, stocky, man with wavy salt-and-pepper hair wasn't listening. He shifted in his chair then crossed his right leg over the left one and turned the page of the paper. He filled his mind with the news of the day, trying to wipe her nagging from his mind. It was the way he coped and the way he dealt with her.

"Hello? Earth to Arthur!" Lorraine announced with a high-browed look as she folded her arms in front of her chest.

After a moment of awkward silence, he shook his head at her and said, "Yes, dear. The animals make strange sounds all the time. I've told you time and time again to pay no mind to it."

Her arms dropped to her sides in exasperation. Deep down inside she knew something was wrong. She wasn't sold on the idea that it was some random occurrence.

She wasn't backing down either. "There is something not right around here. I'm telling you since the first day we moved here. It has something to do with the strange lady of that castle."

This same debate had raged on for the three months they had been living at 6 Jesmond Dene Road, and this morning the words chosen were no different. Lorraine became more and more suspicious about the caretaker of the castle across the way. It was driving a wedge between them.

Arthur raised one brow and added, "You're the one who wanted to leave the city of Norwich. You said you were tired of the construction noises disrupting your thinking. Now you're complaining about the noise here."

She felt a rush of anger from his comments and stated, "That's just a coincidence, and you know it. Give me a break already."

When she was in an agitated state, her habit was to raise her voice at the end of each sentence. It came out as if she were asking a question instead of making a statement.

She felt her blood rise beneath her skin and started to pace the room slowly. In the process she looked over and gave him the evil eye. She could be spiteful and scary when she was mad.

Arthur responded with a look of surprise. Noticing that did not go over well with her, he decided the best thing to do would be to tone down his comments.

Lorraine wanted to protest again, pleading her case. After growing exhausted from the nervous pacing, she

stopped because there was one more thing she wanted to add.

“It just doesn’t sound right. The animals are suffering out there. Abusing them is unnecessary and inhumane.”

“There are hunters killing animals for sport all over England. There is no reason to be alarmed.”

“I didn’t hear any gunshots.”

“Maybe the animal was attacked by another animal. This kind of thing happens all of the time,” he said while reading again, or pretending to read.

She looked all huffy and puffy. Sometimes her temper got in the way. This was one of those times.

“I plan to one day get down to the bottom of this,” she said, straining to keep her voice calm, but eyes raging.

When he saw her like that, Arthur was beginning to lose his patience. “Lorraine, if you mean what I think you mean, forget it. I’m going to stop you right there, because you want to put your nose in where it doesn’t belong. You don’t want to cause trouble. Do you?”

She came back with a sharp remark, “Why would I do something like that?”

It struck her right then and there. Lorraine would wait until he made a trip to the store. She decided in the back of her mind that she would check out the area around the castle when he wasn’t around. See if there was any unusual activity around the building. She was determined to satisfy her curiosity.

“Please don’t do anything you might regret later on,” he added, uncrossed his legs, and then folded up the newspaper.

“Sure, Arthur, sure,” she finally relented, “I will be in the kitchen. I’m going to make you some Earl Grey tea and start the breakfast.”

“What a good idea. I could really use a cup.”

Lorraine looked at him with a sharp eye. Before she could let loose with a smart remark, she realized she didn’t have anything prepared to say. Then she looked one last time toward the window and made a frustrated face.

“We’ll see about that,” she finally muttered putting in the last word.

And with that, she stormed toward the kitchen leaving the room in a huff.

Chapter 5

I WAS ONE WEEK SHY of turning twenty-four. It was a dreary Wednesday morning, after a long night of rain, just a few days after my celebratory dinner with Siobhan Mulcahy. I just came out of the shower wearing a gray towel wrapped around my body at a little before eight o'clock.

I walked over and stopped in front of the mirror attached to my dresser. Then I twisted my thick hair into one long, fat braid fastened with a rubber band with its ends fanning out and hung it over my right shoulder.

The sound of a door closing startled me for a second, until I realized that it was Siobhan. I felt relieved when I remembered that today was her day off. She probably closed her bedroom or bathroom door on the way to the kitchen.

About a minute later, I opened a drawer in my dresser and took out my work garbs, a flowered short sleeved shirt and bright pink pants. I especially liked the shirt because of the two deep pockets in the front that was perfect for stashing things like a pen, or an emergency pair of gloves.

As I dressed, suddenly something inside me was telling me that I needed a change. Was I tired of the same routine? It was a question I asked myself because lately I felt torn up about many things.

It seemed like such a long time ago when I was offered the job at Longwood Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. At that time, I was thrilled to accept it.

Now I just didn't feel the same way I used to. Oftentimes I found myself questioning whether I made a good decision when I took the job. Was it a crutch to hold me back from living each day to the fullest and experiencing all that life could offer?

Just last night Siobhan said to me that I didn't take enough risks in my life like a lot of young people. She knew I had been afraid to jump off the deep end in the past. Maybe she was right about that.

Then I thought, perhaps I felt this way because my birthday was coming up soon and I didn't have a clue about what I wanted. Must be a case of birthday jitters. I tried to reassure myself, but I was sure I was going through an emotional crisis.

Recognizing that this line of thinking wasn't the most positive or productive, I needed to put it on the back burner. I needed to head to work. So, I put on my Jimmy Choo

crossbody bag, grabbed my keys, and headed toward the front door.

After locking up, I darted over to my white Honda SH125 Mode scooter and gingerly sat myself on it. I treated myself to this two-wheeler in 2016. It was a belated gift from me to me, eight months later, for graduating from the university.

Honestly, I didn't have enough money to buy a car outright and didn't want to lease or finance one. So, I settled on a scooter which was affordable, lightweight, compact and fuel efficient. With time I had grown to love it more and more. Even wearing a helmet, I felt like such a free spirit driving it on the open road.

I drove at a steady pace all the way. It usually took me about twenty minutes to cover the distance. I enjoyed the ride, except in rainy weather, I preferred the Metro.

When I got to Thornton Street, I turned toward the parking lot right next to a HSBC Bank that was designated for employees of Longwood Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. After I turned off my bike and put down the kickstand, I walked to the employee back entrance.

At the secure double doors, which led into the main corridor of the facility, I swiped my access card across the reader. The doors opened, I stepped inside and headed for the office area to clock in. Right on time. Nine o'clock.

My shift ran until five, with a one-hour lunch break occurring between noon and 2 p.m. and two ten-minute breaks. My duties included checking patients' vitals and tucking them comfortably in bed, fluffing their pillows,

distributing food trays, and feeding and bathing them. I did my best to accommodate them. Ninety percent of the residents were over the age of sixty-five and not in the best of health.

Before I could open my locker and put my things away, Joyce Gunn came into the women's locker room and said, "Myrna, I'm so glad you're here! I need your assistance, immediately! It's an emergency situation with Stan Brightman again."

"Is he all right?" I asked, a bit worried.

"He's in a state of anxiety, wandering up and down the corridor and trying to leave the premises. He believes that his daughter is waiting for him at home," Joyce told me frantically.

"He seems to have developed a habit of doing that lately."

"You get along so well with him. I think if you read him a book, it will calm him down."

"I'll be right there," I said as I shoved my bag in the locker.

"Thanks, Myrna! You're a doll!" she said, smiling her big, toothy smile and walked out of the room.

Joyce Gunn was my supervisor and she instilled in me a real interest in the job and the company. Well, sometimes she did. It was a pleasure to work with her.

A black woman of mature years, who stood about five feet five inches with short-braided hair and a skinny figure, Joyce looked marvelous since returning from medical leave six weeks ago. Her bout with lupus was thankfully months

behind her. I thought she really sparkled. The purple flower-patterned scrub top with light purple scrub pants she was wearing brought out the color of her large moon shaped eyes.

I walked down the corridor, thinking how the day had started off a little shaky, Stan Brightman in a state of agitation. I hoped this wasn't an omen of things to come.

Apparently, an orderly had brought Mr. Brightman back to his room because he wasn't in the hallway. When I poked my head in his room a big smile came over his face as he looked in my direction. Standing beside the bed, he also looked a little bewildered. He appeared to have calmed down at any rate.

"Good morning, Stan, how are you today?" I asked as I stepped into his room.

Most patients shared a room, but because of his medical condition, he was given a private room. In fact, a dozen rooms on this one hall were private.

"Who are you? Are you here to take me home?" he asked, becoming emotionally unhinged.

"No. I'm Myrna Ivester. I work here," I said in a pleasing voice.

His brown eyes stared intently at me. The five-foot-eight tall, wavy-white-haired man with a small nose seemed tired from his earlier ranting. He really was a sweet old Jewish man and couldn't help his occasional outbursts.

"I've seen you before," he said a little more coherently.

"Stan, why don't you sit down on the bed? How about I read you a book?"

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I should just leave now,” he said, still confused.

“How about I read for a little while?”

When I came closer to him, I noticed a spot of his breakfast stained on the front of his blue long-sleeved pajama top — something yellow. Probably eggs.

“Will you take me home after?”

“As I’ve told you before this is your home now.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed and simply asked, “You’re going to read? The one about magic and witches?”

“Yes. You remember. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. It’s my favorite *Harry Potter* book by J.K. Rowling.”

Even in his state of dementia, he understood some of what was going on.

Just then, an orderly, dressed in a white smock top and loose fitted white pants, appeared at the door, and asked me if everything was under control and I assured him it was. The well-built, blue-eyed young man gave me a quick smile and left without another word.

I grabbed the book from the shelf in the corner and rolled a stool over so I could sit next to him. After I sat down, I began to flip through the book looking for the chapter I was on before. Then I started to read.

Chapter 6

WHEN I GOT HOME, Siobhan Mulcahy wasn't there. But that was not unusual. I knew not to worry. More than likely, she was out shopping or running errands for herself, something she did on the days she was off from work.

I turned into my bedroom and dropped my crossbody bag on my bed. Then I went into the bathroom to freshen up.

As I came out of the bathroom, I thought I heard the sound of a car honk from outside. The horn was different than the horn of Siobhan's Toyota. I just ignored it thinking it was a car passing by.

Going about my business, I walked toward my closet for a change of clothes, until the sound of the horn came again. I stopped in my tracks, halfway to the door of the closet.

"What in the bejesus?" I asked quietly under my breath.

Someone began to pound their car horn insistently. Whoever was out there was in a hurry. The noise was beginning to irritate me.

Quickly leaving the bedroom, I bolted through the living room and went straight to the window next to the front door. I wanted to see who was causing that ruckus.

Peeling back the curtains, I peered out through the grimy windowpane. Immediately, I saw a new gray two-door Jaguar coupe parked in front of the house at the curb instead of the driveway. Siobhan was sitting in the driver's seat. She got her dream car.

When Siobhan saw me open the front door, she waved at me, then stuck her head out the window and asked, "Myrna, isn't it gorgeous?"

I rushed up to the driver's side door and said, "Siobhan, it's awesome."

"Let's go out for a spin. How about some curry? My treat."

"This car is expensive. Why don't I treat?"

"I'll take you up on that. I'll cover the gas."

"It's a deal! Let me just change out of my work clothes," I said and ran back into the house.

Back in my bedroom I stripped off my clothes and threw them in the laundry basket in the closet. Then I put on a lacy white camisole to go under my sheer tan cardigan and slipped on a pair of tan corduroys and black sandals.

I grabbed my crossbody, turned off the lights and hurried to the front door. After locking up, I went to the passenger side of the Jaguar.

The first thing I noticed was that the black leather interior smelled new. Just as you would expect in a brand spanking new car. It was the epitome of luxury.

“This car is hot!” I exclaimed.

“I got a good deal on it,” she said as she drove off.

“You have to explain that one.”

“Apparently, they wanted it off the lot.”

“Go on.”

“Earlier today I went over to the dealership to look at this 2017 F-Type model advertised on their webpage that I found surfing the Web on my iPhone. I went crazy for it. I put down five thousand pounds from my savings account for a down payment. And I was allowed three thousand three hundred pounds trade-in for my 2014 Toyota Corolla. Not to mention a four-hundred-pound monthly car payment for the next five years.”

“Still, it’s a bit pricy,” I added.

“The good news is that on Friday I will get my first paycheck with the salary increase.”

“I just thought of something. Now with the car of your dreams, maybe you can find the man of dreams,” I said changing the subject.

“Easier said than done. Wishful thinking Myrna.”

“Nothing on my end either,” I told her rather depressingly.

“We’re young and exploring. There’s no hurry.”

Or so we told ourselves. More and more silly jokes started popping up and kept us laughing the rest of the ten-minute ride to the restaurant.

Siobhan drove into a small lot for valet parking on Forster Street directly across Mango Grove restaurant. Despite the full comprehensive car insurance policy and InControl secure tracking service to protect the Jaguar from theft, she was still worried about losing it. I could empathize with her having just bought it. Plus, I wouldn't want to be walking home should anything happen to it. So, I was with her on that added bit of protection.

By the time Siobhan pulled the key from the ignition, I was already out of the car. I came around and found that she was still sitting inside the car with the driver's door open. All the while the attendant stood there smiling holding out his hand and waited for her to hand him the keys.

"Let's go, Siobhan," I urged her.

"Okay. I'm just enjoying it," she said as she climbed out of the car and handed the man the keys.

In return he gave her a ticket for retrieving her car later. Then we finally headed toward the restaurant.

To my surprise, Siobhan's favorite Indian restaurant, Mango Grove, wasn't all that crowded for a Wednesday night. The sheer aroma of the place made my stomach growl. I couldn't wait to order one of their fabulous vegetarian cuisine dishes. After a long day's work, I was famished.

After the server set a pot of tea on the table and left with our orders, Siobhan and I started chatting away.

"Are you going to show off your car to people at work tomorrow?" I asked and took a sip of mint tea.

"You bet I am," she said all giggly.

“I’m really glad you got it. It’s nice to see you treat yourself for a change.”

“Yes, the times are changing right before our very eyes,” she said all giggly again.

“For one of us, at least.”

Siobhan looked at me queerly for a moment after I said that. But what I had said wasn’t far from the truth. My true feelings concerning my humdrum of a life slipped out accidentally. So, I laughed a little to defray the tension. Then she laughed a little.

“Myrna, that sounded pathetic.”

“I agree with you. I don’t even know why I said it.”

Right after I said that, I swiftly shifted the conversation elsewhere. After all, this was a time to celebrate for Siobhan. And there was no need to change the mood.

Dinner came and went fast. Before I knew it, we were getting her car from the valet. Gleefully, Siobhan and I hopped into the Jaguar.

Before she pulled out of the lot, she looked across at me and asked, “Shall we take the long way home?”

“Yes, definitely. I’ll crank up the radio. Now that you have a working stereo system again, I figured I may as well put it to use.”

“And I’ll crank back the sunroof for some fresh air.”

Siobhan hit a button on the dashboard and the sunroof whirred back, filling the Jaguar with a rush of cool air. Then she drove out of the lot and turned north.

I reached over and flipped on the radio right in the middle of the song “Something Just Like This” by The

Chainsmokers & Coldplay. We both liked it a lot. Siobhan quickly turned in her seat, and after making eye contact with me she reached for the radio and turned up the volume. She glanced up at the sky before bringing her eyes back to the road.

I pushed the passenger seat as far back as it would go. My legs were stretched out in front of me and crossed at the ankles. My head lolled back against the headrest of the seat and I looked up through the panoramic sunroof to see a full moon surrounded by clouds.

Chapter 7

A BOLT OF LIGHTNING struck the ground only two yards from the dark and mysterious 19th century castle, simply known as Wightwick Hall. It was a place on Jesmond Dene Road that had long been a part of the history of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne. Rain started falling soon after, and a cool breeze swept through the area. Water trickled down a flight of stone steps into the darkness, reaching the bottom of a bolted wooden door to the cellar.

Ileana Vladislava was hanging upside-down from the ceiling of the cellar. A small, black spider came from a nearby web and began to crawl on her right foot. It slowly made its way up her leg, under her dark gray leggings.

The tickly feeling of the fuzzy critter's legs startled Ileana from a deep sleep. Her eyelids flew open to reveal her faintly glowing red orbs — the signature trait of a vampire in the grip of a rage.

She started to rustle about and slipped her hand down her leg to remove the culprit who had disturbed her peace. When she reached it, her fingers flicked the pest off her body.

The anger in her eyes dissipated. Her eyes squinted, and a grin came on her face. She made a mental note to remind herself to brush out the cobwebs and spiders in the room. It was not the first time the pesky creatures had bothered her rest.

She was now wide-awake listening to the sound of the torrential downpour. It was time for a gander about. She came down from the ceiling.

As she came out of the cellar and walked up the stairs with her bare feet, she felt a bit of weakness in her body. Suddenly feeling cold, she hugged her arms around herself for warmth. Then she felt a familiar pain.

First thing was first, Ileana was thirsty, for blood. Plenty was stocked up, there was no need to worry.

At the top of the stairs she opened the door to the hallway and strolled on the oak floor toward the kitchen. In the kitchen, she opened the refrigerator door and took out a bag of blood. She took a lead crystal wine goblet from the overhead cabinet by the refrigerator and poured the blood to the rim. She placed a straw, one of those bendy types, in the glass and took a quick sip. After picking up the glass, she left and headed toward her study.

Ileana climbed a spiral staircase before reaching the study, while the storm still flashed and boomed beyond the castle walls. She was instantly comforted by the sound of

the rain which was a steady drone on the castle roof. The first thing she did when she entered the room was look out of the window.

Admiring the rain and claps of thunder, it seemed as if it would be just another day tempered with loneliness as she began to think about her life. Thoughts of how she was living it flashed through her mind — spending most of the time inside her castle, looking out a window.

She purchased Wightwick Hall in 1929. It was a beautiful residence, but there was a feeling of emptiness in the place because of its size. It was larger than the mansion in the Gosforth area where she had resided for thirty years before. The cellar and a finished basement with media room were in the lower level of the castle. The large library, dining hall and the kitchen were on the first level. The study, six large bedrooms and four and a half baths were on the second level. A small attic, and a giant greenhouse with an ample number of skylights in the roof were on the third and top, level of the castle.

And, of course, there was always her past, the way she had lived in Transylvania, when her life was at its the best. The mere thought of that time sent chills through her heart. It was long, long ago, but she remembered so well. She was scarred by the deaths of her vampire family members.

Ileana set aside the rambling thoughts. With music, books, and movies sufficient to fill all her time, she should spend no time thinking about the past. And with that thought, Ileana turned from the window and glimpsed on her tastefully designed study.

The clock that hung above the inglenook fireplace told her it was ten past eleven. She walked over and put her glass on the carved limestone overmantel, then went toward a square oak cabinet with twisted legs and a turntable on top. It stood at the left of a Victorian turquoise velvet buttoned back armchair with turned wood legs.

She played music. Today's selection was "The Dance of The Knights" from Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*.

The record began to play.

She picked up her glass, sat down on the Victorian armchair, and rested her left hand on the edge of the armrest. Leaning her head back, she let the instrumental music surround her. The fingers of her left hand began to tap the armrest as she was enthralled by the music.

When the song was over, her intense emotions subsided. Ileana leaned forward, sipped the rest of the blood to her heart's content and felt fulfilled afterwards.

With a deep sigh, she leaned her head back again and shut her eyes, enjoying the feeling of the blood flowing through her. She took a deep breath and meditated while the processes in her body worked themselves out.

Before long, she was back in the kitchen again. She proceeded to rinse the glass in the sink. While the faucet ran a steady stream, a flash of lightning crashed across the sky. The sound caused her to look out the window above the sink. In that second, from the corner of her eye she saw a shadow move by a tree in her direct view. She sensed it was a person, but who?

After a moment to ponder the mysterious stranger outside the castle, it suddenly came to her who it might be. There was only one person who sprang to mind. Ileana was convinced it was her nuisance of a neighbor, Lorraine Krag.

Ileana knew this too well because she had seen Mrs. Krag staring toward the castle from her living room window several times. But why today, in the pouring rain?

The last time she saw Mrs. Krag spying on the castle, Ileana took it upon herself to discover who the woman was. She decided two could play at that game. At the wee hours of the morning, Ileana crept around the Krag's house and found her name and husband's name on the address label on a newspaper outside the door of their house.

Ileana had specifically picked out Wightwick Hall, a place she could disappear in, secluded, and ignored by other people. Many of the nearby houses were unoccupied. The house at 6 Jesmond Dene Road had been empty for six decades, or possibly more. Three months ago, the estate agent of the property lowered the price of the house and in came Mr. and Mrs. Krag.

As Ileana stared more intently out the window, part of a brownish-yellow raincoat could be seen sticking out from the side of the tree. Sensing it was Mrs. Krag made her blood boil. Probably, she thought Ileana would never notice. Lorraine Krag just wasn't a very bright woman in the eyes of Ileana Vladislava.

Ileana bared her vampire teeth in a sneer. That made her feel much better. Still, she kept her cool and turned off the

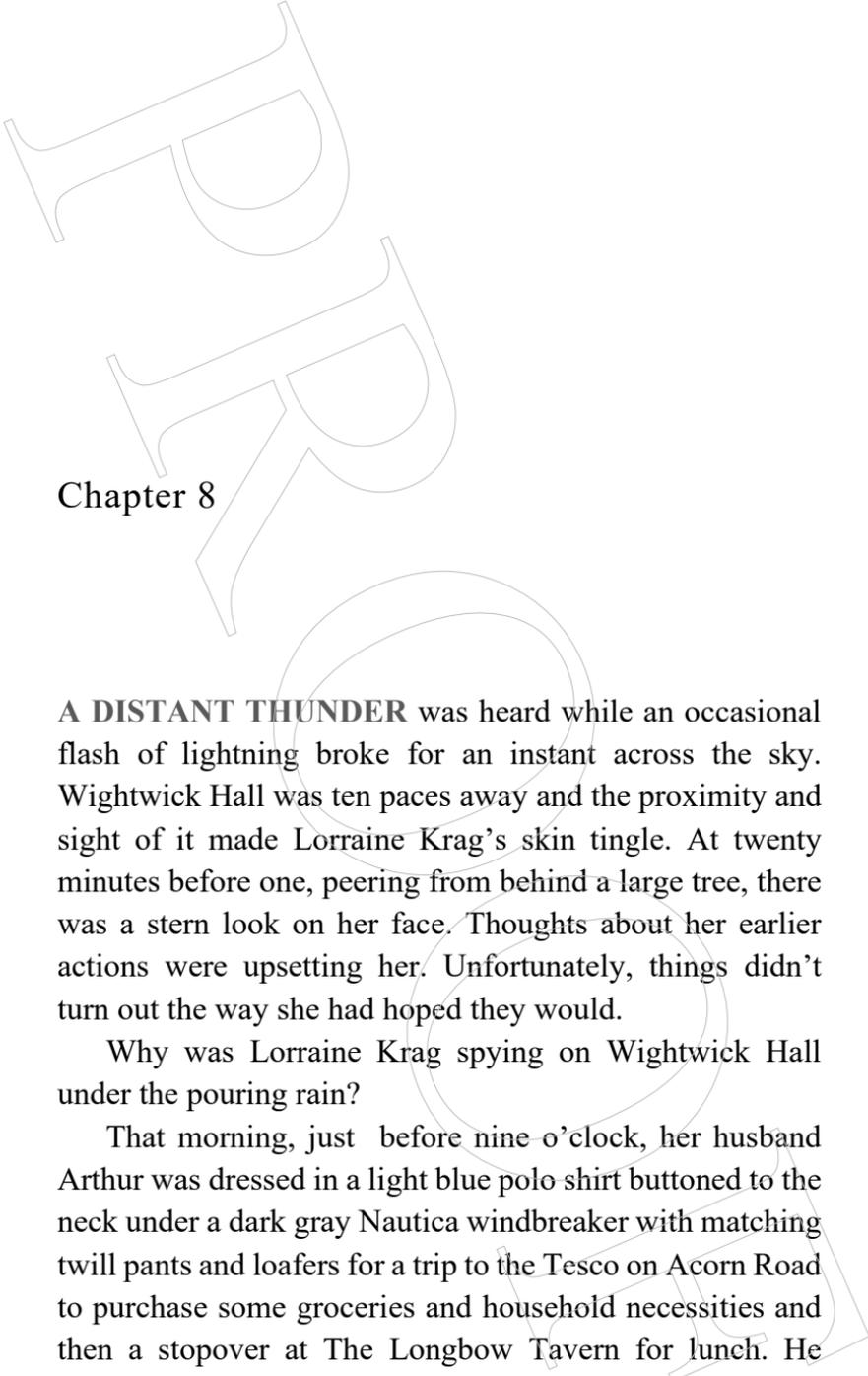
faucet. She didn't let on that she had seen Lorraine Krag and would ignore it this time.

Besides, she didn't have time for such trivial matters. She shoved the thought of Lorraine Krag out of her head and focused her attention back on the glass in front of her that she was drying with a white towel.

Ileana didn't worry none either. As far as she was concerned, when it came to vampires, people didn't believe in such things.

Her story was simple. She was a woman who lived in a castle, which was common in England, a caretaker of a large estate for the purpose of managing a greenhouse as a connoisseur of horticulture. It was a plausible explanation, well-rehearsed, and it couldn't be contradicted.

After putting the glass away, she felt it was time to return to the cellar. The spiders weren't something she needed to worry about now. Ileana Vladislava was too tired.



Chapter 8

A DISTANT THUNDER was heard while an occasional flash of lightning broke for an instant across the sky. Wightwick Hall was ten paces away and the proximity and sight of it made Lorraine Krag's skin tingle. At twenty minutes before one, peering from behind a large tree, there was a stern look on her face. Thoughts about her earlier actions were upsetting her. Unfortunately, things didn't turn out the way she had hoped they would.

Why was Lorraine Krag spying on Wightwick Hall under the pouring rain?

That morning, just before nine o'clock, her husband Arthur was dressed in a light blue polo shirt buttoned to the neck under a dark gray Nautica windbreaker with matching twill pants and loafers for a trip to the Tesco on Acorn Road to purchase some groceries and household necessities and then a stopover at The Longbow Tavern for lunch. He

didn't invite her along and there was no need for her to join him.

Not long after Arthur left, she was in her living room standing behind the curtain, peeking out the window wondering if the castle was empty. The fact of the matter was, she was convinced the woman was not there. For the last four days, Lorraine had not seen hide nor hair of her.

The rain started to fall right before her eyes. When the telephone rang, she picked it up from the mahogany end table in the room. It was Arthur. He called from his cell phone to say when he entered The Longbow Tavern it started raining hard. He decided to wait out the storm which he thought would be of a short duration, a couple of hours at most.

That was when she made her move. To put her mind at ease, she wanted to find out for sure whether or not the castle was empty. Maybe even to sneak into Wightwick Hall if everything went to plan. The thought of what might be going on in that castle and its strange occupant blinded her to reason.

She got dressed and took off, wanting to make the most of the little time that remained to her.

The rain hid her well. And the black galoshes and khaki-colored hooded raincoat she was wearing blended in with the surrounding trees and foliage. So, she thought she could remain as inconspicuous as possible.

Lorraine scrutinized every inch of the castle and its grounds. She snuck around, peeking into windows of the castle, watching for some movement. Nothing.

A bolt of lightning flash struck behind the castle provoking her to look in its direction. She saw a flight of stone steps leading to the lower level. Curiosity got the best of her and she couldn't leave it alone.

Lorraine Krag smirked to herself at her own cleverness. "This is exactly what I was looking for."

The closer she got to the steps, the more she felt like she was being drawn to it, by an invisible yet powerful force. As she moved even closer and snuck a look down the stairwell, it was a pure miracle that she heard the music. Right then she stopped herself from descending the stairs. She stood there for a moment listening just to make sure she wasn't imagining things. The faint sound was coming from a window above her. The moody notes of Sergei Prokofiev spilled out into the foggy air.

That was when she ran over to a tree, practically stumbled into it because the wind and water whipped at her face, partially blinding her. She felt the sharp pangs of rain smacking her in the face with ferocity. Lorraine was not at all pleased by this.

The rain got heavier. Long drops of water pattered on the hood of her raincoat. And droplets of water cascaded down her neck and seeped through her raincoat. Then lightning flashed in the cloudy sky. The flash of light jolted her. She moved a little to her right as a gust of wind mixed with rain hit her in the face. Lorraine was wet and miserable, hiding as she was.

After she brushed some droplets of rain from her eyes, she looked up at a window directly across. That was when she saw the reflection of a woman through it.

At the last possible second, she quickly shifted her body behind the tree to conceal herself further. What she didn't know was that part of her raincoat was in plain view.

"Doesn't she ever go anywhere?" she questioned with a whisper.

She kept a watchful eye, thinking she had not been seen. After another minute or so, she couldn't see the woman anywhere.

"There's something strange going on with that woman," she muttered under her breath.

If only she could erase from her mind everything that had just transpired.

Now it was late afternoon, raining hard, and she was drenched and tired. Lorraine turned her eyes away from the window of the castle. She held onto the trunk of the tree, resting her body against it. A red squirrel came out of nowhere and scampered up the trunk passing close to her face, startling her even more. She was so frustrated by it all that her face twisted up with fury. Could things get any worse? she thought.

"Stop and take a deep breath. Just breathe a little bit. Smell the flowers if you can," she spoke to herself, trying to calm down.

Today things didn't go well for Lorraine Krag. She was bitter coming up empty-handed.

“Well, Lorraine, it just wasn’t in the cards,” she whispered bitterly to herself.

For an added bit of security, she performed one last scan to confirm she wasn’t being watched. The last thing she needed was to get caught trespassing.

An icy shiver ran through her body as she leered at the castle with her beady hazel eyes one more time. The cold sensation gave her goosebumps. However, after a few more thoughts about it, the way she felt must be because of the cold rain that was pouring down on her.

Enough was enough for her. Lorraine turned and started to move away from the tree. She walked most of the way home, rather slowly with her head down. There was no looking back on that castle. She didn’t even care that the rain was coming down strong. It just didn’t matter to her anymore that the light wind whisked the rain in all directions, soaking her face, hair, and neck.

“I don’t know why I bother, I don’t,” Lorraine mumbled to herself.

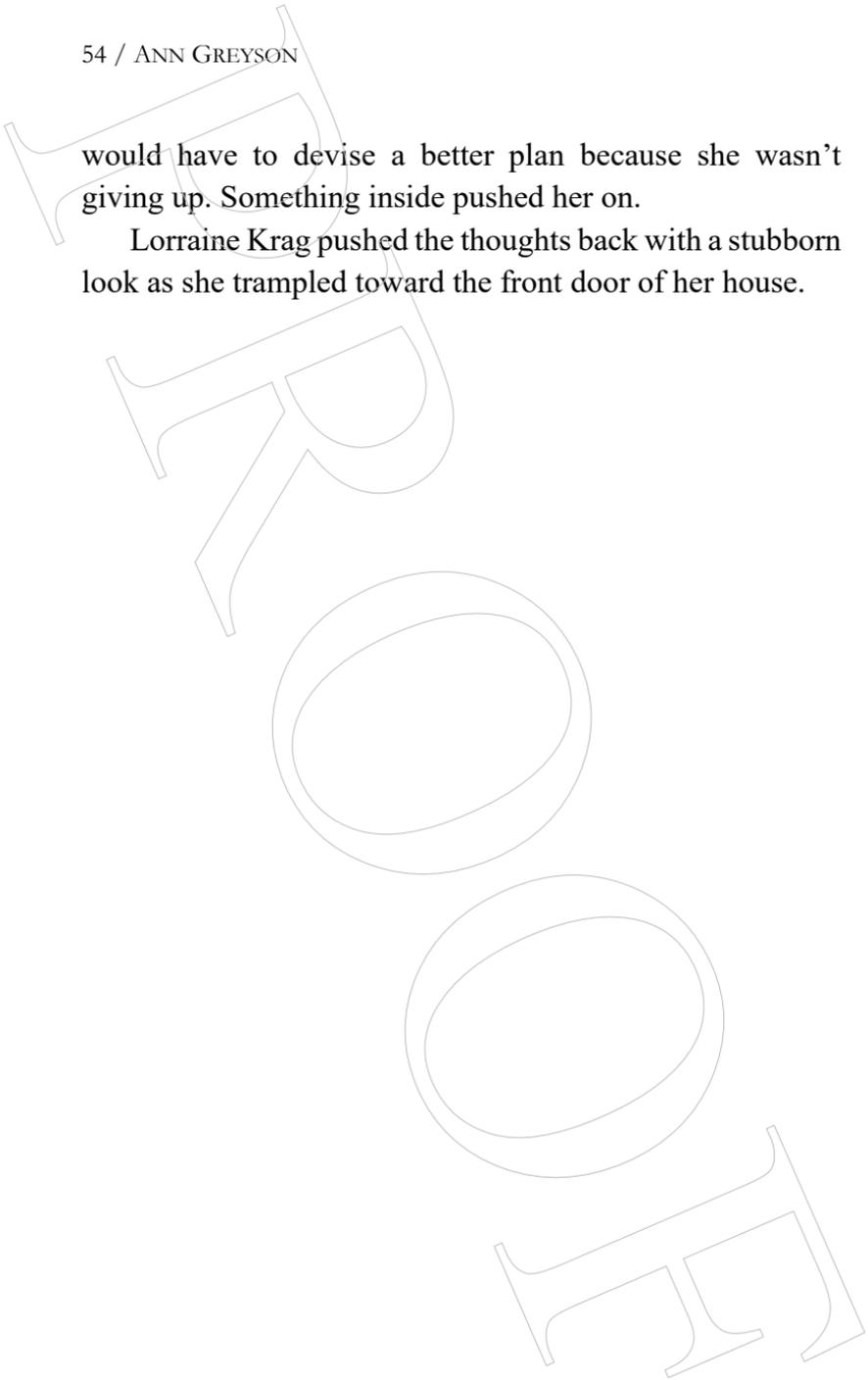
She wondered why in the world she had gone out in this horrible weather. Nothing went according to plan. She began to think her little espionage excursion was wearing her down. It was something she needed to think long and hard about.

But not that long.

She thought of the day’s events, again and again, and saw it as a temporary setback. Whatever that woman of mystery was up to was going to have to wait for another time. Yes, she decided there would be a next time. She

would have to devise a better plan because she wasn't giving up. Something inside pushed her on.

Lorraine Krag pushed the thoughts back with a stubborn look as she trampled toward the front door of her house.



Chapter 9

SITTING AT THE COUNTER, of The Longbow Tavern situated on Stepney Bank in the heart of the Ouseburn area on a Thursday afternoon, Arthur Krag was reading the day's paper. The relaxed look on his face was because of this much needed break from the recent quarreling with his wife Lorraine. The pouring rain gave him an excuse to linger — and linger he would. He believed that time away was good for his marriage that had lasted a surprisingly thirty-four years.

A solidly built, medium height, sixty-something man with a full head of dark hair touched with gray, wearing a white shirt and brown pants under a brown apron, came through the door of the kitchen behind the counter.

The man stopped behind the counter, swiped up Arthur's plate with crumbs of leftover bread and potato salad on it, and asked, "Would you like a scone, Arthur?"

“Why certainly I would, Allan,” he answered, looking up from the paper with a smile.

“So, how’s Lorraine doing? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“The same old, same old.”

“I am sorry to hear it buddy,” Allan Palen said with a chuckle, laughing at his own wisecrack and then gave a gentle nudge with his elbow against Arthur’s arm.

“Yeah, me too,” Arthur agreed and laughed too.

The two men had become good friends in the short time Arthur had lived in Newcastle upon Tyne. So, they could talk that way to each other.

Allan Palen carried a very thick British accent that stood out from the crowd. Divorced with two daughters in their twenties, he was an easygoing, restaurateur with a sense of humor and larger-than-life personality. Everybody in the neighborhood liked him which was the reason his establishment was busy all the time.

He went to the kitchen and returned with an apricot scone on a plate and placed it on the counter in front of Arthur. Allan picked a napkin up from the floor, tossed it in the trash can under the register near the counter, and dusted off his apron. He stopped by a customer at the counter to apologize for the slight delay of his order, then returned to the kitchen.

Arthur took another sip of his tea and bit into the freshly baked scone. It was delicious to him. He could never get enough of them. And he was in the mood to indulge. Nobody made scones like Allan Palen, not even Lorraine

even though she was a good cook and liked to cook for him. Perhaps that was why he stayed with her, Arthur thought. That could be why he married her. He didn't exactly remember.

The years went by so fast and his memory ran short. Though he did know Lorraine's personality had changed over the years. He attributed her mood to the fact that they didn't have children. They tried many times but were unsuccessful in their attempts. For most of his life, he had been busy with his career as a senior investment banker at Barclays while she had spent twenty years working as a schoolteacher. Having children would have made them closer, he thought.

Returning to his newspaper Arthur turned a page and folded it up. He peered out the window. The rain was still coming down hard. He did a doubletake when he saw a man behind his stylized gray Nissan Leaf, a compact five-door hatchback battery electric vehicle, parked in a space on Lime Street.

It was a tall, thin man with dark hair, eyes that were haggard, pale lips and a curvy mustache. The man appearing in his late forties was leaning against a reddish-brown brick wall near an artist's studio gallery.

Arthur thought his outfit of a black top hat, long black tuxedo jacket and black slacks was odd. The little brown monkey under his left arm was even odder.

The man just stared blankly into space as the rain fell hard all around him. Water dripped on his hat and clothes as the tiny, black edge of the roof above his head did little

to shelter him and his pet from the whipping rain or the light wind blowing straight into his face. The monkey looked terrified, looking from side to side and pawing at him with its left arm.

Upon seeing a skinny black woman toting an umbrella coming from a distance, the man nudged the monkey with his hand. Then the monkey put his hand out like a beggar, as if trying to gain sympathy from the passerby. But she didn't make a donation. She hurried her step, ignoring the gesture of the animal. When she was a couple of feet away from them, the man gave a disappointing glare and the monkey gave a sort of confused look.

Arthur Krag wasn't surprised by this. On the contrary, it was to be expected. He had seen those types before.

Losing interest, he now turned his attention toward the front of the counter.

Allan came toward him and asked, "I guess you caught a glimpse of Viktor Pavlovic and his pet monkey, Jasper?"

"You know him?"

"Yes, Arthur. He lives nearby and is a regular of this good establishment."

"So, what is his story? Not that it's any of my business, but I have to ask since you mentioned him."

Then Allan proceeded to tell Arthur that Viktor Pavlovic was originally from Croatia. As a young boy, he had taught himself magic and worked with a traveling circus. He got stranded somehow in Newcastle upon Tyne. Finding himself out of work, he decided to work as a street performer with his trained monkey.

“When the weather is good, Viktor earns a good lot of money on the weekends at the Old Eldon Square,” Allan Palen added.

“Why doesn’t he come inside out of the rain?”

“I think he does it on purpose to create sympathy in the passersby. He thinks he can get more money.”

“A devious sort of fellow,” Arthur said with a raised eyebrow.

“He’s as strange as they come.”

“The moment I saw Viktor, I should have asked you first.”

“Who’s on first?” Allan asked.

“For the second time, I should ask you first.”

“What’s on second,” Allan fired back.

“I don’t know. So, for the third time, I’ll check with you first.”

“I Don’t Know is on third.”

“What’s on third?” Arthur asked.

“No. What’s on second.”

“I got it. You had me going there for a moment,” Arthur said and laughed a bit.

Allan knew when to liven the mood with his imitations of routines made famous by Bud Abbott and Lou Costello. He was obviously a fan of their films.

“Just give me a holler when you’re ready for the check,” Allan said, with a cheerful smile.

He grabbed a white rag he had just wiped the counter with and tossed it onto his right shoulder. He whistled his

way to the door leading to the kitchen and pushed through it.

Arthur flicked his brown eyes toward the window for another gander at the rain. It was starting to dissipate. This could only mean one thing. He would be returning home soon. That thought put a frown on his face.

Chapter 10

LORRAINE KRAG was home again. It didn't look like the rain was going to start up again, and that meant Arthur would be returning soon. That she was certain of.

The earlier rain had dropped to a drizzle then faded away as the bulbous clouds overhead dissipated during the time she had opened the door to the basement and hurried down the steps to put her raincoat and galoshes in the linen closet next to the washer and dryer, which she thought was the best place to hide them. The laundry room in the basement was a place Arthur rarely ventured.

Rummaging through her bedroom closet, she found her comfy thin gray cardigan embroidered with yellow flowers. Still shivering from the rain, she pulled it on over her yellow linen dress.

Lorraine proceeded to the kitchen to fix herself a hot cup of black tea. After making her favorite English

Breakfast Tea, perfect for anytime of day, she took the flowery bone china cup and saucer with her and headed down the hallway in the direction of the living room.

After she took a sip of tea, her eyes fell upon the window that faced the mysterious castle. She set the cup and saucer down on the end table by the telephone and moved toward the window. Lorraine wasn't done spying.

Parting the curtain, she wondered if she was becoming obsessed with Wightwick Hall. Looking at it from afar, she thought about the many possibilities as to why that woman was so mysterious. Maybe she was just a caretaker? Could it be that she didn't care to get involved with anyone? It was likely she might be just some homebody.

"Oh, Lorraine, you're the homebody," she said loudly to herself and laughed.

Enough spying for one day, she thought to herself as she drew the curtain closed and turned her attention back to her cup of tea. She gulped down the remaining tea in the cup and then went back to the kitchen to wash it out.

"Best I prepare myself for Arthur," she said to no one in particular.

A little bit later she was back in the living room. She turned on the BBC radio channel on the device on the large scalloped mahogany coffee table in front of the sofa. The volume was set to a low level. She thought it was a good idea to get her mind off the day's frustrations.

Next, she scooped up a pair of knitting needles and a ball of yarn from the coffee table, and then sat down on the cream-colored Victorian sofa with tufted cushions,

trimmed in dark oak with claw feet. She really wanted to look occupied. Her latest project was knitting a blue yarn scarf for Arthur. How she found time for such things was beyond her.

Almost fifteen minutes later, she heard footsteps coming toward the front door and keys jangling. She continued knitting without looking up as the door opened and closed. Footsteps came toward the living room. It was Arthur. Still she didn't look up.

"Hello, dear," he said in a cheery voice.

To further the charade, she didn't respond immediately, rather ignored him giving the impression she was listening to something on the radio. And like she was falling asleep, though she was pretending.

"Lorraine, did you hear me?" he asked standing in front of her with three plastic grocery bags in his hands.

"Good afternoon," she said, feigning surprise, "I didn't even hear you come in," she said putting the knitting down and turning off the radio.

She acted as if she didn't have a care in the world. And was successful at that.

"How did you enjoy your day out?" she asked him.

"Yes, I did," he answered vaguely, walking through the room toward the kitchen.

"I'm so sure," she said sarcastically under her breath.

"How was your day?" he shouted from the kitchen.

Arthur emptied the contents of the bags on the countertop. There was a little spring in his step as he busied himself with putting everything away in the cabinets. He

even started whistling a bit. That he couldn't explain, but just went with it. He was in good spirits and he didn't have a problem showing it.

Meanwhile Lorraine said something he didn't hear. "It was wonderful, just wonderful. I turned on the radio because the rain almost put me to sleep."

It was important to sound convincing, that everything was just peachy keen. She wanted him to believe that she was doing the same boring thing the whole time he was away.

"I picked up those shortbread cookies you like so much," Arthur said entering the room.

"Why, thank you dear."

He turned, gave her a wink and a smile, then asked, "Did you hear anything of interest on the news?"

To her bewilderment, he walked over to her, gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and then proceeded to sit down in his comfy beige suede chair.

"Same old boring talking about the same old boring stuff," she said vaguely because she needed to say something, as she had just turned the radio on shortly before he arrived.

"I figured as much. Otherwise you would be telling me all about it," he said, shifted in his chair, then asked, "Was your day all right?"

She looked at him in surprise. Apparently, he didn't get that she had already told him. He didn't look as if he heard what she said earlier. Lately, he was often preoccupied with his own thoughts or wasn't listening to anything she said.

Rather than get irritated about it, she decided to repeat herself, this time in another way. Looking at it from her perspective, in her mind she thought that she was the one who got the better of him, not the other way around.

“Oh, Arthur, please. I have been sitting here all by my lonesome. There is nothing to report,” Lorraine said with a devious grin and a silly giggle.

Chapter 11

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS OLD. It seemed like everything was moving so fast. It was already Monday, September 4, 2017, my birthday. I was prepared for it. So, I told myself as I dressed this morning.

There were so many questions I could ask myself because I still didn't have a clue about what I wanted. Should I be traveling? Should I be engaged to some man? What type of presents did I want? I didn't have an answer to any of these questions.

Before leaving the house for work, I found Siobhan in the kitchen and told her my decision. I settled on dinner and a movie. It was the only thing I was in the mood for. And she came up with the perfect place to go after work.

Around seven o'clock in the evening, there were only six other people in the Cinema 'N' Drafthouse on Pilgrim Street when Siobhan and I walked in. It indicated that we

would have the place to ourselves, at least for a while, and that suited me very well.

Thanks to Siobhan, there was a VIP area set aside. One table was sectioned off in the center of the room near the 16-foot wide-screen mounted on the wall. Siobhan was good enough to arrange it all by telephone ahead of time. I considered myself fortunate to be one of her closest friends.

The joint, designed in an art deco lounge atmosphere, was popular with the twentysomethings for beers, pizza, and its Monday night movie series. The movie *Red Riding Hood* with Amanda Seyfried and Gary Oldman was playing tonight. It was released in 2011 before Siobhan and I started attending the university. We had not seen it before. I was curious to see what I had missed because of the hype surrounding this film.

“Welcome to the party. Follow me please we have a table already set up,” I heard Siobhan say aloud to Aunt Eowyn as I headed for the bathroom.

I didn’t bother to say hello. I decided to save it for when I returned.

On my way back from the bathroom, I peered out the window of the restaurant. My gut told me Casey wasn’t coming, but that didn’t stop me from looking.

Staring out into the dark moonless night, I reflected on the crazy spur of the moment decision, I had made when I asked Casey to meet me here and how he accepted my invitation. It seemed so silly of me because I met him for the first time at work earlier today.

Returning from lunch, I was hurrying past the elevator to a patient's room. Casey stopped me as he came out of the elevator and asked if he was in the right place. He was visiting his grandmother and wasn't sure what room she was in. I walked him to the reception desk to verify. In the process, we started talking and seemed to hit it off. For reasons beyond my comprehension I asked him to be my date for tonight. I didn't even know his last name. Plus, on top of that, I didn't even give him my phone number.

I came back into the room and saw Siobhan and Aunt Eowyn talking quietly at the table, as if sharing secrets that no one else should know. Drinks had already been served. There was a glass of iced tea in front of Eowyn and two bottles of Guinness for Siobhan and me.

Though she was in her late fifties, time had been kind to Aunt Eowyn in its own special way. Apart from the merest graying at her temples, her shoulder-length hair, done up for the occasion, was as blond and thick as ever. She had aged gracefully without much change. She looked as lovely as ever wearing a forest green and dark pink plaid dress under a thin, pink shawl.

A smile broke across Aunt Eowyn's face as she flashed her blue eyes in my direction and then held up her hand for me to come to her. She stood up from her chair and greeted me with a big hug and kisses on my cheeks. I felt like I did when I was a child and Aunt Eowyn would comfort me.

"Myrna, look what I got you. Your favorite," Aunt Eowyn said as soon as we separated.

She handed me a Juicy Couture gift bag and inside was a large bottle of Viva La Juicy perfume and a white silk scarf imprinted with Fifi Lapin illustrated bunnies. My aunt's generosity put a smile on my face. I had learned that no matter how old you got to be, to some degree, you remained a child in the eyes of your relatives. That was surely true with Aunt Eowyn. I thought the world of her. She was a warm and caring person, and my guiding light. Had been for years.

Aunt Eowyn sat down again. I took my seat in-between her and Siobhan.

"Where's that person you said you met today? No Casey?" Siobhan asked.

"You figured that out pretty quick. No, I'm afraid not," I said depressingly.

With raised eyebrows, Eowyn Dymtrow threw in her two pence. "I don't know about men these days."

"You and me both," Siobhan joked.

I laughed a little because Aunt Eowyn took the words right out of my mouth. Men, as of late, no luck in that department. The last time I went out with a guy was on a double date in a cinema. He was a friend of a classmate from the university. I never saw the guy again, nor did I remember his name. I was in a rut, and I knew it.

Since they were in a joking mood, I thought I would throw in the funniest thing I could think of and pull their leg a bit. "I never said Casey was a him. I would have said it earlier, but you two didn't give me a chance to talk."

When they both looked at each other stunned, I laughed again and said, “I was just kidding.”

“You are?” Siobhan said, on purpose to extend the joke.

I looked at Siobhan funny, and she broke up laughing.

“You girls are too much,” Eowyn said and laughed too.

A young light skinned Hispanic waitress arrived with a large vegetable pizza on a round tray and carefully set it in the center of the table. She left and quickly returned with three red-plastic baskets of popcorn that she placed on the table.

“Enjoy it,” the waitress said, then turned and left.

“So, what if I was totally stood up on my birthday?” I questioned and shrugged my shoulders.

“It’s his loss. Drink up that beer and you’ll forget all about him,” Siobhan threw in.

“It’s for the best, Myrna. You would have broken his heart and you know it,” Aunt Eowyn added.

Siobhan took a bite of her pizza, then talked with her mouth full, “You’ve got that right!”

“You guys are so silly,” I said, and laughed even more.

Siobhan drastically changed the topic and moved away to a different place. “You look great, by the way.”

“Thank you for saying that. I needed to hear it,” I replied.

The song “Castle on the Hill” by Ed Sheeran playing in the background was fading out slowly and the lights were dimming. The movie was starting. I sipped my beer and watched the movie quietly along with everyone else in the

room. In the course of the evening, more people had shown up. There were now over twenty people in the restaurant.

When the movie was over, the lights in the room began to pop up here and there. I was surprised by the singing of *Happy Birthday* by the guests.

The Hispanic waitress came from the kitchen into the room. She was holding a chocolate cake with lit pink candles on top.

Everyone in the room clapped when I blew out the candles on the cake the waitress had placed on the table in front of me.

“Don’t forget to make a wish,” Siobhan whispered loudly.

“And many more,” someone yelled from the back of the room.

There were more laughs and more clapping. They were pretty rowdy.

I really didn’t know what to wish for. I just smiled. All the kindness so many had shown me, made me so grateful. It was a nice way to end the evening.

Tonight, in the company of Siobhan and Aunt Eowyn, the people I cared the most about, I was completely satisfied. I treasured their companionship, and the three of us had a lot of fun together.

It all felt like one of those rarest moments in life. I couldn’t help but wonder if we would all be happy together like this ever again.

Chapter 12

THAT NIGHT I had a horrible dream. I was in a graveyard watching a funeral in progress. The problem was it was mine.

“Myrna, everything is okay. Take a breath and relax,” I spoke in a low tone to myself.

Still unsettled by all of it, I wasn’t ready to leave the bed yet and didn’t need to either, because it was my day off from work. I tossed and turned a little eventually stopping to rest on my back. Then I started thinking about the nightmare while it was still fresh on my mind.

A vicar was at the burial site doing what he could to administer to my dead body that was lying in a simple black casket with white satin trim. The tall, middle-aged man dressed in black and wearing a clerical collar was standing beside the half-opened casket and a deep hole in the earth reading Scripture from the Bible.

There were no other people around.

I was gazing at my face, my hair, my neck, at all of me that was exposed. When the priest gave the sign of the cross with his right hand over the casket, I saw my body twitch, and I thought to myself, 'I'm not dead.'

Needing to make sure I was alive; I came closer to the casket. A moment later I saw my eyes blink open.

The priest closed his prayer book and slipped it under his left arm. Using his right arm, he closed the casket door with all his strength. The casket began to lower into the ground.

"Stop! I'm alive, for God's sake!" I yelled at him. "Why are you doing this to me?"

The white-haired man with sharp blue eyes ignored me — or rather my other self, the one on the sidelines watching the events unfold. He bent down, put his hand into the soil and lifted it up. Then he raised himself upwards and threw a fistful of earth onto the casket in the hole.

"Didn't you hear me? I told you I'm not dead," I yelled to the vicar once again.

Still, he ignored me. It was as if I wasn't there. At least I was completely invisible to him. And all I could do was watch the macabre scene.

I came closer to the edge of the hole because I heard a noise that sounded like a wooden door opening. Sure enough, the casket door was open. I saw my body floating up and out of the casket.

I looked at the priest who didn't seem to notice until the other me ascended from the hole. The second he saw my

body floating in mid-air, he took a couple of steps backward and stood still.

When he took a small vial of holy water from his jacket pocket, twisted off the top, and splashed it on my body, I saw myself hiss at him. He stepped away in fear, clutched his Bible to his chest, and his lips moved in silent prayer.

The next thing that happened was even more surreal. I saw myself transform into a bat.

The bat let out a horrible screech as it came closer to the priest. He put the Bible under his left arm and made a cross with his fingers to ward it off. The bat screeched loudly, flapping its wings furiously, and then flew away.

It was eerily terrifying, but not over.

“I told you I wasn’t dead,” I said to him.

This time he looked in my direction and gave me a cold stare with a defiant upraised chin. He lifted his arm and pointed his finger to something behind me but didn’t say a word.

I turned around to see what he was pointing at. About five feet to the left of me, I saw a German Shepherd dog. A low growl rumbled up from his chest upon seeing me. Then he barked and growled in a manner that made my blood run cold.

I just stood there, too confused to even scream. You would think at some point I might have started to run away. I didn’t understand what was going through my mind.

The vicar looked upon the scene with a grin. He opened his Bible and began to read Scripture, occasionally glancing in my direction.

Next thing that happened was a darkness fell all around me. The vicar was nowhere to be seen. The only thing I could see was a pair of red eyes of the dog growling at me. Now I was frightened.

In seconds, I took off, running in the pitch black. I was terrified beyond belief, trying to find a way out of the darkness. I looked over my shoulder briefly and saw those horrible red eyes in hot pursuit. What did this animal want with me anyway? I dreaded to think about it.

Looking front again, I saw a dim light approaching. I ran toward it and found myself in a dark forest. I looked up at the trees so tall they touched the sky that was covered with dark clouds. Raindrops fell on my face and hair from the start of the rain.

Frantically, I looked over my shoulder to see the German Shepherd still following me. I turned my head back to the front and ran faster and faster, while the rain was pouring down on me. I kept looking for a way to escape, but I couldn't find one.

That was when the dream changed again.

Suddenly, I emerged from the forest and I found myself right back where it all started for me, in the graveyard. I was running so fast I didn't have time to stop myself from falling into the hole where the coffin had been. I kept falling and falling into this bottomless hole until I woke up in my bed.

This was the oddest dream, to date. I hoped these strange nightmares I'd been having, over two weeks now,

would go away. Now I wonder why they hadn't yet. Was it a premonition of sorts?

I turned over on my right side to look at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost eight o'clock in the morning. I turned to lie on my back and tossed my white and purple plaid blanket to the side.

My mind returned to the dream and why I had it. Perhaps it was inspired from the movie I watched yesterday. It was a logical explanation. *Red Riding Hood*, about a primitive medieval village stalked by a werewolf, was a bit corny to say the least. Apparently, the movie left an impression on me that few others had.

To prevent another nightmare of such terror, I must remind myself not to watch scary movies. Next time, it would be a romantic comedy for me, which would do me some good.

All thought of the matter had vanished from my mind when I smelled the scent of eggs enter the room. I rolled over onto my left side, closed my eyes, and breathed in the aroma.

Siobhan was making the breakfast as she usually did about this time of day. It was a hobby of hers. Cooking was therapeutic for her, took her mind off the stresses of her job.

In the meantime, I needed to drag myself out of bed. I was pressed for time. Siobhan left for work at eight-thirty on the dot because her shift started at nine.

Even though I wasn't that hungry, I really wanted to spend some time with Siobhan. After having such a crazy dream, I would probably feel better if I talked to her. She

often had feedback, some degree of insight regarding the way my mind worked. My imaginative mind might amuse her more than anything else. Well, I thought so.

BOOKS

Chapter 13

STANDING ON THE LEDGE of the roof of Wightwick Hall, Ileana Vladislava was staring into the tranquil wooded valley of Jesmond Dene. At around five o'clock on a Wednesday morning, the beautiful urban woodland was shrouded in dense gray fog. She loved this time of day, the pre-dawn hours, for hunting.

How else could this lonely vampire survive?

She was in dire need of blood. Her body ached all over from the desire. Her thirst was deep, and her eyes were glowing red.

Ileana spotted a couple of roe deer feeding on the grass with her intense vision. She was pleased by what she saw.

She took off fast, moving with a purpose straight down the side of the castle wall to the ground sixty feet below her. It was a sight to see how her long-nailed feet glided down

the wall as if she had glue on the soles of her feet to prevent her from falling. Such was the ways of a vampire.

The fog that blanketed the woods, helped to conceal her. She crouched behind a huge rock in the almost total darkness, peering around for any sign of the deer seen earlier.

A lone kingfisher glided into a pine tree and perched on a branch way up high above. Its keen eyes took in the view. It spotted something of interest, Ileana Vladislava, something that seemed out of place in the bird's sanctuary.

For a short spell, the kingfisher eyed Ileana as she climbed a large rock and fell into a perch-like position. That was her hunting crouch.

The kingfisher left the branch and flew past Ileana's head. The bird vanished into the fog.

Time was of the essence. Ileana would like to get this over with quickly before the clouds evaporated and the sun blazed upon her. Additionally, the heat from the rising sun would dissipate the fog and bring her out in the open, clearly something she would like to avoid.

She turned her attention to a male deer about seven yards from her. The lone deer was leisurely grazing. It would have to do.

The fog swirled in and floated above the grass near the deer. The deer lifted its head to look around. Suddenly, it saw Ileana and stared intently at her. There was no reason for it to be afraid. Her face was soft and open while she was staring down from the rock. She didn't carry any weapon, nor did she display any threatening behavior

such as a vicious look or strange sounds. It was an odd circumstance, as the animal had no idea the intentions of Ileana.

When the deer lowered its head to feed again, her face changed into a fierce expression. Her eyes were slightly red, and her fingernails began to protrude as she altered into full vampire mode.

The time to strike was now.

Ileana began her descent from the rock while the deer was not paying any attention to her. He continued to graze about.

She slowly stepped away from the rock, careful not to rouse the deer. As she drew nearer the deer jerked its head up quickly, sensing danger. It looked directly at her. The wild fiendish expression on her face frightened it so much that it ran off.

It was of no use because she ran faster than the deer imagined possible. She chased it down easily and tackled it to the ground. As soon as her teeth pierced into its flesh, it yelped in pain.

Ileana was sprawled on the ground on her hands and knees. She had drained as much blood as possible from the body of the animal. Slowly, ever so slowly, she pulled her teeth out of the deer's neck. With the sleeve of her black linen tunic, she wiped away the blood of the deer from her mouth and chin.

After extracting blood from the animal's neck with a needle attached to a plastic bag, she quickly placed the plastic bag of blood inside her crossbody and tossed the bag over her shoulder.

The wind blew softly through the tall trees all around her. Ileana looked up and saw the sun was coming from behind the clouds. She needed to act quickly.

She rose to her feet, blew out a big breath, and dusted off the soil from the knees of her black leggings. A convulsive, gasping sound was heard. Looking to the ground, she watched the deer take its final air in, and then expel it in a snort. It was gone.

She was wholly contented with the kill. Best of all, she left no trail behind, confident that no one could trace the kill to her. For all these years gone by, she was extremely adept at covering her tracks.

Once again, she reminded herself that no one believed in vampires, and there was no reason to believe in them. She was sure.

Right before she left the woods, she looked back over her shoulder and took a final look around. There was no one in sight.

Ileana went by the same route she had traveled countless times and for many years. In the last of the morning's darkness, she was fast approaching her sanctuary on Jesmond Dene Road.

Strolling across the sprawling grounds of Wightwick Hall in the most inconspicuous manner possible, she didn't mind it all that much, that the name came with the property. There was no reason to change it. It was a significant part of the history of Newcastle upon Tyne. She thought it was best to leave things as they were.

To Ileana, Wightwick Hall was just home, nothing all that special. The rich history of her place didn't appeal to her whatsoever. The only history that mattered to her was her Romanian past.

As discreetly as possible, she quietly moved closer to the castle's entrance.

Suddenly, she stopped near some shrubbery. She had felt a sudden chill in the air and experienced the prickly sensation of hairs rising at the back of her neck. There was something about it that bothered her, but she wasn't quite sure what it was. Was something out of place?

On the off chance that anyone could be watching her, not that she suspected for an instant that anyone was. And for the heck of it, she turned and took a quick look around. At that moment she sensed something or someone.

Ileana took a gander in the direction she sensed the aura. She was looking at the Krag's house. Not a moment sooner there was a face staring right at her.

Someone had noticed her, which wasn't good. Lorraine Krag was at her living room window, carefully peeking out between the curtains. Ileana couldn't believe it!

What was Mrs. Krag doing awake at this time of day?

"It just couldn't be a coincidence," Ileana declared under her breath.

Ileana's mind was spinning with emotions. Her eyes began to go red. She needed to think straight right now, and she didn't know what to do. Then a thought suddenly came to her.

Ileana looked upon the woman with fierce eyes with the intention of frightening her, to death would be even better. That was how mad she was.

Sure enough, seconds later, she saw Lorraine Krag cower away from the window. Ileana felt complete satisfaction and turned her attention back to the castle. With a confident look on her face, she slipped inside through the front door. For now, she didn't have to say anything to placate Mrs. Krag.

Chapter 14

LORRAINE KRAG had just closed the curtain, feeling as though she was caught in a trance, and forced herself to turn away from the living room window. She scrunched up her nose at the thought of the staring match she just had with the woman of Wightwick Hall.

“That’s not a coincidence, is it? How did she know I was looking? Could that woman have discovered my interest in her?” Lorraine asked herself those questions as frightening thoughts ran through her mind.

A cold chill rushed down her spine, her mind still troubled by the image of the creepy expression on the face of that woman. Standing there, frozen in fear, she spent the next few minutes, thinking about it all, attempting to decipher the strange look that had been on the woman’s face. The woman’s stare had been so intense that Lorraine felt a presence around her, like she was right there in the

room with her. It was like the woman had peered into her soul, stripping away all but the very core of her. She had felt it so deep in her body that she could not string that moment together with any other.

Now she thought of the reason she was at the living room window just before six o'clock in the first place. Was it worth rehashing the circumstances in her mind? Could she just let what happened go and start anew? Not a chance. It was just in her nature to brood about it.

Twenty-five minutes ago, an animal scream startled her out of her sleep — the abrupt sound of something being killed. Although the noises outside were not as loud as they had been in the past, the sound held a sense of urgency. It irritated her because she knew the animal was in distress.

Why did it always happen at the same time, in the wee, wee hours just before the crack of dawn?

Oddly enough, the animal sounds never bothered Arthur. He never thought there was anything wrong with it. But she knew different.

This time she wasn't going to disturb his sleep because she didn't want to be put through the third degree. What was the point? She knew him all too well. He would tell her there wasn't anything out of the ordinary and ignore it and go back to sleep.

She had a sudden notion so strong she climbed out of bed with her hair a mess to check it out. The whimpering sounds that the animal made disappeared before she reached the window of the living room. She couldn't see anything out there because the visibility was poor at this

time of the day, the predawn darkness of the morning. What made matters worse was the foggy mist surrounding the castle and thereabouts.

It just didn't sound right, she thought to herself. It sounded like the animal had been attacked. If only there was a way to determine what was happening to these animals. She looked down at herself and realized she couldn't go outside searching for an injured animal wearing nothing but her pink, short-sleeve nightgown that went down below her knees. God knows what she might find out there.

She poked her head round the curtain again. When she saw that woman walking toward the entrance of her castle, Lorraine eyed her suspiciously, staring at her with a questioning look on her face. And what made it so suspicious to her was that the woman was coming from the direction of where she had heard the noise of the ailing animal. Then the woman stopped in her tracks and stared right back at her.

Lorraine pulled her thoughts back to the present. But she was so snarled up that it took a couple of more minutes for her to gather her composure, erasing that woman's face from her mind.

She knew in her gut that something was wrong, and that woman was somehow involved with it. What could she do? As of yet, she hadn't found out what was going on with that woman. But Lorraine Krag would.

Was it wise to continue spying on that woman? Was it all worth it? Should she stop before something happened, she might regret?

For a moment's thought she took it under consideration. "Not if I have anything to do with it. Might as well, Lorraine," she said, her tone rising a bit as she lifted her shoulders up and down.

It was as if she forgot everything that had happened earlier. Lorraine was back to her old self again, no longer shook up by seeing that woman.

Now she felt that she was reading too much into things. Maybe it was all coincidence. It was likely that the woman just happened to be looking in her direction. It probably didn't mean anything. She shook it off and chalked it up to her imagination.

It occurred to her she didn't even know the woman's name. Yet she felt as if she should know it. She wanted to find out her name. Lorraine pondered the thought for a moment, and then shook her head.

"Something else I have to do," she said mischievously.

Maybe Arthur was right about her being nosy by nature and interesting herself in other people's business. Lorraine just didn't care anymore. She was curious about that woman, and that was the end of that.

She looked at the clock on the wall. It was 6:02 a.m. What should she do now? What were her plans for the rest of the morning?

It was time to start the breakfast. Of course. That was what she always did at this time of day. But first a quick trip to the bathroom. She needed to freshen up, and brush and fix her hair.

Before she took a step forward, she paused to collect a few more thoughts, then she shrugged to herself, and laughed a bit too, though not too loudly.

As she headed to the bathroom, she thought it was best she kept certain things to herself. As much as she wanted to confide in someone, she just couldn't bring herself to talk about what had happened earlier with Arthur. He would say it was her fault for spying on Wightwick Hall again. He would treat her like she was some meddling troublemaker. That was just how he saw her.

After leaving the bathroom, she felt remarkably cheerful. The splash of cold water on her face had made all the difference. She looked forward to preparing the breakfast.

She set a carton of eggs on the counter. Looking out the kitchen window, she saw the sun coming up over the horizon and the rays cracking the sky. Almost a minute later, she heard Arthur walking toward the kitchen.

“Good morning, Lorraine,” he said sleepily as he shuffled into the kitchen.

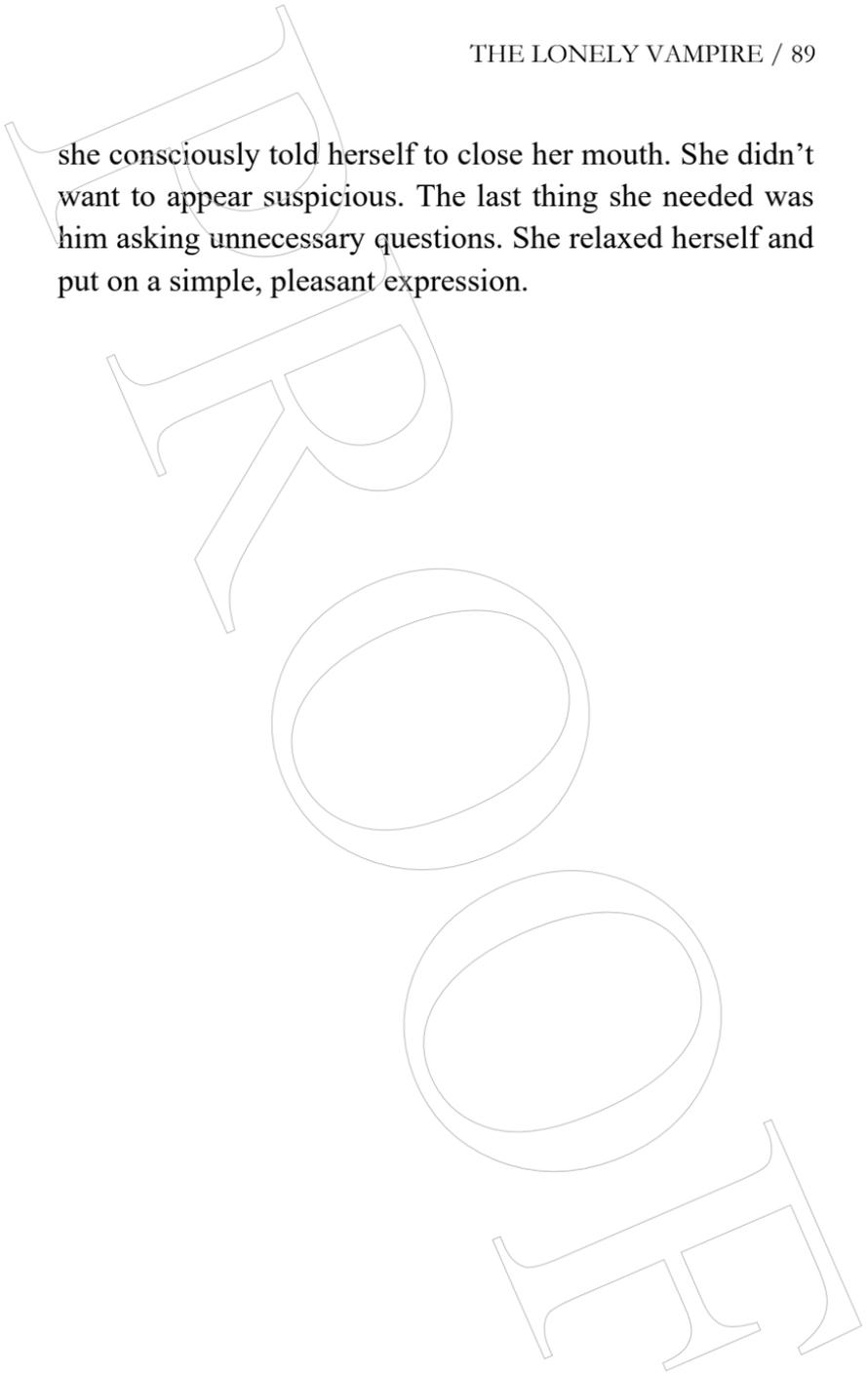
She quickly turned around when she heard him speak. “Good morning, dear.”

He was still waking up, getting his bearings as he tied the belt of his dark blue bathrobe around his body over his light blue pajamas.

She held an egg in each hand, and asked, “Sunny-side up or over easy?”

She noticed he seemed startled by her cheerful mood. When she realized she was sporting a smile from ear to ear,

she consciously told herself to close her mouth. She didn't want to appear suspicious. The last thing she needed was him asking unnecessary questions. She relaxed herself and put on a simple, pleasant expression.



Chapter 15

ILEANA VLADISLAVA came out of her kitchen. As she walked down the hallway, her mind filled with something she had almost forgotten during the past twenty minutes. She had caught Lorraine Krag spying on her. Ileana didn't like it one bit.

She knew the chilling stare she had given Mrs. Krag wasn't going to be enough to really scare her. Sooner or later, she might find out the truth about her. That Ileana couldn't afford.

The question was — what could she do about it?

She pushed aside the thought for later. Once her mind was well rested, she would have to figure out something to do or not to do about it. After such an eventful pre-dawn morning, she resigned herself to the cellar. She desperately wanted to hang from the ceiling and sleep.

Yes, Ileana was ending her day around 6:00 a.m. when most people were starting theirs. She slept in the day and hunted in the night. The vampire's routine went that way.

After walking down, a flight of stairs, she came to the door at the foot of the stairs, opened it, and went into the dark. Then she climbed up the wall and onto the ceiling.

Her feet clung to the ceiling and she crossed her arms over her chest. When she closed her eyes, her mind traveled to a time long ago before she became a vampire. Images of her past in Transylvania snuck into her mind at the oddest of times.

For some reason she was thinking about her mother, whom she was fond of. Even though Ileana had little memory of her. In November 1517, when she was eight years old, her mother died of influenza. A few months before she had died, Ileana remembered running toward her in a field for the comfort of her mother's embrace. She could still feel the warmth of her mother's arms and the brush of grass against her legs.

Then came the worst years in her life.

After the death of her mother, her father became depressed and turned to booze. He wasn't mean to her, just neglectful. Some days she didn't have anything to eat or drink because he had spent most of his money on liquor.

She spent the rest of her childhood engrossed in household chores that her father couldn't perform. It was the only way she could keep the place from looking like a pig pen. As an only child, having no siblings, the work also occupied her loneliness.

It was a hard life for a young girl. She often cried and hoped for something better in her life. And she had every reason to.

Years later, her hopes for a better life came true when she became a vampire at the age of thirty-one.

Was the life of a vampire better? She thought it was. Her mind slipped into a deep sleep on that thought. Yet, a single tear streamed from Ileana's left eye down her cheek.

At half past four o'clock, she awoke to the sound of loud knocking on the castle's front door. What in the world? Could it be Lorraine Krag?

The knocking came again. That was it. Ileana quickly came down from the ceiling. She wanted to know who it was.

"Miss Vladislava, are you there? It's April Fielding," a voice called out from behind the door.

Ileana couldn't make the connection. Who is April Fielding? she thought, feeling nervous.

"Yes, this is Ileana," she said from behind the door.

"I'm from Pike Nurseries. I have a delivery for you."

"Oh, yes, thank you. You can leave it on the doorstep."

"I can't do that this time. This shipment of *Dactylorhiza grandis*, the Blackthorn Strain marsh orchids require your signature."

Ileana opened the door a little less than halfway, saw only a purplish pink flowered plant, and asked, "Where do I sign?"

April Fielding carefully placed the orchid she was holding in a box on the ground. In her late teens April wore

lots of makeup on her face, including blood-colored lipstick on her full lips. Her medium-length hair was bleached blonde. She was wearing a three-quarter-sleeved black shimmery shirt, jeans with holes at the knees, and black combat boots.

April reached into the back pocket of her jeans, pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, and said, "Good afternoon, Miss Vladislava."

Ileana opened the door wider and squinted her eyes from the sunlight. She wasted no social graces on April, and just took the pen and paper from her hands.

After signing her name to the paper, she handed it and the pen back to April, and asked, "Anything else?"

"Well, yes, I have to carry the box inside."

"Proceed," Ileana said reluctantly, and opened the door all the way.

April walked into the castle and set the box down in the foyer. Then she looked around with amusement.

"This place is spectacular!"

The girl was too curious. Ileana wondered if she had lied about the delivery requiring her signature.

"Thank you for your assistance," Ileana said in a way that indicated to April that she had overstayed her welcome.

"Okay, I'll see you next time," she said, taking the cue, and walked out the door Ileana was holding open.

Ileana closed the door shut, and asked in a low voice, "Next time?"

She was surprisingly still tired, despite sleeping ten hours. After she carried the box of orchids upstairs and

dropped it outside the door of her greenhouse, she walked to the cellar for some more sleep.

Fast forward. Some hours later. She awoke in the cellar feeling uneasy. Looking on with wide eyes, she remembered the last thought which had been in her mind before she fell asleep, the first time, namely the unhappiness of her life before she was turned into a vampire. Things she didn't want to remember.

Most important to her was the vampire's life. The vampires in Transylvania were the family she had been longing for. Now they were gone. Now she was alone. But she wasn't sad, nor depressed. She was just lonely.

To ease her mind, she would watch a scary movie.

She took a short walk to the media room in the basement. The clock on the wall read 11:36. She did not remember the last time she had slept so many hours.

She sat on the large brown leather sofa and grabbed the remote control from the round oak coffee table. Flipping through channels on the 55-inch flat screen TV mounted on the wall directly across from her, she found a channel with a movie she would like to see.

All was silent in the castle except the sound of the television. The 1922 silent film *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* had started at midnight. Ileana was completely engrossed in the horror tale, a vampire story.

Ileana made an odd face when she saw what happened in the film. She never slept in a coffin like the emaciated vampire portrayed by Max Schreck did in the movie. However, she could if she wanted to. It had long ago been

a custom of some vampires in Transylvania. Occasionally, she slept in a sleigh bed, which resembled a coffin, in one of the intimate guest chambers of the castle. More often than not, she slept hanging upside down from the ceiling of the cellar.

Another odd expression graced Ileana's face when the vampire in the film disintegrated in the sunlight that streamed in through an open window. She didn't expect that to happen.

A little sunlight wouldn't hurt her. She was amused by the fanciful creation of ignorant minds. Although she knew it wasn't their fault. How could they find out the truth about vampires?

It was after 2:00 a.m. The movie was over. She switched off the TV and tidied up the sofa.

After climbing the spiral staircase, she walked down the hallway to her study. When she entered the room, the thought of Mrs. Krag returned to her.

Ileana shrugged as she stepped forward to the window for a look outside. She pulled aside the thick burgundy curtain from the window and saw the Krag's house in the distance. She was already irritated, even though she knew they were fast asleep in their bed.

What was she going to do about Lorraine Krag?

The question resonated in her mind while she stared out into the dark night. Her fangs slowly slipped out of her mouth. She lifted her left hand toward the direction of the Krag's house, made a claw shape with her fingers, and growled, "Ugh!"

Chapter 16

IT WAS TEN TILL TWELVE. I was in the middle of placing a plate on a table in the resident's dining room located directly across from the nurses' station. Lunch was about to be served.

The clatter of silverware hitting the floor shook me out of my thoughts.

I looked in the direction of the noise and saw Elizabeth Guderian standing beside the dining table, clutching her chest with her right hand. She appeared to be having a heart attack.

"Get the doctor!" I yelled to an orderly who was standing near the kitchen entrance as I ran to help Ms. Guderian.

Too late. Ms. Guderian backed away, bumping into a chair which proceeded to collapse to the ground, taking her

with it. The heart attack was fatal. It was obvious the woman was dead by the time I reached her.

Careful not to get blood on my tan slacks, I went to the ground on my knees, reached forward and lifted her left arm, feeling for a pulse at the wrist. There was no heartbeat, nor any sign of breath.

There was a small pool of blood around the seventy-something black woman's head and some had splattered on her rose-colored cardigan she wore over a burgundy nightdress. Blood leaked from a gash in her head that hit the floor first, with that awful crash. Despite my nursing experience, I was a little squeamish at the sight of blood.

Joyce Gunn arrived on the scene with Dr. Ajay Patel to examine her and asked me, "Myrna, did you find a pulse?"

I nodded my head, for no words would come out — only tears.

Joyce's face was exasperatingly sad when the doctor rolled Ms. Guderian over from her side onto her back. The doctor checked her heart with his stethoscope.

Less than a minute later, the thirty-something, dark-haired man of India descent dressed smartly in khaki dress pants, and a tan dress shirt and blue tie under a white lab coat, gave us a glazed look that she was dead, confirming what I had already suspected. It was so sudden and unexpected, and it crushed me.

That was the moment when everything came to a halt for me. Racing thoughts flooded my mind all at once, hitting me like a ton of bricks.

It was time for my ten-minute break. Something inside me just didn't want to deal with it anymore. I stood up from the floor, trembling. I needed to go somewhere and get my emotions in check. Still, with tears in my eyes, I quietly left the room without saying a word to anyone.

As I walked down the hallway, I wiped the tears from my eyes with a tissue I had pulled from the pocket of my white, short-sleeved, smock with a maroon caduceus embroidered on the chest pocket. I was headed toward the break area. Going outside for a breather was needed despite the fact it was an area where the smokers hang out. I couldn't stand the smell of smoke. But I was willing to endure it because I needed a release from the horror of seeing Elizabeth Guderian fall to her death.

Walking up the stairs toward the roof terrace of the building, I thought about how I had seen patients die before, but this death felt different. Something peculiar had taken over me.

It was easy to get attached to the patients. Even though the management advised not to. But how could I not? It was so hard not to. I saw them every day and was responsible for their care and well-being.

After having a few conversations with Ms. Guderian, I became fond of her. I found her quite personable. She was born and raised in Liberia, West Africa. After marrying, she moved with her husband to the United Kingdom in the 1990s. Her husband died the same year her daughter moved to London for work reasons, during which time she fell ill and ended up here.

The moment I opened the door of the terrace, the cool breeze comforted me. I took in a breath of fresh air and felt rejuvenated. After walking over to the edge, I put my hands on the cement railing, and took a bunch of deep breaths.

As I stood there and looked at the buildings in the distance, I felt I needed to re-examine my life and my job because this felt like the most terrible Friday I ever had. Was this what I really wanted? I kept asking myself, because I felt as if I wanted to go somewhere else and start all over again.

It took a dramatic event to stir up feelings I had locked away. I needed something more meaningful in my life, and I sensed it was coming soon.

If it did come, I would give in to it, I just knew I would. I had been waiting for such a long time for something magical to happen in my life.

Just then I heard the faint sound of music. It actually sounded pretty magical. I could hear it coming from the Tyne Theatre and Opera House on Westgate Road. How I longed to be there watching that ballet.

It felt terrible to admit to myself that I had never seen a ballet and certainly never taken a ballet class. I felt I deserved a little fun and yet, most of the time, I never did anything except work.

I wasn't a selfish person. I took this job because I like helping people. Siobhan and I felt the same in that manner. But she was dedicated to the job. I was barely getting through each day. So, I was more or less flying by the seat of my pants, so to speak.

I always thought I was doing the right thing. Yet, I felt it wasn't the life for me. It was so strange.

In all the passing thoughts one surfaced. I was lonely. While preparing for work this morning, I fantasized about meeting someone special. Maybe I would go to a bar after work. But there was no way I would let myself do that on a work night — which meant almost every night for me.

I wouldn't be working this weekend. However, I would be busy with housework, activities with Siobhan and helping my aunt.

It wasn't like I wasn't aware that I was making excuses that kept me from having a relationship.

There was always the possibility that I was shying away from relationships because my parents died; because I was afraid somebody I love might die — that I feared losing someone again.

My other concern was that I was turned off by men. Most guys I met were boring, immature for their age, or stood me up. I wasn't sworn off men. My experiences weren't all that bad, but they weren't all that good, either.

I glanced down at the watch on my wrist and saw that the time was 12:25. Just a little more than ten minutes had passed, and I couldn't stay outside any longer. I needed to return to work before Joyce wondered where I was.

As I grabbed the handle of the door with my right hand, I turned my head around for one more look at the Tyne Theatre and Opera House. I couldn't help but listen to the music chiming from that lovely Victorian building. It was such an odd feeling because I really wished I were there.

Once again, I felt that desire for some kind of change. A change I would gladly embrace with all my soul if it came my way.

I put the thoughts away and concentrated on work again. I was already late as it was. I turned back toward the door, opened it, and slipped back into the building.

Chapter 17

BY THE OFF CHANCE, Ileana Vladislava found herself in a seat in Box CC on the Grand Circle level of the Tyne Theatre and Opera House. She was enjoying a Friday matinee performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, her favorite ballet. It was one of the rarest treats she allowed herself to indulge in. She was even dressed in the way that was required for such an occasion. She wore a black cashmere cardigan over a black with white orchids silk, frilly blouse, and black dress pants.

The day before she had read in the newspaper that the Russian State Ballet would present the ballet for the next two weeks at the Tyne Theatre and Opera House. She needed to get herself there. From the telephone in her study, she called the box office and bought one of the last tickets available for the almost sold out performances.

Despite sleeping only five hours, a bright eyed and bushy-tailed Ileana watched the stage closely. It was a scene from Act One. “The Dance of The Knights” by Sergei Prokofiev played to her great delight. She found pleasure in the music more than the dance itself.

Despite a few empty seats, given how crowded the place was, she felt completely alone, as if she were the only one in the theatre. It was as if she didn’t exist — technically — she didn't. Her world was made up of herself only.

The chair on Ileana’s right was empty, and she didn’t pay any attention to the old woman seated on her left. She didn’t socialize with anyone. She made herself transparent to those around her and had learned over the years to come and go rather quickly. Everyone seemed to be engrossed in the ballet, and she was grateful no one seemed to notice her.

When the intermission came, the old woman seated next to her politely excused herself to the bathroom. For only a brief second, she spoke to Ileana who in return nodded.

The lights in the theatre blinked and a bell rang three times to signal that intermission was almost over, so the old woman returned to her seat. She merely smiled to Ileana before sitting down. Ileana nodded again in return, as she wasn’t comfortable engaging with people.

The old woman was pleasant enough looking and very well dressed, Ileana thought. Her white hair was coiffed, and she wore an elegant cream-colored gown with beaded trimming and a cameo brooch at the collar, and a beige shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

The dancers returned to the stage, and the old woman peered at them through a pair of opera glasses, held by an ornate silver handle.

When the performance concluded, Ileana raised herself from the chair and left with everyone else. She walked down the stairs behind the slow-moving woman who had been sitting next to her.

Soon enough, the old woman's pace was beginning to irritate Ileana so when she saw an opening, she took advantage of it. She plunged into the lobby and let herself sway with the crowd. It was easy for her to disappear into the crowd, something she was exceptionally good at and had done so many times before.

That was when it happened. By some sheer coincidence, and with all of the hustling and bustling of the people, she accidentally bumped her right shoulder against the left shoulder of no other than Lorraine Krag.

And Ileana had tried so hard to avoid attracting undue attention.

Lorraine was flabbergasted by the incident. And of course, you would expect her to be.

She turned to face Ileana squarely and arched an eyebrow. Yet Lorraine didn't recognize her. How could she? She had never seen Ileana up close nor ever spoken to her.

On the contrary Ileana recognized her, did her best not to show it, and opted not to acknowledge her. Rather she behaved like a passerby completely indifferent to the situation and Lorraine didn't seem to think any differently.

“My word,” Lorraine said, gave Ileana the once-over and openly stared at her waiting for an apology.

Lorraine wasn't going to be ignored. It was in her nature to always be suspicious of people she thought were sufficiently pretentious anyway. For the moment she focused all her frustration on Ileana, the woman who had intruded on her space by so rudely brushing up against her.

Ileana was so amused by the gaudy way she was dressed, that it took a moment for her to respond. Lorraine was wearing a blue chiffon long-sleeved dress with silver sequins all along the neckline, and a big white hat with a blue ribbon around it was in her left white-gloved hand. Ileana kept her chin down, her eye on the exit, and tried to hide her smile.

“Well?” Lorraine asked and squinted her hazel eyes, scrutinizing her while waiting for a response.

“Pardon me,” Ileana said in a low voice without even a glance at her, as she was fed up with her already.

“Well, I never! Some people,” she said, with her nose in the air, and swiftly turned her back on Ileana, just as easy as closing a door.

Lorraine Krag had to have the last word.

Ileana kept walking toward the door to exit the theatre just as Arthur Krag came out of the men's room. When he reached Lorraine, he noticed she looked distressed. He couldn't help but ask why.

“Is everything alright, dear?” he asked, bewildered by the expression of annoyance on her face.

“There is something strange about that woman. I just can’t put my finger on it,” she said turning around and watching Ileana walk out the door.

“Oh, Lorraine, that’s what you say about everyone.”

She glanced at Arthur with raised eyebrows and said with disdain, “Just forget I said anything. Let’s get out of here!”

Outside the theatre, he followed behind Lorraine who was wearing her hat now. Lorraine was already nitpicking about the three-minute walk to the Grainger Town parking lot on St. James’ Blvd where Arthur had left his Nissan Leaf. He took it all in, not getting a word in edge wise.

Arriving at the car, he unlocked and opened the door for Lorraine, allowing her to enter. She sat down in the passenger’s seat.

Just before he closed the door, he interrupted her yapping, and changed the subject by asking, “Did you enjoy the ballet, Lorraine?”

“What?” she asked as if she didn’t know what he was talking about.

“The ballet you watched.”

“It was fine, thank you,” Lorraine said and immediately put on a fussy face, threw up her right hand, and locked the seat belt in place.

“I’m glad to hear,” he said and slammed the door shut.

Arthur shook his head as he walked around the rear of his car toward the driver’s side. He wanted to remind her what the day was supposed to be about. Even if it didn’t last for more than a minute.

When Arthur got in the car, she gave him the look. He'd seen it before. Without saying a word, he just started the Nissan and proceeded to back out of the space he was parked in.

Lorraine almost said something but changed her mind.

"Hmm." It was the only thing that came out as she turned her head the other way, and simply looked out the window.

Chapter 18

IT WAS DARK and cold in the cellar. It was just the way Ileana Vladislava liked it. It was around eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning, and she wasn't sleeping. Not more than a few minutes earlier, she was disturbed out of her sleep by a hairy spider crawling on her.

Using a broom, she brushed away the cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling. When a small black spider fell on her left arm, she brushed it off with her right hand. It fell on the floor and she trapped it in a corner and crushed it, pressing with the weight of her whole body on the broom handle. It was extreme, but it gave her great relief.

With a satisfied feeling, she put away the broom in the closet near the door of the room. Then she looked around and decided not to go back to sleep.

As she left the cellar, she took in the quietness of the castle. She wondered what she was going to do for the rest

of the day. It was a question she had asked herself before. Maybe she should read something. This, she thought as she strolled through the foyer near the front door where she saw the newspaper and mail inside the door where the mailman had shoved it through the slot.

She scooped the mail up and headed down the hallway toward the library. Once inside the room, she sat down in a Venetian chair of ebony and inlaid all over with mother-of-pearl. The chair was positioned by a dark brown cherrywood end table and a bookshelf with an ideal collection of classical novels. After turning on the Victorian table lamp, Ileana glanced through the letters, all promotional mail, nothing of interest. She dropped the junk mail on the end table. Then she read *The Journal's* full-page review of the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. She was pleased with the commentary.

A couple of minutes went by and she was bored already, something that often happened to her. Ileana closed the newspaper and placed it on top of the mail on the end table. She leaned back in the chair and stared at the bookshelves. She loved the library so much that she had decorated it with expensive art and antique furniture.

She stood and perused the bookshelves for a book to read. It wasn't surprising she had already read every book there at least twice. They were her very favorite books in the world.

"Not this one. Not again," she said to herself as she looked at some of the books on the shelves.

Ileana sat back into the Venetian chair. She was tired from searching the shelves. Her mind started to wander and before anything else she started feeling isolated and lonely. Most times she could handle it, but there were times, like now, when she thought that the loneliness overwhelmed her. Its intensity was such that she felt she needed to go somewhere.

That was when another thought came to her mind. She decided to go to the Newcastle City Library to look at the shelves to see what book she could find. It seemed like a good idea, since she was already suitably attired, wearing a three-quarter sleeved thin gold sweater that ended mid-thigh and tan colored leggings. It might even improve her mood.

But first she needed to check the weather. She stood up from the chair, went to the window and poked her head out of the curtain to look. Casting her eyes toward the sky, it was cloudy, yet, it wasn't raining. Just as she liked it, a little dark in the afternoon.

However, to be on the safe side, she pulled out a pair of sunglasses from the drawer of the end table. The sun's rays irritated her eyes, but not enough to be in any danger of blinding her, just enough to trouble her. She slipped them on as she headed for the closet in the hallway where she kept a pair of sneakers.

After exiting the castle, she entered the garage. She stared at her lovely silver Bentley Continental GT two-door coupe. It was only two years old, and she fancied it. It fit well with the British people as if she were one of them. She

kept it in pristine condition, though she rarely drove it. And today was no exception.

She would take the Metro to Monument Station.

Less than a ten minutes' walk, the Ilford Road Station was a comfortable distance away. She exited the garage, turned, and took the shortcut through the woods so she could cut her walking time in half.

The short trek through the woods brought her to the station's entrance. She stepped on the sidewalk, walked through an entrance toward the ticket machines, and reached into her crossbody for money to pay. After purchasing a ticket, she slipped it in another machine to enter the surface level platform.

The only other people waiting were a senior couple in their 70s — most likely husband and wife. Neither of them looked at Ileana as she crept further down the platform and positioned herself against a wall in a shadowy area under the awning.

She stared off in a trance while patiently waiting for the train to arrive. Her mind was starting to drift away. Although she wasn't thinking about anything in particular.

The sound of the approaching train brought her to the present moment. Before coming to a screeching halt, the train sent a gust of wind in her direction.

As the doors opened, the subway car's overhead lights flickered on and off at the same time Ileana stepped inside. Like a blink of the eye, you could hardly see her physically enter the car. No one on the train noticed her.

Ileana sat alone in the corner of the car by the connecting doorway to the next car, the usual seat she took. Despite the distance she kept from others, she could feel their energy around her. And of all things, she kept her sunglasses on.

The train tore out of the station the instant the doors closed. It entered a tunnel and disappeared into the dark.

Chapter 19

IT WAS A LITTLE AFTER TWELVE O’CLOCK and I was on the Metro train on my way to the Newcastle City Library. The library was my favorite retreat, an ideal refuge from the grind of work whenever I could spare myself. Since I was a young girl, I loved reading, especially fantasy because it occupied my mind with something other than thoughts of missing my parents that I loved so much.

I awoke about an hour earlier with a feeling of anxiousness. Since yesterday I had been struggling with self-doubt stemming from the sight of Ms. Guderian falling to her death, and probably would feel this way for the next couple of days.

I sensed I was at a crossroads in my life.

I stayed in bed a few extra minutes feeling like I was in a trance with questions racing through my mind. Was I satisfied with my life? Once more, that nagging, and

recurring question popped into my mind. Was I feeling this way because Siobhan Mulcahy was on top of the world in her career and seeing her often just reminded me that I wasn't where I wanted to be in life?

Thanks to sleeping in later than usual, I was slightly saddened that I had missed seeing Siobhan before she left. If she was off work today, we might have done something together. Then I thought, maybe it was for the best because I needed to get my head together. Some time alone with my thoughts would do me good.

That was when I decided on a trip to the library. Checking out a book to read over the next days might improve my state of mind.

I had checked the weather from the window, and I didn't see anything to brighten my day. It was cloudy, looking like it could rain any moment. Which wasn't the kind of weather I should drive my scooter in. But I think it was all for the best because of the mood I was in, it would feel good to sit back and let someone else do the driving.

So, here I was sitting on the Metro, and I thought, sometimes I feel like I was born generations too late. People living centuries ago seemed to have things easier. The simple ways of the past interested me so much that I often read fairy tales or romance classics such as "Emma" by Jane Austen. When I was at Northumbria University, I even took many literature courses just so I could read.

The quiet train ride kept me lost in my thoughts. I didn't even notice that I was twirling my dirty-blonde hair

clockwise with my left index finger. It was a nervous habit I had picked up when I was a child.

My gaze turned to the face of a thirty-something Rastafarian man with dreadlocks, a wide nose, and fat lips dressed in a faded denim jacket and jeans, seated across the aisle staring at me with bulging eyes with blue contacts. There was a puzzled look on his face, as if he were trying to understand something. Men sometimes acted like that around me, unless he just happened to be glancing in my direction.

I could have caught his attention when I was playing with my hair. He seemed nice enough looking, but I wasn't interested in communicating with him.

Tucking my hair behind my ear, I tried to ignore him and stared out the window. Before I could think any more on it, the train had just stopped where I needed to get off. Surprisingly, I couldn't help but notice him looking me over as I left the train.

I traveled up the stairs from the lower level concourse of Monument Station. After exiting onto Blackett Street, I turned the corner and saw a Pret A Manger across the way on Grainger Street. The delicious aroma coming from there told me that I needed to eat. I carefully considered my sudden craving for a cup of tea and a sandwich.

The library could wait.

I stopped in my tracks, turned on my heel and made a beeline to the restaurant. When I stepped inside, I noticed that the place was filled with people. Unfortunately, there were no tables left outside or inside. After making a

purchase, I ventured over to a stool facing the window counter.

Nobody else had said anything to me besides the clerk behind the counter. While I was eating, I drew only an occasional glance — and awkward at that — from some of the men at the tables. I was accustomed to simple flirting from the opposite sex, but nothing had come of it, I thought sadly.

Despite the crowd, I felt so alone as I sat there. You would think I wasn't even there. Sometimes I felt as if I didn't belong anywhere. It seemed that people either ignored me or avoided me. It made me feel like an outsider, and I wondered about all of that, as I looked around the place.

There I was again, thinking in depth, and analyzing all the things I had kept just below the surface.

An outside table became available, and I thought about sitting there, but changed my mind when I saw that Rastafarian man walk by. That very same man from the train. He'd been walking too fast, preoccupied with his thoughts, or he would have seen me. I suppose it was all by happenstance.

I didn't think on it anymore. I took the last bite of my brie, tomato and basil baguette and dusted off my hands. Then I continued sipping on my large cup of organic Earl Grey tea and stared at the passersby from the window.

I finished up my tea and the rest of my rosemary and olive oil kettle cooked chips and decided to take an even

longer route to the library, so I could have a little more time to myself, more time to think.

I left the restaurant walking on Blackett Street for a stroll through Old Eldon Square. Seemed like a good place for sightseeing.

Chapter 20

AS I APPROACHED OLD ELDON SQUARE, I could see that it was packed with people. There was something happening over there, maybe it was worth a glance.

When I got there, I found that the high-spirited crowd was assembled watching some live event. Apparently, this had been going on for some time.

Looking in the direction that everyone was facing, I could see a man that looked like a master of ceremonies of a circus, fair, or other variety show. And he behaved as such a person in charge of an event.

I recognized him off the bat. It was the man with the curvy mustache, the man who was leaning against a wall on Sandhill the night Siobhan Mulcahy and I came out of Hunan Manor celebrating her promotion at work. This was another odd coincidence.

The man looked even more mysterious in the daylight. I noticed that besides having a hound's face, his nose was shaped like a bird's beak, his cheeks were hollow, and his large ears were set at right angles to his skull.

He was wearing wooden stilts under long black trousers to go with his black top hat and long black tuxedo jacket, which made his height overpowering. And again, he was holding a wire leash to a brown monkey, which he commanded to perform tricks. And it did.

"Isn't it adorable?" I heard someone mumble behind me.

The man handed a cane to the monkey. The little furry critter balanced the cane upright on the ground in front of him, and then without touching it, he moved his paws around it, and the cane danced all by itself. It was a good trick, and some people clapped.

In between a trick, the monkey found time to take interest in a handful of pigeons squawking around. The monkey walked to a bird closest to him and reached out its hand to touch it. It flapped its wings and flew up to the sky causing the other pigeons to scatter.

At the end of the monkey's performance, people clapped their hands, amused by its tricks. The monkey took off its red velvet hat, made a solemn bow, then held the hat out to the people, some of whom put money in it. The whole spectacle made me laugh.

The money collected made the man smile.

"Jasper, say thank you to the people for their support," the man said to the monkey.

“That’s it,” the man said, after the monkey bowed to the crowd.

The man went on to say that the money was strictly for the care and maintenance of his pet. It didn’t matter because the people wanted to make a donation. There was not one complaint made.

Twice I caught the man’s deep-set green eyes looking my way. A short while after that, I saw him staring at me oddly as though he had seen me before somewhere — as indeed he had. Perhaps he remembered seeing me on Sandhill with Siobhan.

The way he looked at me, it was like I was the only one in the square. He stared at me for only a minute or two and in that time, I couldn’t shake his stare. It was as if I was in a trance or under some magic spell.

I seemed to have drifted off in my own thoughts, wondering what he was thinking because it wasn’t a look of attraction. He wasn’t checking me out, rather it was a look of concern. Then I thought I was reading too much into it, because I suddenly felt as if everyone on the street were staring at me.

That felt really weird for a moment there, until he stopped looking at me because the monkey handed him the hat filled with money.

“Hello, Viktor,” a man with a Jamaican accent called out and then asked me, “So, what you think about that?”

The man with the monkey, whose name I had just learned was Viktor, turned around and just nodded his head to the man who called out his name. I whipped my head

around to see the man who had also said something to me and saw that Rastafarian man I had seen on the train.

How many coincidences could one person take in one day? Was there a full moon behind those clouds? These questions paced around my mind as I stood there staring at him, shocked he had spoken to me.

As far as I knew, he hadn't followed me. I was positive about that. He acted as if he didn't remember me from the train and that he had just nonchalantly asked me a question. And by the way he was looking at Viktor and his monkey, I wasn't even certain he had seen my face. He seemed genuinely amused by it all.

I finally said politely, "It is some spectacle."

"Yes, I agree. I've seen Viktor here many times before. Nothing surprises me in this city."

After he said that he turned and looked at me straight in the eye, like he wanted to say something else. Then a look of remembrance came into his eyes.

He paused for a moment and then spoke again. "Hey now, I think I saw you on the Metro. Yes. I know I have."

It was pretty convincing, and it didn't seem like an act, either. So, I went along with it.

"Yes, I remember seeing you there."

"And now you're here too. What a coincidence! I hope this is a sign of good things to come. Oh, yes, I sure hope so," he said, quite jovially.

He was personable enough and easy to get along with. I decided not to think too much on this casual encounter. The more I thought about it, I convinced myself that it was

nothing to be alarmed about. Still, I fought the urge to babble about anything in order to stop the conversation from going on any further.

I knew it was time for me to go when I noticed him staring where he shouldn't be looking, where he couldn't stop looking.

"Well, it was nice to see you again. But I must be going."

"Maybe, I'll bump into you again sometime."

"Maybe you will."

"My name is Lonnie Trigg. So please don't forget it."

"Sure thing," I said with a smile.

I weaved my way through the crowd of looky-loos. As I was walking away from the scene, I saw a sudden movement out of the corner of my eye and swung around to see Viktor shoot a glance at me. I turned my eyes forward again. I didn't care to analyze it. There were more important things for me to do, such as go to a library.

I was ready to escape from it all, especially from all the emotions running through me. Reading an adventurous novel, was the only way I knew how to do it. It was all I could do just to keep myself from coming unhinged.

In the distance I could see dark clouds in the sky looming just over the library. It sure got dark quickly I thought to myself as I came closer to the building. It seemed it could rain any time and I didn't have my umbrella with me. I could only hope my choice to wear my waist-length white Burberry rain jacket with detachable hood would be enough if I got caught in the rain. It was lightweight,

waterproof, very comfy, and went well with my red and white long-sleeved, buttoned-down shirt and blue jeans.

I only planned to be at the library for a couple of hours at most, but I might stay longer if the rain comes. I would wait out the worst of it if that be the case. It was something I kept in the back of my mind as I walked up some stairs on New Bridge Street West.

Chapter 21

AT ABOUT TWO THIRTY in the afternoon, as I quickened my pace, eager to get indoors, I couldn't help noticing a well-proportioned teenage girl with bleached blonde medium-length hair sitting on the steps near the entrance of the library. What caught my attention was the graphic tattoo of a vampire chick with blood dripping from a fang on her right shoulder blade. Her grayish-blue eyes were distant, yet focused, and she turned her head slowly as if she were looking for someone.

When her glance fell upon me, she caught me admiring her tattoo, and her expression changed to one of indifference. She gave me the once-over from head to toe, pulled her cat styled sunglasses from the top of her head to cover her eyes, and turned her face in another direction. It struck me as rather odd, that she was wearing sunglasses on a cloudy day.

Without another thought about that girl, I walked through the library. I knew exactly the kind of book I wanted. Eager to find something, I started shuffling through stacks of index cards in a drawer of the card catalog against the wall.

I stopped searching when I felt cool air on the back of my neck. Nevertheless, if someone had hurriedly walked by, when I turned around to look, no one was there that I could see. In fact, I was surprised that there were few people at the library.

When I closed the small drawer of the card catalog, I felt a breeze again. I looked over my shoulder to find a raven-haired woman leaning against a shelf holding a big book about the opera in her arms, looking directly at me. It was possible she had sent a small breeze in my direction because she was the only person in view.

The woman seemed to recognize me, though I couldn't recall where I'd seen her. Whoever she was, her brown eyes were all over me, studying me. But why?

The look she was giving me, which was hard, made me feel like I was important in some way, and this was peculiar. But perhaps even more peculiar was that I didn't even think about looking away because I was just as curious about her.

A minute later, she stopped looking at me, and placed the book she was holding on the shelf in front of her. So, I guessed it was just by chance that she had been staring at me. What else could I think?

I began to walk toward the shelves in the fiction section. I was thinking I might pick up something sort of at random.

Moving quietly down an aisle between two bookshelves, I felt that somebody was watching me. To be more precise, I felt a presence nearby and wondered if someone was there.

The lights flickered above me. For a second there, I thought the electricity was out. But it all happened so fast because within seconds, the lights flickered on once again and returned to normal intensity.

Automatically, I looked up and around and that was when I saw that woman, the one who had been staring at me. She was in the aisle directly across from me. Was it some kind of twist of fate?

I froze in complete surprise, unable to move. What was up with this woman? Now she was walking toward me, and our eyes met. The closer she got I could tell she was fascinated by me like she had found what she was looking for.

My brain couldn't process why she felt so familiar. On some psychic level, it was like I knew her.

She stepped into the same aisle as me. There was nothing to be afraid of, I thought. It was all so innocent. Maybe she wanted to ask me something or maybe she just wanted to talk to me. I kept wondering.

As I stood there in the middle of the aisle looking at her, waiting to hear what she would say, the lights flickered off again. I briefly looked up toward the ceiling. As the lights came back on, I looked back to where she had been standing. She just wasn't there anymore. It was as if she just vanished into thin air.

I turned into the next aisle and she wasn't there either. I looked around the library and realized that she was nowhere to be found. Again, and again I found myself stopping, expecting to catch her looking at me from somewhere. Instead I saw a heavyset, older woman librarian wearing reading glasses with a chain attached and very white hair perched on a tall stool behind the checkout counter looking at me funnily. Maybe because of the spooked look on my face, her eyes had fallen on me.

I went back to the same aisle where I'd last seen her. Now I was interested in talking to her, but she wasn't there. Where could that woman have gone off to?

I leaned up against the bookshelf and started thinking. Maybe she just turned around and left when she realized I wasn't the person she thought I was. Maybe she was going to say something but changed her mind. Those were the only conclusions I could draw. Outside of that, I was clueless.

Before I went back to searching the shelves, for some reason I thought of that woman again. I realized how attractive she was with European features. She was maybe in her early thirties. And there was something different about her, something I couldn't quite pin down, and it bothered me that I couldn't.

Would I ever see her again? I wanted to.

I very quietly said to myself, "Okay, Myrna. Slowly breath in and out. Close your eyes, clear your mind, and then open your eyes again."

I felt better after that. And, then, at last, I returned to the bookshelf. I picked up the first book that stood out. According to the description on the back cover of “The Secret Garden” by Frances Hodgson Burnett, it was interesting enough.

I went toward the front of the library to checkout. The older woman librarian who looked at me funny before was still looking at me kind of funny. What could I say? I was just having one of those days.

The librarian slid off the stool and said, “Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon to you to,” I said and handed her the book with my library card on top of it.

“Myrna Ivester how are you today?” she asked, looking at the name on the library card.

“Fine, thanks for asking.”

“Is this what you were looking for?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“You should enjoy reading it,” she said with a wrinkled smile.

“I can only hope.”

I didn’t say anymore when the librarian told me the book was due back at the library in three weeks. I simply smiled, took the paperback from her hands, and stowed it in my crossbody bag.

I took off quickly from the library. All I could think about was getting out of there. That whole thing with that woman had left me feeling adrift.

The darkness reminded me rain could come down. As I headed down New Bridge Street West toward the tube station, I noticed the sky had grown hazier. Although, the fresh air was helpful to me.

All I was really interested in was getting back home, the sooner the better. I was feeling kind of tired. The day had been long and odd. I tried not to remind myself that it wasn't over yet.

Chapter 22

APRIL FIELDING had recognized Ileana Vladislava as soon as she walked out of the Newcastle City Library. She remembered meeting her some days ago at Wightwick Hall when she delivered a box of orchids, for her after school part-time job as a sales associate at Pike Nurseries.

April put the sunglasses back on her head, tucking them into her hair, and stood up from the steps. Here was her chance to converse with Ileana, and she didn't want to miss it.

Holding a Hello Kitty rectangular metal lunchbox for a purse in her left hand, she rushed to catch up with Ileana who was moving at a fast pace like she was following someone. April noticed too that Ileana was caught up in her thoughts that she didn't notice her approaching.

April hurried up behind her, called out her name and waved a greeting, "Miss Vladislava, wait up!"

She could tell by the way Ileana abruptly stopped on New Bridge Street West, that she seemed surprised to hear her name in the silent air. Ileana turned her head and looked at April with questioning eyes. It appeared that Ileana didn't recognize her. And by the blank stare in her eyes, it was apparent Ileana was waiting for her to say something else.

"What a coincidence finding you here. I was sitting on the steps when I saw you leave the library," April said almost out of breath.

"And you are?" Ileana asked quickly.

"April Fielding. I delivered some orchids to you the other day from Pike Nurseries," she said while walking closer to her.

"Right. Well, good day to you," she told April curtly, and started walking ahead.

"Where are you going?" April asked, walking behind her.

"Apparently, to the Tyne and Wear Metro," she answered, as if she weren't sure.

"Another coincidence! I'm going there too, and I wouldn't mind the company. I am seventeen, you know. It's not safe for young people to be alone in the city."

"You are? I mean by yourself?" Ileana asked seeming startled.

"All alone here in this crazy city."

Ileana stopped walking and stared at April intensely while she thought on the matter further. She appeared to have no clue about what went on in the mind of a teenager.

Apparently, it was difficult for Ileana to understand the desires of youth.

“Well, come along then. Better hurry, we don’t want to miss the train,” Ileana said and started walking fast.

April hurried her steps to follow.

“Why aren’t you at school?” Ileana asked her.

“It’s Saturday.”

Ileana looked at her puzzled and asked, “What do you mean?”

“There’s no school on Saturday,” April told her matter-of-factly.

“Indeed,” Ileana agreed, feigning as if she knew.

“Why aren’t you at work?”

“It’s my day off.”

To April, Ileana Vladislava acted as if she came from another era, and she was full of quirks. There was something dark and mysterious about Ileana. Perhaps April was drawn to her for those reasons. For now, she was just going with it and was hanging close by Ileana’s side.

“Where’s your library book?” April asked with curiosity.

“I didn’t check anything out.”

“I know what it’s like. It’s not easy finding something that appeals to you.”

“The air is cool to be without a jacket,” Ileana interjected.

“I’m really okay with it.”

“Nice tattoo,” Ileana said, admiring the image of a vampire.

“Thanks. I’m really interested in things like that because I’m young and exploring life.”

“Your platinum tongue ring is a nice touch, too.”

“I got it done two weeks ago. And it didn’t hurt like I thought it would.”

They reached Monument Station’s entrance on Blackett Street, proceeding down a flight of stairs, and passed through the ticketing area. Then they walked down more stairs leading to the lower level concourse and platforms.

When they reached the platform for the Yellow Line service, April noticed that Ileana quickly looked past her and around her either for the reason of looking for someone or checking to see if a train was coming. April could only assume the latter, as Ileana turned to her left and walked to the end of the platform.

April started carrying on about something at her work while, from time to time, Ileana looked down the platform in a way that looked like she was looking for a train. She wondered why Ileana had ordered so many plants because she hadn’t seen any of them around Wightwick Hall. She thought this might be a good time to ask her.

“I know it’s none of my business, but most people use their plants to make a garden. I was just wondering because I haven’t seen any of the plants, I have delivered to you outside the castle.”

Just as it looked like she was going to answer April, the light from the train appeared in the tunnel. The rumbling noise the train made was loud. April figured there was no point in Ileana answering her until the train stopped.

Suddenly, Ileana turned and started walking down the platform. April followed without question despite the peculiarity of it.

When the train came to a stop, the doors opened, and Ileana stepped into a car with April in tow behind her. April followed her to the end of the car.

Once they were seated, Ileana said, "I have a greenhouse. That's where I keep all the plants you have delivered."

"Awesome. I would love to see it," April said as the train started to leave.

"Remind me next time you come with a delivery," Ileana said reluctantly.

"I most definitely will."

April didn't notice that from the position they were sitting in, anyone seated in the middle, or on the other end of the car, would not be able to see Ileana.

"Jesmond Station is coming up next. That's my stop," April said.

"This train travels so fast," Ileana said, peering around the room.

"I appreciate you escorting me, watching out for me. I hope it wasn't any trouble for you."

"It wasn't any trouble for me. I hope you get home safe."

"There are two more stops till the train comes to Ilford Road Station. That's where you're getting off?"

"You are quite right."

"Don't go to sleep, or you'll miss the stop."

“Thank you for pointing that out. I shall remain awake.”

April lastly said, “It’s been nice chatting with you. I look forward to seeing you again soon.”

As the train came to the station, Ileana gave April half a smile as she stood up, walked, and stood in front of the sliding doors waiting for the train to stop so she could exit.

Chapter 23

IT WAS SOMETIME AFTER four o'clock in the afternoon when I was sitting on the train and I saw her again. Something made me look up just before the train came to a stop at Jesmond Station. That teenage girl with bleached blonde hair and cat styled sunglasses on the top of her head, dressed in a white T-shirt, black leggings, and black combat boots was standing by the doors at the other end of the car. It was the girl that had been sitting on the steps near the library. I knew it was her because of the vampire tattoo on her right shoulder blade.

I couldn't help but stare at her in awe knowing that she had been in the same car with me the entire time. I just didn't notice until now.

The strangeness continued when I saw her turn her head toward my direction, almost looking right at me, and I couldn't tell whether she recognized me from earlier or not,

just before stepping off of the train and onto the platform. Before I could give any reaction to that, the car doors closed.

The young girl was nowhere that I could see through the window as the train pulled out of the station.

A discomfoting thought came to my mind. Was it an omen? I quickly blotted out the idea of any such thing.

Suddenly, I remembered how earlier, an eerie feeling came over me that someone was watching me while I was waiting on the platform for the train to come in. It was an odd presence that I could not explain. I wondered if someone was stalking me. And if so, why?

Which now I was thinking it had to be that girl. She must have arrived at Monument Station sometime after I did, and I didn't see her among the people gathered. Still, I couldn't say for certain though that she was the one watching me.

Paranoia was starting to set in. I breathed out a sigh. Maybe I was jumping to conclusions. It was just a random occurrence, I started to tell myself. She was just a stranger passing by, like two ships passing in the night.

The overhead lights in the car flickered off, which tore apart my thoughts and brought me back in the present. Next came the sound of the connecting door between the cars being opened. A sudden rush of wind brushed my face as I looked in the direction where the noise emanated from. Strangely enough, it was the same breeze I had felt in the library.

“Get the lights back on,” an irritated voice called out.

When the overhead lights sputtered and dimmed, I saw a shadow moving there — or rather someone — going through the connecting door. Not too many seconds later, the lights came back on full power. I didn't see anything there anymore. I decided to ignore that one.

My thoughts fell on the woman that had been eyeing me in the library. I would like to know who she was. But how could I find out? Why couldn't I stop thinking about her? She wasn't a figment of my imagination either. I didn't have visions of women ogling me.

I was a bit out of sorts and needed to remind myself that the woman probably thought I was someone else. Yes, that must be it. It made a lot of sense to me. What else could it be?

How much this was troubling me, when, out of the blue again, that same creepy feeling came back, right there and then. It sure felt as if someone was watching me. I looked around and didn't see anyone looking at me. Either they were good at following people without them noticing or I was losing it.

It was best that I filled my head with a story rather than give in to paranoid thoughts. That would be the only way to keep my sanity in what was the strangest day I had ever had. I opened up "The Secret Garden," the book I had checked out from the library and started reading the first chapter. It would occupy my mind for the duration of the train ride.

The train stopped at another station once again, but I didn't bother to look up. I kept my nose in the book and

concentrated on reading every word. “The Secret Garden” was much more interesting than I expected.

A few pages later in the chapter, I heard the announcement for South Gosforth Station coming next. At that point I was relieved, closed up the book, and tucked it into my crossbody bag. The good thing was that the reading had helped to distract me from the strange occurrences of the day.

I stood up and walked to the doors. While I was standing there, waiting for the train to stop, I thought about how I just wanted to get home, crawl into bed, and read more of the book. I was still feeling tired on top of everything else.

Thinking about all that had happened earlier in the day, I wasn't sure if I should tell Siobhan. Actually, I didn't want to tell her. It all was so confusing to me. I wasn't ready to talk about it with anyone.

Soon, I would be back to my old self again. I wouldn't worry about all this stuff about someone stalking me anymore. After tonight, none of that would matter. All of it would be a faded memory.

When the train reached my stop, I couldn't wait to get out. The doors opened and I hurriedly stepped onto the platform. My smartphone started ringing as I approached the exit. I quickly pulled it out of my crossbody bag to check on it. The caller ID told me it was Siobhan. I answered on the third ring.

She told me not to be surprised that she wasn't home yet because she was still at work. Alysa Pitely, her

coworker, had called in sick. She was putting in overtime hours and she would be home around eleven.

“If I’m sleeping when you come in, I’ll talk to you in the morning,” I told her before I hung up.

When I reached Haddricks Mill Road, I was glad it wasn’t raining and continued on my merry way.

Chapter 24

BACK AT WIGHTWICK HALL, Ileana Vladislava was in her study, seated in a Victorian armchair. Not in a long, long time had she smiled like this. She kept seeing Myrna Ivester with her eyes open or closed and couldn't think about anything else. 'Myrna was perfect' were the words that kept ringing in her ears over and over again.

No music was playing in the study. Not this time. Ileana needed the peace and quiet so her mind could wander freely. Her heart was thumping wildly in her chest. She thought of Myrna's beautiful face — fair complexion, wide-set blue eyes, full lips, but most of all, the very core of her lost soul.

It wasn't uncommon for Ileana to take interest in a woman. Vampires weren't restricted by gender. It didn't matter. It wasn't all physical attraction, rather

psychological. There was a spiritual bond between the vampires.

“Yes, her hair,” she said to herself.

Myrna’s long dirty-blonde hair that hung loosely over her shoulders was enough to turn anyone’s eyes. So, Ileana was thinking.

It was apparent that a scheme was forming in her head. That Myrna Ivester could be with her if she were a vampire too. It would be the only way they could have a relationship.

After all this time, maybe fate was finally rolling things her way. It was time for two of her kind, she kept saying in her mind.

Her eyes were wide — off in her own world again.

Earlier that afternoon, she was following Myrna to Monument Station at a safe distance. She had allowed April Fielding to tag along with her to shield herself from suspicion. Ileana didn’t want to look like a stalker.

Sitting in the same car of the Metro train, she had noticed that Myrna seemed to recognize April. How was that so? Myrna watched April as she left the train and stepped onto the platform of Jesmond Station.

Shortly after the train left the station, Ileana slipped on her sunglasses, threw open the connecting door and went through it to the next car. All the while the overhead lights in the cars went out, then on again. She leaned against a wall and watched Myrna through the window of the connecting door for the rest of the train ride.

Later on, she followed Myrna home.

Ileana Vladislava hadn't imagined anything like that, couldn't imagine where it was leading, from the first moment inside the Newcastle City Library where she had first seen Myrna. She remembered how she couldn't take her eyes off Myrna. Ileana approached her, but at the last minute, she fled. It was all too much for her. She hid in the shadows, watching Myrna, and by chance she heard the librarian say Myrna's full name.

The thoughts had run through her mind over and over, but the conclusion was at hand. She had spent enough time meditating on the matter — anxious to make a decision — as she came back to the here and now.

She was filled with a desire, the like of which she hadn't felt since many years ago in her country. For the first time since she left Romania, she was ready to create a vampire.

She knew the risk.

That the murderous werewolf was somewhere, hunting for vampires of Old Romania. Thus far, she had eluded the werewolf and would continue to do so.

Ileana couldn't turn her back on fate. So many times, she had dreamed of a day when she would find someone who was meant to be a vampire. The day had finally come, and this was no dream — it was real.

It wasn't difficult for her to spot a person who was meant for the vampire's life. She could easily peer into the very soul of another person like someone would look out a window. This natural skill was considered extra — as in extrasensory perception. That and the immortal life was the vampire's gift.

Infatuation was driving her, but she didn't want to get ahead of herself. There was a question that needed to be answered. Would Myrna Ivester want to be a vampire?

The more Ileana sat there thinking about it, the more she believed it. She could sense a yearning in Myrna who seemed as lonely as she was. It was like something was missing in Myrna's life and it was that she wasn't satisfied. This convinced her that Myrna would embrace this life of hers, the vampire's life.

Or so Ileana hoped.

The plan was set. She felt it was time to act on the desires that were consuming her. Ileana was going to appear to Myrna in the late-night hours. If things didn't go the way she wanted, she would transform into a bat and fly away. It was simply something vampires could do.

The thought of tasting human blood once again invigorated her and reminded her that she needed some blood and she needed it now.

Rising from the chair, she left the study and proceeded to the kitchen. When she opened the refrigerator door, she saw that there was nothing inside. It completely slipped her mind that she had drank the last of the deer's blood. This was an unexpected predicament.

Leaning against the refrigerator door, her eyes were glowing red. The pain was intensifying. She needed to do something because her craving was strong.

She didn't want to hunt, for fear of being watched. Considering her nosy neighbor, she knew it was best to

keep a low profile, at least for a while. Lorraine Krag could spoil all her plans.

The only option she could see was the hospital's blood bank. It wouldn't be the first time she had done it. She had taken bags of whole blood at different hospitals many times before, quite successfully.

After her trip to the hospital, hoping it would be successful, she would return to the castle, and store the blood in the refrigerator. Mostly likely a little after eleven, she would go to Myrna Ivester's home.

It was more than she anticipated, two such chances in one evening. She was excited just thinking about it. It was going to be the night of nights. She sensed it so strongly.

Finally, she would give into her desires. And it was about time that she did.

Chapter 25

THE PATIENTS were tucked in their beds and the hallways were empty at the Freeman Hospital in High Heaton. The quietness at night in the hospital was eerie to Siobhan Mulcahy, even though she had worked during those hours before.

Sitting in the nurses' station in the middle of a hall, she was wearing her usual hospital garb, a white, short-sleeved smock with a small floral pattern on it, weathered brown slacks, and white sneakers. The name tag, pinned on the breast pocket of her smock, read S. Mulcahy, R.N. She tightened the ponytail holding her chestnut, shoulder length hair and began typing a few notes into the computer.

She was deep in thought about how the scheduling of staff members for the coming weeks might need to be revised. That was exactly what she would do. First thing Monday morning.

Siobhan was a little upset with Alysa Pitely calling in sick, and for the third time in two weeks. Alysa had some personal issues that was affecting her job performance.

So, there she was waiting for Alysa's replacement to arrive. She glanced at the clock on the computer screen — 10:27. Since nine that morning she was working at the hospital and right now she couldn't wait to go home.

She snatched up a patient's chart from the ordered stack on the desk and reviewed the patient's history and physical progress notes as she stood up from her chair.

A sudden rush of air brushed past the back of her neck, zapping her out of her thoughts. It was cold on her skin and gave her goosebumps of fright. She turned around thinking someone was there, but she didn't see anybody.

Her eyes moved back to the patient's chart, but she was unsettled about the strange way she was feeling. She looked back one more time, just for good measure. Nothing.

Leaving the nurses' station with the patient's chart in hand, she turned left and walked down a semi-dark corridor. At the end of the corridor, she opened a door into a stairwell and hurried down the stairs to the next level. With a flash, she entered a corridor with a faint but familiar smell of disinfectant.

Her thoughts were disrupted by the sound of a door closing, not too loudly, but the hospital was quiet enough she could hear just about anything. She stopped walking.

Suddenly, that same cold gust of air that she had felt earlier surrounded her for a few seconds, and she shivered until it was gone.

Siobhan turned around, gazed down the hospital corridor in the direction the noise had come from, and she saw a woman dressed in a black clingy three-quarter sleeved sweater with matching leggings, and black boots leaving the Blood Issue room in the hematology unit. She was alarmed and started to approach the woman.

“Can I help you with something?” Siobhan called out to the woman.

The woman stopped walking. Then Siobhan stopped walking. It was eerie. Neither of them said a word.

Siobhan was waiting for a response. And just as it looked like the woman was going to respond. She couldn't begin to imagine what would happen next. The overhead fluorescent lights in the corridor went out, and she couldn't see anything in the darkness.

A couple of seconds later, some lights flickered on and off for a handful of seconds. Then all the lights in the corridor returned to full strength.

The weirdness wasn't over. The woman was gone.

Siobhan looked in the adjacent corridor and didn't find anyone around. It was as if no one was ever there.

She decided to check the Blood Issue room. And there she asked herself, as she pulled the handle of the door, why wasn't the door locked as it usually was. Looking around the room quickly, she didn't see anything irregular.

After opening the Blood Bank refrigerator door, she thought there might be a few whole blood bags missing, but she wasn't certain. Regardless, she just couldn't deal with

it now. She needed to drop off a patient's chart. She closed the door back up.

After she left the Blood Issue room, she quickened her pace down the corridor and wondered if she had seen a ghost. Maybe her mind was playing tricks on her, or maybe the raven-haired woman was never there at all. She had never believed in ghosts before, but it occurred to her that it was possible.

More and more she was sure she needed a break from working too long.

After she placed the chart on a desk in an office, she decided she wasn't going to start believing in ghosts. Such a foolish notion, she thought to herself.

Not long after, she found herself climbing the dark marble stairs to the fourth floor. She was headed back to the nurses' station. When she arrived there, she found Shelagh Holton seated behind the counter, staring up at the patient monitoring board. This meant Siobhan could leave.

"Shelagh, so good to see you. Thanks for coming in on such short notice," Siobhan said to her.

"It's no big deal. How's everything going?" returned Shelagh, turning her smiling brown eyes on Siobhan.

"Since you asked, the weirdest thing just happened."

"Oh, please, tell me all the juicy details!" Shelagh said enthusiastically and stood up.

"I saw a woman come out of the Blood Issue room. I asked her a question and she stopped. The lights went out then came back on again. I went to look for her and she wasn't there."

Shelagh had been leaning against the counter listening to every word, twirling her carrot-top ponytail with a pencil.

“How sure are you that she came out of the Blood Issue room and not out of one of the adjoining rooms?”

“Actually, I’m not sure. I just got a glimpse of her.”

“Maybe it was a member of the cleaning staff?”

“She wasn’t wearing a uniform.”

The twentysomething nurse beamed and said, “You know, when I think about it now. I’ve heard about stuff like that happening in hospitals all the time.”

“You have?” Siobhan asked, surprisingly.

“I haven’t seen anything, though, other nurses say that a lot of strange things happen on the night shift.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I feel better knowing I’m not the only one seeing things.”

“Don’t think about it anymore,” Shelagh said and sat down on the chair.

“I’m not going home yet. I have to write up an incident report. It’s the procedure. Before I leave, I’ll put it on the desk for the blood bank technician to review first thing in the morning.”

“There is always the chance that a patient with a life-threatening illness took the blood for their condition.”

“It’s a rare circumstance, but let’s not rule it out,” Siobhan said as they both laughed.

“Getting back to serious stuff,” Shelagh quickly added, “the time has come for me to go. I have to check on some patients.”

Shelagh Holton, stood up, lifted a clipboard off the desk and walked away.

It was half past eleven when Siobhan Mulcahy came home. She went directly to her bedroom. After changing into a lavender V-neck T-shirt and white with lavender stripes pajama bottoms, she fell onto the bed and enjoyed the stillness. She turned off the bedside lamp and dropped off to sleep.

Chapter 26

AT AROUND MIDNIGHT, Ileana Vladislava had watched the lights in the house located on Lilburn Gardens go out. In the woody area nearby, she waited patiently to make her move. The night, that was overcast with darkish clouds, concealed her with its gloomy darkness.

Meanwhile, it was coming up on two in the morning. The time was now at hand for her to approach the house. She could feel the adrenaline running through her veins as she rounded the house toward the back.

She moved as silently as she possibly could. As she approached the window with dense gray fog everywhere, it looked like she was emerging from a gray-covered world floating in the universe. It was too much like a scene from *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, the movie she had watched recently.

Her shadow appeared in the window. She was there.

She could barely catch her breath as she watched Myrna Ivester in bed, devouring her with her vampire eyes. Ileana was very attracted to her.

She was actually going to do this!

Ileana set her gaze on Myrna and used a vampire mind trick to place her in a hypnotic trance. She knew it worked when Myrna suddenly sat up in bed and sleepwalked her way to the window. It was like some invisible energy force was pulling her toward Ileana.

She had whisked Myrna right out of bed easily with the intention of luring her into the woods to have her way with her, in a manner of speaking. Under the vampire's complete control, there was no way Myrna could see what was happening in the sleep-like trance she was under. Instead Myrna's mind created a false environment.

Her mesmerizing eyes glazed over with passion for Myrna, who pulled the curtain to the side. She gave Ileana a quick glance then started to open the window, but stopped halfway, after receiving instructions to meet outside. Completely vulnerable to Ileana, she closed the curtain and proceeded toward the back door of the house. Myrna opened the door and walked to the woods.

She was surrounded in fog so dense it blotted out all darkness, standing by a tree, waiting patiently for Myrna. Her eyes were glowing a soft red that were magical and alluring to Myrna, and alarming to any onlooker.

There was a bustling sound of the wind blowing through the trees as Myrna slowly walked toward Ileana. She stared

deeply into Myrna's blue eyes and sent her into a deeper trance that made her want to succumb to her.

Myrna stopped only inches away from her. She inhaled the intoxicating scent of Myrna's blood, as if it was perfume. Human blood. It teased all of Ileana's senses.

Ileana lowered her head to speak. "You're a beautiful site."

There was no way Myrna understood the vampire language that had been whispered in her ear. Out of practice in the art of seduction, Ileana remained confident, knowing Myrna would never have noticed in her state.

Ileana came even closer to her — until she stood face to face with her, just a hand's width away from Myrna's wide-eyed gaze. As she fell increasingly under the vampire's influence, she couldn't turn away from Ileana.

Something was about to happen.

Ileana raised her left hand and brushed back her long dirty-blond hair that was hanging along the nape of her neck. The length of her neck was exposed, enticing Ileana to lean down and bite her there. Her hand shaking, she carefully used her fingers to locate the major artery that held her sweet relief. Ileana's eyes were fiery red with anticipation, and her fangs slipped out of her mouth.

Faint radiance from the full moon behind the clouds illuminated her vampire teeth when Ileana said in the vampire language, "You've been waiting for this all your life."

Her exceptionally long fingernails of her right hand rested on Myrna's left shoulder as her face came closer to

Myrna's neck. Deeply under Ileana's spell, Myrna closed her eyes just as Ileana's fangs punctured the smooth flesh of her neck. Myrna's whole body shuddered briefly from the sensation of that simple action.

And so, began the process that would transform Myrna Ivester into a vampire. Ileana Vladislava had accomplished her mission.

After draining a pint of blood from Myrna's body, she slowly raised her head from Myrna's neck. When she brushed Myrna's hair back to where it was before, her eyes opened slowly.

Myrna, in a hypnotic state of mind, was completely unaware of what had transpired.

Ileana looked deeply into her eyes and spoke softly using the vampire language, "Go, my lovely."

Ileana's words echoed inside her head. She turned away from Ileana and slowly walked through the woods toward the house.

A smile graced Ileana's bloody mouth, knowing that she had pulled it off without a hitch.

It was risky, especially knowing that her roommate Siobhan Mulcahy was asleep in her bedroom across the hall from Myrna's. What made the situation more harrowing for Ileana was that Siobhan's bedroom was near the back door. Ileana pitied Siobhan for what she didn't know, for what happened right under her nose, unaware that Myrna had come and gone.

She walked to the edge of the woods and watched Myrna place a hand on the knob on the back door of the

house. Ileana quickly transformed into a bat. Before Myrna could open the door, the sounds of screeching and wings flapping in the air caused her to stop and look back at the bat.

Myrna watched the bat, screeching loudly, as it flew into the cloudy sky toward Wightwick Hall. Ileana had implanted the image of her castle in Myrna's mind, so that was what she saw. This was something only vampires could do.

Ileana knew that Myrna would return to her bedroom, crawl back into her bed, and fall into a deep slumber. Hours later, when Myrna would awake from her sleep, she might remember an image or two or nothing at all.

It was four thirty in the morning when Ileana, in bat form, flew through an open window on the second level of the castle. She landed on the floor as a human. She dusted herself off, then walked to the window and shut it.

She walked proudly across the floor, carrying a confident smirk on her face. As she was walking down the spiral staircase, she thought about stopping for a quick look in the refrigerator.

In the kitchen, she opened the fridge and admired the six whole blood bags she had taken from Freeman Hospital and stored the night before. At the time she stored the bags, she wasn't thrilled that she had been seen by a staff member of the hospital exiting the Blood Issue room. Ileana could only hope that the woman who had seen her thought she was a ghost, as she fled in the cover of darkness when the lights were temporarily out in the corridor.

But it now seemed like ages ago. She closed the refrigerator door and forgot about it entirely.

She left the kitchen and walked down the hallway toward the door that led to the cellar. Once she opened the door, she disappeared down the dark steps.

Ileana was in total darkness, hanging upside down from the ceiling. Before drifting off, she wondered what would happen next. There was no way to predict how Myrna might react. Would Myrna Ivester come to her?

Chapter 27

I ABRUPTLY WOKE UP from a dead sleep. My eyes fell on “The Secret Garden,” the book lying next to me. I had fallen asleep reading it the night before.

The reason I woke up was I sensed that someone was in the bedroom with me. It was dark. But I could feel a presence — that itch at the base of your skull telling you someone was there.

How could someone have gotten into the room?

After carefully looking around, I saw a steady breeze blowing the curtains around, as though someone was playing with them. The window was partially opened. Now I was scared.

Utterly petrified, I slid slowly and cautiously out of bed, dropping my bare feet on the fuzzy rug by the bed. I checked out the room, hurriedly looking around the bed as best I could in the darkness. The only light in the room came

from the LED display of the alarm clock on the nightstand. It was 4:43.

I flipped on the lamp on the nightstand. Nothing. Not a sound. I checked the bathroom and the closet just in case an intruder was inside my room. They were empty. Then I walked over to the window and peeked carefully out. Looking up at the sky I could see dark clouds. Though there were no signs of any rain. I closed the window gently.

For the sake of peace of mind, I walked through the house, turning on lights in the guest bathroom, living room, and the third bedroom we turned into an office. I also checked the front and back doors. Both were locked. I even saw Siobhan sleeping peacefully in her room. So, I went back to my bedroom, thinking it was a false alarm.

I picked up “The Secret Garden” from the bed and placed it on the nightstand. Then I laid out on the bed and fell to sleep. It wasn’t long after that I was having a wicked dream that was very real to me.

My dream started with a feeling of terror. As I was running in foggy corridors of a building of some sorts, my loose hair fell over my shoulders like a cloak. Someone was following behind me, getting closer and closer to me, which made me run faster. I couldn’t see who or what it was. All I knew was that I was scared and confused because I was hearing a strange voice creeping up on me.

Soon I was tired from running with knee length black boots on and hid behind a wall to catch my breath. I hoped whoever was out there wouldn’t find me. Standing with my

back against the wall, I took in many breaths of air and tried to shake away my fear.

Despite my fear, there was something in the back of my mind telling me that this was a dream. Somewhere in my subconscious, I knew it was. Essentially, I was awake inside the dream realizing that I was inside a dream and that I was not awake in the normal sense.

Still, I couldn't wake up.

The dread had subsided, and I peered from behind the wall, for pure curiosity. More importantly, I just wanted to know who was chasing me. Glancing down the foggy hallway, I swung my head from side to side trying to see everything. I couldn't find anyone there. Instead I heard a voice in the dark. It called out my name in English and spoke in a language that I didn't recognize, some sort of Slavic or Eastern European language.

"Don't be afraid, Myrna. Come to me. I understand you. I'm a lot like you," the voice beckoned in the odd language.

It was the deep voice of a woman. That I was sure of. Who was she and what did she want?

Ducking back behind the wall, I kept trying to analyze it in the back of my mind that would not rest. A few more words were spoken, but I couldn't figure out what was being said no matter how hard I strained.

There was something else that was odd. The place seemed familiar to me, as if I had been there before.

As I stood there trying to collect my thoughts, I remembered a time in my life. I could see myself as a little girl again. The vision came into my brain, clear and sharp.

I had been running down the exact hallways in the visitor's center building of some park holding a Raggedy Ann doll under my arm. The doll dropped from my arms. I kept running and began spinning around in my yellow dress. I had a lot of energy at the age of five.

After searching in the corridors for my doll and not finding it, I started to get scared because I was lost. All I could do was cry. My father must have heard me crying, because after a while he came from around the corner and scooped me up in his arms. He carried me to my mother, who took me in her arms to comfort me. After that, I didn't remember anything else.

After all these years, what was I doing there?

I almost cried in my sleep. But I didn't wake up.

The voice came again. Fear raced through my veins and I turned instinctively to face whoever was approaching, yet nothing but foggy air swirled.

The next thing I knew I was running again, trying to find a way out of this maze of a building, and found myself running in circles. It was like there was no way out. Then, rounding a corner, I saw a stairwell and took off in a blur toward it.

I reached the door at the top of the stairs and stopped. The door wouldn't budge when I twisted the knob and used shoulder pressure. Growing more frustrated I tried again with no luck. Moments later I was banging my hands against the glass window of the door hoping that someone would come to open it.

The door suddenly gave way. I pushed through it, not knowing what to expect and found that it was just an empty corridor. The floor started to creak with each and every step I took down the hallway.

Then I stopped. Fear gripped me, sending my mind in a state of turmoil. I dared not divert my eyes from what was coming toward me. A bat! I was so startled that I didn't have the sense to run away.

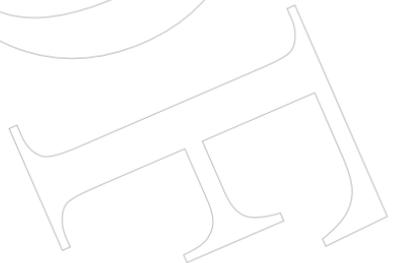
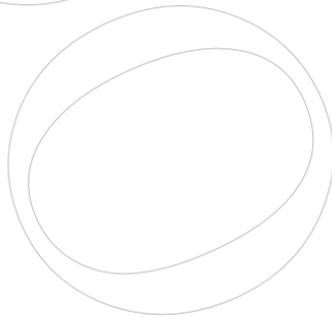
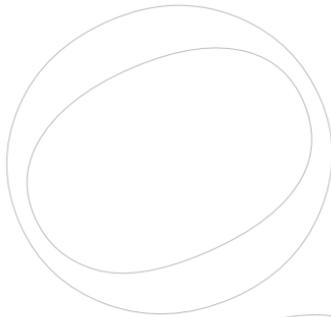
Its rustling black leathery wings made a whooshing sound as it flew toward me in the hallway where I stood, scared stiff. It came closer and closer to me and it was like there was nothing I could do but stare into its brown eyes.

When it got close to my face, I waved my arms to shoo it away. Then I lost my footing, slipped, and fell to the floor. I rolled over on my back. The bat flew down to me and bit into the right side of my neck, tearing through the skin and into a vein. The bite sent a wave of shock through my body. I screamed and struggled until the creature got off. When it flew up, a few drops of blood fell from its mouth onto the black camisole and matching leggings that I had on.

Tension held me immobile. I stayed put on the floor, propped up on my elbows trying as hard as I could to ignore the pain in my neck. I looked up with a squint, bringing everything into focus. The fairly large bat with black marks that streaked its brown fur and my blood pumping through its body, screeched and flew toward a castle I had seen before.

The bat flying in the distance had me locked in a trance until it finally disappeared and the corridor came into my

sight again. I lay silently on the ground, as if waiting for something to happen, but nothing did. I wiggled around, looked, and saw that nothing was there. Except there was a pain in my neck that caused me to scream.



Chapter 28

I LITERALLY woke up screaming. At the same time, the sound of the tea kettle whistling in the kitchen muted the scream. I didn't know how loud it was as it pushed me upwards. I found myself sitting bolt upright in bed as I threw off my plaid blanket.

At first none of it made sense to me since I was still a little fuzzy. Slowly, my tension eased. Then I remembered I had been dreaming of a bat again.

The early morning light was in the room. I squinted my eyes and looked at the digital clock atop my nightstand. 8:37. It was earlier than I actually wanted to get up on my day off.

After rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I yawned and stretched my arms above my head. Getting off the bed, I dropped my bare feet on the fuzzy, colorful pink and purple rug at the foot of the bed. I stepped into my fuzzy slippers

and went briefly to the window. After pulling back the curtain, I made sure the window was locked. It was. I looked up and saw that the sky was cloudy, but still no rain fell.

As I passed the mirror on my dresser en route to the door, I paused, took in the dishevelment of my hair, and the pallor of my face. I brushed my hair off my shoulders with my hand. A cold chill ran through me when I saw two small holes in my neck and three small drops of blood on the top right side of my gray, long-sleeved sleep shirt. Now I was worried.

The question ringing loudly in my head was — what exactly had transpired last night?

I stood there frozen for a moment looking at the bite marks on my neck, thinking maybe they were there when I went to bed, but I just didn't notice them. Maybe the dream I had wasn't a figment of my imagination. It was more real to me than a dream. It seemed more like something that had actually happened to me, but I just couldn't remember what it was. At least, not yet.

I gazed at my necklace, a 24-karat gold chain with a locket containing a picture of my late parents. Safely around my neck, it was the only possession I cared about. Just then an ancient memory sprung into sharp focus. My parents had taken me to Jesmond Dene, a public park, many times as a child. I felt nostalgia take over and form into a desperate longing to see Jesmond Dene again. Instantly the castle I had dreamed about flashed on my mind, like a

picture before my eyes. Something jogged my memory of the castle being adjacent to Jesmond Dene.

I wondered who lived in that castle. This was something I needed to investigate. But first I was going to the kitchen to tell Siobhan Mulcahy all about it. Of course, there were some things I couldn't tell her about. So, I quickly twisted my hair into a single fat braid and let it hang down in the front on the right side to cover up the two punctured holes in my neck and the drops of blood on my shirt.

Coming out of the bedroom, I rushed toward the kitchen, and noticed right away that the smell of the scrambled eggs made my stomach feel uneasy. Odd that I wasn't hungry. I usually was around this time in the morning.

I stepped into the kitchen, almost out of breath. Still in her pajamas, Siobhan was standing by the stove as she poured hot water from the kettle into a mug with a tea bag in it.

"I just had the weirdest dream ever," I hurriedly said with her back facing me.

She heard me, placed the stainless-steel kettle on a cold burner of the stove, turned around and asked, "What's going on, Myrna?"

"Hang on, just a second. I feel like it's fading away," I said, and felt my temples tighten as I remembered the dream.

She leaned her back against the sink counter, nodded, and said, "I can't wait to hear."

I paused to gather my thoughts, sorting them out, then continued, “I was running, in foggy hallways, in some building. I was being chased, but I didn’t know by who. I was so scared. I slipped to the floor and then woke up screaming.”

“That’s some nightmare, Myrna.”

“It was so weird. But it was so real. No matter what I could do, I just couldn’t get away. And then I woke up.”

“Wow! That’s awful,” Siobhan exclaimed.

“Yeah. It was so scary.”

Siobhan handed me a mug of tea and said, “You need this more than I do.”

I took it, shrugged, and said, “Thanks.”

After taking a quick sip of tea, I just realized I left out some details that were relevant. There wasn’t any way I was going to tell her everything. I just couldn’t.

“Are you all right? You look shook,” she asked with some concern in her voice.

“It was just like one of those dreams that was just so real.”

Siobhan agreed, with a shake of her head and a smile, then asked, “How about some breakfast?”

“I’m good with the tea, thanks.”

I wondered if my face showed that my appetite just wasn’t there.

“That’s not like you, Myrna. You sure?”

“That dream has messed up my appetite. Really, I just want to hang out with you.”

“Well, if you don’t mind, I’m going to sit at the table and dig in. I’m really hungry.”

Siobhan did not seem to notice my state of mind. The dream from last night was all I could think about. Thoughts like it really did happen were flowing in my mind and haunting me.

“Are you going anywhere today?” Siobhan asked, startling me from my thoughts.

It took me a moment to register what she had just asked. I joined Siobhan at the small, square oak table.

“I don’t know what I’m doing today. I haven’t decided yet,” I said, setting my mug on the table and turning to her.

“It’s Sunday, your day off. There’s no need to make any plans.”

I watched Siobhan chowing down on scrambled eggs and wheat toast with jam with immense satisfaction. I sipped at my mug, closed my eyes, and sighed.

When I opened my eyes, I started to feel like something was off between us. We didn’t seem to be connecting as strongly. On top of the fact that she didn’t take the dream I had seriously. And really, there was no reason for her to think of it as anything but a nightmare.

After Siobhan finished her breakfast, she stood up with her plate and took her mug from the table. She set the dishes in the sink, turned on the cold water and started washing them.

“Today is my day off, too. Why don’t we head over to Clyde’s tonight? We haven’t been there in a while. We

could both use some fun, right?” she suggested enthusiastically.

“Sure, let’s do that,” I said, reluctantly.

I wasn’t talking anymore. My head was just not into it. Instead, I sank deeper into my thoughts and I became aware something had happened — or was about to happen.

Chapter 29

JUST AS I stood up from the chair, my smartphone started ringing in my bedroom. The sudden ring caused me to back away, startled. The dream of the night before, if it was a dream, had thrown me a curve and made me jittery.

I looked at Siobhan and she looked at me and we were both wondering who was calling my phone and if I was going to answer it, but neither of us said a word. We were waiting for the other to speak. Nothing came.

Finally, she asked, “Are you going to get that?”

“Yes, but,” I said still in a haze.

Before I could decide or move, a thought occurred to me as to who might be calling. I realized in that instant, that I had made a commitment with my aunt and that it had just slipped my mind.

I was about to take off to answer the call, but first I needed to ask Siobhan something. “What time is it?”

Siobhan was standing in front of the clock, blocking my view.

She looked over at the small clock on the counter by the sink, and stated, "It's nearing ten o'clock. Why do you want to know, Myrna?"

There was no time to answer her. I sprinted across the hall to the bedroom and snatched up my phone from the dresser.

"Hello," I said, answering on the third ring.

As I had suspected it was my Aunt Eowyn. She wanted to know if I was coming over to her house today. She sounded worried because I didn't call her to confirm.

"I told you last week that I have an appointment with the salon at eleven this morning. You didn't forget, did you?"

"No, Aunt Eowyn. I'm just getting ready now."

She needed someone to look after her dogs while she was away. I gave her my word and I couldn't renege on it now.

"I'm so glad to hear you say that, Myrna. I knew I could count on you!"

I quickly improvised and told her that I got caught up with housework and would be there soon.

"You sit tight."

"Myrna, you are such a dear," she said into the phone.

"Siobhan, I have to go out!" I spoke out loudly, just as I hung up the phone.

I could swear that I had heard Siobhan in the hallway by the time the call was completed. Still, I needed to be

certain she was out there. Before I went to change my clothes, I popped my head into the hall to make sure she heard me since I had cut her off before. Sure, enough she was walking down the hallway near the turn to her bedroom.

“Siobhan, that was Aunt Eowyn on the phone,” I called out to her.

At the sound of my voice Siobhan’s head turned toward the doorway.

She stopped in her tracks and asked, “How is she?”

“She’s well, thanks. I promised her I would come over and take care of her dogs while she was at the hair salon. She wants to look her best because this Wednesday, she’s going to a fundraiser for the Lord Mayor’s Charity Fund on behalf of the Rotary Club.”

I didn’t give Siobhan time to respond. There was more I needed to say to her, so I kept going.

“She is very protective of those two dogs and doesn’t like to leave them alone.”

“Thanks for letting me know. You go on, and we’ll catch up later,” she said, starting to move again.

“Okay. I’ll see you later,” I said as she turned the corner.

After letting out a sigh, I pulled away from the doorway. There was no time for a shower, I decided as I went to the closet and ransacked it for something to wear. I was supposed to be at Aunt Eowyn’s house at ten thirty this morning. That was thirty minutes from now. I couldn’t keep my aunt waiting too long.

Eowyn Dymtrow was the only family I had left. I was her only family too, well, in the vicinity. Her only son, Andrew, recently married and moved to the United States a year ago. And three years ago, her husband Clark died in his early sixties of a heart attack.

Lately Aunt Eowyn was devoted to her pets and activities with the Rotary Club. A caring and community orientated woman, she had helped the Rotary Club of Newcastle upon Tyne for years. Even though it was September, she was already working with a committee on their Tree of Light event happening this Christmas.

Now that I was dressed, I covered up the holes in my neck with the scarf, imprinted with Fifi Lapin illustrated bunnies, that Aunt Eowyn gave me on my birthday. I slipped on my crossbody bag over my shoulder with my smartphone inside, grabbed the keys to my bike and hurried toward the front door.

Rushing out the door, I almost forgot to lock it behind me. I popped on my helmet and jumped on my scooter. Turned the ignition. And zoomed off.

I didn't recall most of the ride there. Not so much because I was in a hurry, but my mind was still preoccupied with thoughts. I didn't know what I should or shouldn't say to Aunt Eowyn. Was it wise to tell her about my dream?

After thinking some more about it, I came back with the answer. I wouldn't tell her anything. There wasn't time to explain it all to her. She needed to get to her appointment. Plus, she was sensitive to such matters. I didn't want to alarm her.

Tearing down the streets, I was almost there. I was making good time because there wasn't much traffic on a Sunday. Thank God. And it wasn't as late as I had thought earlier. At the last red light, I checked the Seiko watch on my wrist, and the monogram read 10:26 a.m. At this rate, I would be a few minutes later than she expected, fingers crossed.

Chapter 30

I PULLED MY SCOOTER into the driveway of Aunt Eowyn's detached house on Woodlea. I parked in front of one of the two garages next to her gold Volvo V40 T2 five-door hatchback. No sooner had I turned off the bike and took off my helmet, the front door opened, and she stepped into the doorway of her house. I got off the scooter and was heading directly toward her and noticed a sign of relief on her face because it was 10:32 a.m.

"Thank you so much for coming, Myrna," she called out as I walked toward her.

"My pleasure. Glad to see you this morning," I said approaching her.

She held out her arms to me and I went in for a hug. Not a moment too soon, she released her embrace on me.

"I've got to dash if I'm going to get to my appointment on time," she said before turning to walk to her hatchback.

“Have a good time.”

“If the dogs give you any trouble just give me a ring and let me know,” she said as she unlocked the door of her Volvo.

“I’ve got it all under control.”

“Don’t worry about feeding them, because they just ate.”

“Okay, got it.”

“After the appointment, I may do some shopping. But don’t worry because I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Oh, great,” I said reluctantly, as I thought it would be hours before she returned.

I watched her settle into the driver’s seat and turn the ignition. She drove off. As the hatchback disappeared down Woodlea, I heard whining and barking coming my way. The noise of my scooter and the Volvo starting more than likely pulled the poodles out of their activities from somewhere else in the house.

When I stepped through the doorway and after closing the door behind me, Lindy and Trudy ran up to me. Her two poodles were so thrilled to see me. They looked adorable with pink ribbons attached to their ears, and very white fur as if they had recently been to the dog beauty parlor.

Aunt Eowyn certainly did invest in the care of these animals. It was rather sweet. I could understand her devotion to them. She got them six months after her husband died and they had become her constant companions ever since. They were exceptionally good company and occupied a lot of her time.

“Okay, okay. Aunt Myrna is here,” I said, unable to resist their charm.

I squatted down and gave the poodles a big hug. When Trudy stood up on her hind legs and put her front paws on my knees, begging for affection, I spoke again.

“All right Trudy. You’re full of affection,” I said rubbing the top of her head.

A short bit later, I moved away from the dogs and moved into the living room. The dogs were still rubbing against my legs and whining with excitement. They started to settle down when I sat down on the suede camel sofa, but they still followed me. I pet them as they poured out their excitement that I was here to play with them, of course. Why else would I be visiting?

Lindy made her way to the beveled glass French doors. She let out a low whine indicating her need to go out — right now. I got up from the sofa and opened the doors to the enclosed garden. I let them out for a spell, while I stepped through the house, from room to room, checking each one as I moved. Located in the residential village of Forest Hall, the four-bedroom house, where I had lived many years, had been barely modernized. My old bedroom was the same. Still, no memories surfaced.

Much sooner than I expected, I heard the dogs barking outside. I let them back in the house. They strolled over to a small oval rug on the wooden floor, in the corner of the living room, and sat down. There was an amused look on their faces as they looked at me.

I on the other hand wasn't as amused. Not intentionally of course. I liked these little dogs, but when I parked myself on the sofa, I kept flashing back to that castle. Perhaps I should do a little research.

I rummaged through my crossbody for my smartphone. After grabbing it, I swiped the screen right to left. My finger clicked on the Google Chrome icon. On a whim, I put in the search words: CASTLE and JESMOND DENE. Like a mad woman, I began googling about the castle, not sure what I was looking for, but searching anyway.

The best I could find was a page with an article positioned next to a photograph of Wightwick Hall, the name of the castle. The article stated that the castle was designed by architect John Dobson. It was built in the early 1800s. In 1871, the castle with neoclassical architecture and a Gothic-style porch passed from William Cruddas to the family of Baron Glenkinglas. In 1929, the family put it up for sale. From what I read; I discovered the property had been sold to an undisclosed private party.

“What in God's name?” I asked aloud.

How could a place that had withstood many trying moments in history have anything to do with me? I came from a poor Irish family that had drifted from Dublin, thence to Newcastle upon Tyne.

Despite my internet sleuthing, I had come up empty handed. Well, at least I felt that way. I didn't find out who lived in the castle. At this stage, it looked as if I wasn't going to find anything else. I didn't want to search the internet anymore.

I was feeling slightly lightheaded and couldn't think right. My eyes needed a break from the strain of staring at the smartphone's screen. I closed my eyes and rubbed them gently to clear my head and get back on track. It just occurred to me, like lightning had struck right there in the living room. My eyes flew open.

In July, Siobhan and I arrived at the tail end of Aunt Eowyn's Friday afternoon Rotary Club meeting at the Best Western New Kent Hotel on Osborne Road. She introduced Siobhan and I to Lorraine Krag, a new member of the Rotary Club who had recently moved into a house on Jesmond Dene Road, in a mostly deserted neighborhood. It was near the castle. This I was certain of.

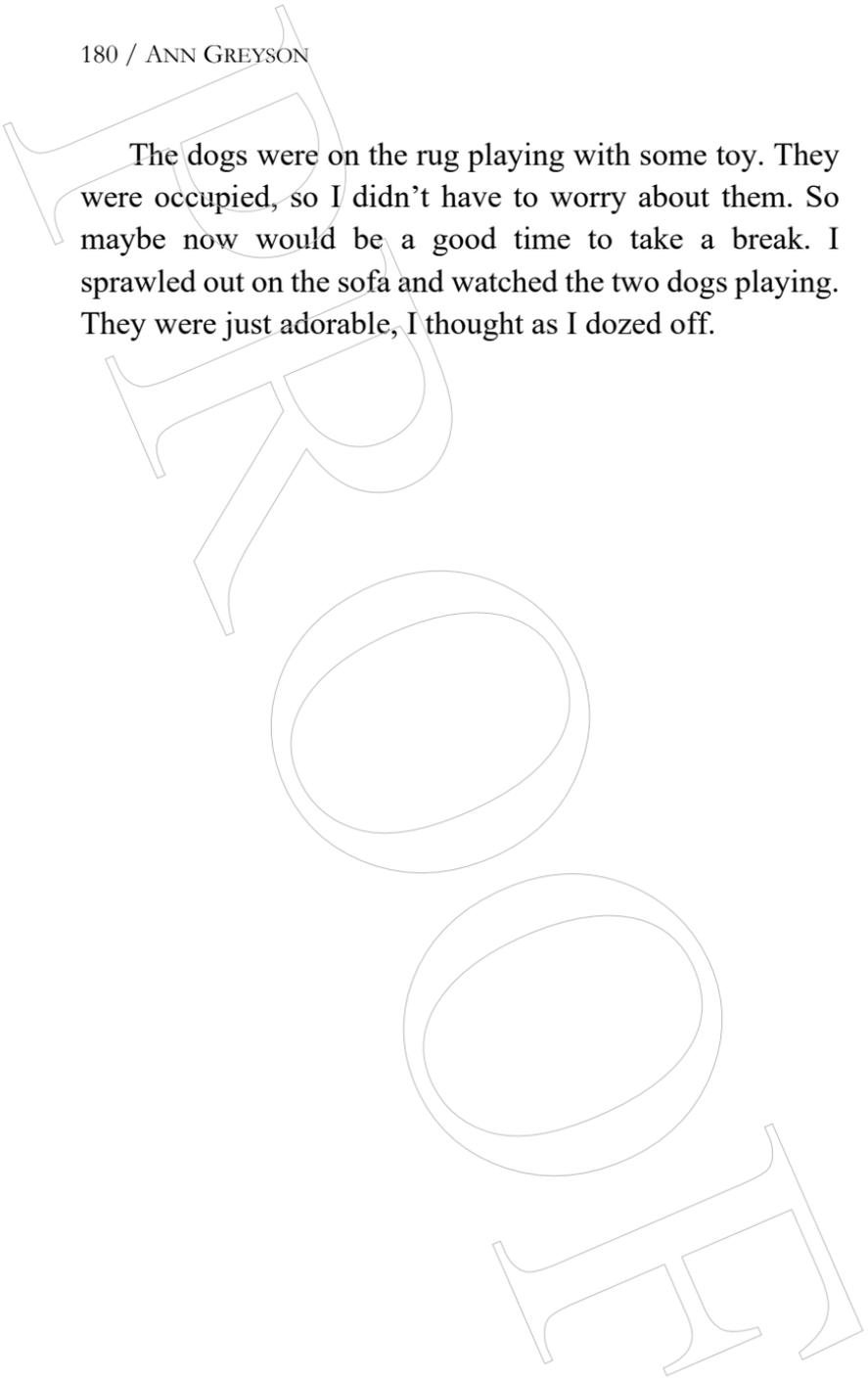
Aunt Eowyn said she thought that Lorraine Krag was asking a lot of questions about her personal life, later when we had lunch together at the hotel's restaurant. She was completely put off by Lorraine Krag's nosiness.

I hoped Lorraine Krag knew something, anything that would shed some light on some of the questions I had about that castle. And if she could tell me anything about the castle's resident, I wanted to find out. Sooner rather than later. It would be worth a visit to her home to pick her brain.

How to approach her without drawing suspicion to myself? I thought that there must be some story I could concoct that would explain why I was visiting her.

I thought about it for a little longer until I was too tired to think anymore. Feeling like I needed a nap, I thought that a little rest would do me good.

The dogs were on the rug playing with some toy. They were occupied, so I didn't have to worry about them. So maybe now would be a good time to take a break. I sprawled out on the sofa and watched the two dogs playing. They were just adorable, I thought as I dozed off.



Chapter 31

THE TIME flew by quickly, passed just like that. It was close to four o'clock when I waved goodbye to Aunt Eowyn as I walked out of the door of her house. Despite the time of day, there was very little light as the clouds were covering the sun. The weather had been like that for two whole days.

As I walked toward my Honda scooter, I could hear the occasional bark from her dogs, which were happy she had returned. Despite all my worries, I must admit it was a joy to be around them.

After putting on my helmet, I straddled the bike, started the engine, and sped away from the house like a bat out of hell. In essence — and literally no pun intended — but that put a smile on my face. I still had the image of a bat practically tattooed on my brain, ever since the dream I had. And it was more than a dream, real in some way. The bite

marks on my neck proved that something real had happened to me.

Once I left Aunt Eowyn's house, there was nothing to do except obsess about that castle. The image of that castle clawed at my mind. I wanted to know anything that might give me some insight into why it was in my so-called dream, and why this was happening to me. And I needed to know who was living there.

My mind was made up. I was going to visit Lorraine Krag. Was there any other option?

To get to the heart of the matter, I needed to see Wightwick Hall up close. I wondered if it was the castle in my dream, even though deep down I knew it was. There was so much I wanted to explore, so much I wanted to know.

The cool air on my body felt nice and refreshing as I tore down Front Street. My adrenaline surged flooding me with a new fearlessness. I was feeling exhilarated — and that felt strange. What brought this sudden change in my mood? It seemed like I was starting to do things without a second thought. I didn't recognize myself — and I liked it very much.

At ten after four on a Sunday, I was glad traffic was practically non-existent. I rode the scooter faster than I needed to on the almost empty street and was thinking about my destination, rather than what was in front of me. For the most part, I was so distracted by my thoughts, which were running wildly from one thing to another, that I swerved to avoid the black Audi Q5 SUV in front of me at

the traffic light. I hit the brakes and skidded to a stop. My bike ended up sideways. The red light came so suddenly. I exhaled loudly in relief, thanking my lucky stars I was all right.

While stopped there, I allowed myself to think about something from that dream. All that was in my mind was that voice calling out to me in a strange language. I wish I knew what language it was so I could translate some of the words that I remembered hearing. But I didn't know what dialect it was. If I had to guess, I would say it was Eastern European.

I took off as soon as the light turned green. That was when I realized that in my haste, I had passed my turn off and I was actually on Station Road. I was supposed to turn left when I got to Haddricks Mill Road. I was going to have to make a U-turn at the next light.

Just thank goodness I caught it in time. I didn't have time to get lost. I agreed to go with Siobhan to Clyde's later. It was one of our hang outs. I was already committed to it and I wasn't going to back out. It was the only way I could think to calm my nerves and so Siobhan wouldn't suspect anything was going on.

As I approached the traffic light at the intersection, I readied myself to make a U-turn. Waiting for the light to change to green, I noticed the clouds were thickening and starting to fill in with the darkness of a storm that might come soon. The turbulent, cloudy sky blanketed the town, gave the streets a gloomy appearance, and added more mystery to the situation.

As soon as the light changed, I made the U-Turn and started back toward my destination. Picking up the pace, I tore down Station Road. I wanted to get to Lorraine Krag's house quickly, before dark and because it looked like it could rain at any time.

Before taking a right turn onto Haddricks Mill Road, I saw a sight that almost startled me off my bike. I was completely caught off guard when I saw that street performer Viktor holding a leash, walking his monkey. Wearing his usual attire of a long black tuxedo jacket, white Oxford button down shirt, black trousers, and a black top hat, he stood out in a crowd. There was no way I could miss seeing him.

From what I could tell, from where I was positioned, I didn't think he spotted me. At the most unexpected moment, or maybe simply one of those serendipity times, there he was again. How bizarre was that?

I looked at him for one last time, and he was deep in thought, like I had seen him in Old Eldon Square.

While in the process of making the turn, the bike jammed and made a screeching sound. It was only for a second, but it was deafening. The noise caused Viktor to look my way. I guessed he couldn't recognize me with my helmet on. But that didn't stop him from looking at me. Actually, he was staring at me oddly.

My scooter wasn't out of petrol, I knew that for sure. It just wouldn't budge. Not an inch. This was the first time it happened.

Just when I was starting to worry, the bike started to move forward again. As I was turning, I noticed the light was changing to red. I looked back briefly and could swear I heard Viktor shout something at me.

I didn't have time to analyze it, nor did I care. It was weird enough just seeing him. All that I was concerned about was that I was headed in the right direction. And I was.

As the street merged into Matthew Bank, I thought how soon I would be turning left onto Jesmond Dene Road. It made me nervous, butterflies welling up in my stomach even thinking about how close I was to the castle. In the short time Lorraine Krag lived on Jesmond Dene Road, I wondered if she had noticed anything strange about the castle.

I knew I needed to be careful what I would say to Lorraine Krag.

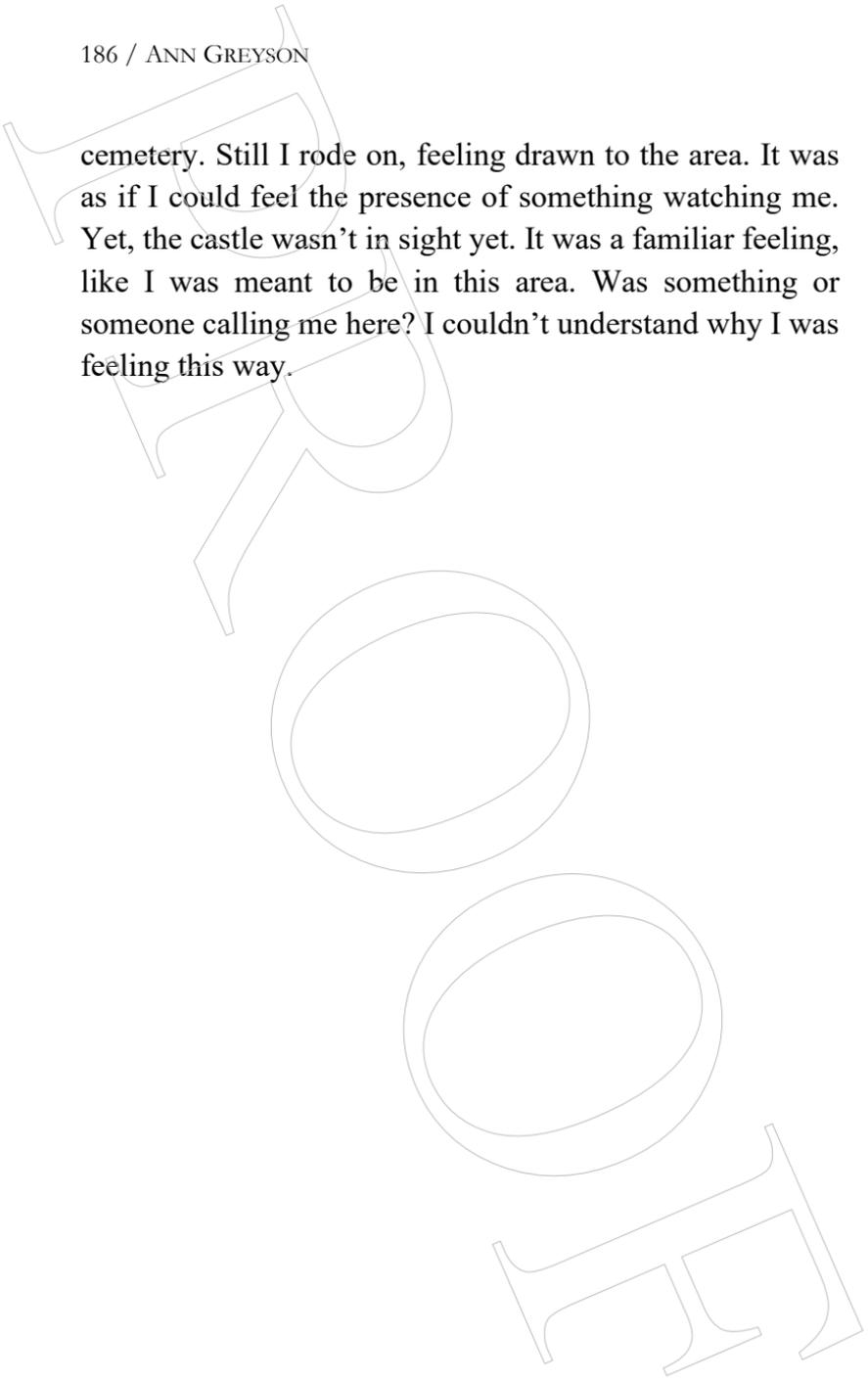
The more I thought about the circumstance, the more I felt that I couldn't let on in any way that I was interested in the castle or its caretaker. It could work as long as I could convince her that I was just getting information for someone else.

I would try to get as much information as possible from her. But that was wishful thinking on my part. I wished myself luck.

Then I thought, perhaps I shouldn't ask too many questions.

It felt strange driving down Jesmond Dene Road. At first glimpse, the road was dusty, and gloomy like a

cemetery. Still I rode on, feeling drawn to the area. It was as if I could feel the presence of something watching me. Yet, the castle wasn't in sight yet. It was a familiar feeling, like I was meant to be in this area. Was something or someone calling me here? I couldn't understand why I was feeling this way.



Chapter 32

THE ECCENTRIC VIKTOR PAVLOVIC was smoking quietly and staring off into space, while leaning against the wall of a building on Haddricks Mill Road. A bit disconcerted, he was deep in his thoughts, thinking about the girl he had seen accelerating away from the traffic light on her scooter. It bothered him that he couldn't figure out why the girl had seemed familiar to him. He didn't believe in coincidences, nor did he like them.

Clearly the girl on the scooter was on his mind. Even though he couldn't see her face well because she was wearing a helmet, he felt sure that her eyes had been on him. She had looked at him with curiosity, though of course he could only assume. He was interested in knowing who she was, as he made a mental note to himself that the next time, he saw her, should he encounter her again, he would say something to her.

His trance was broken by Jasper, who placed his paws on his leg and looked up at him with his brown eyes. Viktor bent down and gave him a pat on his head. He couldn't resist the monkey, his companion and business partner.

“What is it, my little one?” he asked the creature.

Now eight years old, the monkey understood his master. Jasper raised his paws higher up his leg and released a screech in reply. That was how they communicated.

While bent over, he noticed the black leather shoes on his feet were unpolished and worn, reminding him of his financial woes.

“We'll head over to Allan's for dinner soon. How would you like that my old mate?” he asked as he raised himself up.

He took a puff of his cigarette and thought about how the last six years he had lived in Newcastle upon Tyne, had been a hand to mouth existence, which scarcely kept him alive. More than ever before in his life he realized to himself that he had become dependent on the kindness of strangers, surviving on meager handouts.

Despite the fact that his clothes were sometimes worn, he had a taste for the finer things and fine food. He might be a street bum, but he maintained standards.

He was grateful to have struck up a nice rapport with Allan Palen. Being a regular customer of The Longbow Tavern, Allan gave him discounts on meals, and he was given complimentary servings of fruit like apples and bananas, which in turn he gave to Jasper. It was a big help to Viktor. And Allan allowed him to bring the animal into

the restaurant as long as he sat at the farthest table from the kitchen.

Yet he knew that Allan viewed him as an outsider, a misfit of society. Odd character that he was, Viktor knew, too, that he stood out like a sore thumb.

Still smoking the cigarette, he took a quick look around the vicinity. The girl on the scooter was long gone now, and out of his thoughts. Instead, he reflected on his own life, his younger days, when he was a much fitter and handsome man.

A long time ago Viktor Pavlovic was a young man of much promise. Early in life, he developed a love of acrobatics and magic. He grew up so tall and overshadowed other performers in the local circus, that his parents allowed him to participate in after school and weekends.

Coming from a poor family in Zagreb, Croatia, magic was his only opportunity. His mother was a grocery store clerk and his father worked as a welder at a local factory. With two brothers, there was never enough to go around. The extra money he brought in from the circus helped a lot. His parents were proud of him for his ability to earn a living.

Rather than go to college, he became the headline act for the circus. Three days each week, for fifteen minutes each show, he got to perform his favorite magic tricks which served as an introduction for the other performers. He had loved being in the spotlight and it stirred a passion deep inside him.

The circus traveled all over Eastern Europe as one of the leading big top shows. Among the many places he had visited, the one which pleased him more than any other was Medjugorje, a town in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He visited the Queen of Peace statue, the site of the appearance of the Virgin Mary to children in 1981. It was like a spiritual awakening for him.

But time went by so fast. He had carried on relationships with some of the women he encountered in his work, but never settled down with any of them. With the money he made in the circus, he could barely cover his own costs, let alone support someone else.

His current financial problems had begun the day he had missed his train from London, six years earlier. He caught another train and arrived two hours late in Newcastle upon Tyne. The circus had left, and he was stranded in a city where he knew no one.

To say Viktor's life had fallen into misfortune would be an understatement. At the age of forty-six, he smoked incessantly, gambled on rugby matches, and had become a little more than a freak show. But he didn't care much. He drew sustenance from a life-enriching past, that he smiled about.

He would leave Newcastle upon Tyne soon, thought the cynical Viktor. It always troubled him that things had not gone the way he had hoped. Truth be told, he was tired of dreary old England and desperately wanted to get back to Croatia. Maybe even as early as next summer. There wasn't

any doubt that he desired to see members of his family again.

His thoughts returned to the present. He gazed at the cigarette dangling from his mouth. It was burnt to the filter. He dropped it on the ground and crunched it underfoot. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out an empty pack. It was another disappointment, and something else he needed to buy.

In the air, a rumbling sound came from the sky. Rain could be coming. Jasper wasn't into it. The little monkey's arms were clutched around Viktor's leg while his eyes stared up at the darkening sky.

Viktor looked up, displeased. The gloomy day was not a prosperous one for him. Weather, as such, affected his collections from passersby and onlookers he attracted with his performance with Jasper.

It seemed Viktor wasn't sure if the sound he had heard came from his stomach. He was famished from a long day. Thankfully, the little money he earned earlier would provide a much-needed dinner.

He looked left and right one more time. The streets were clear, but the light of the day was fading fast. He wanted to get under cover before the rain came.

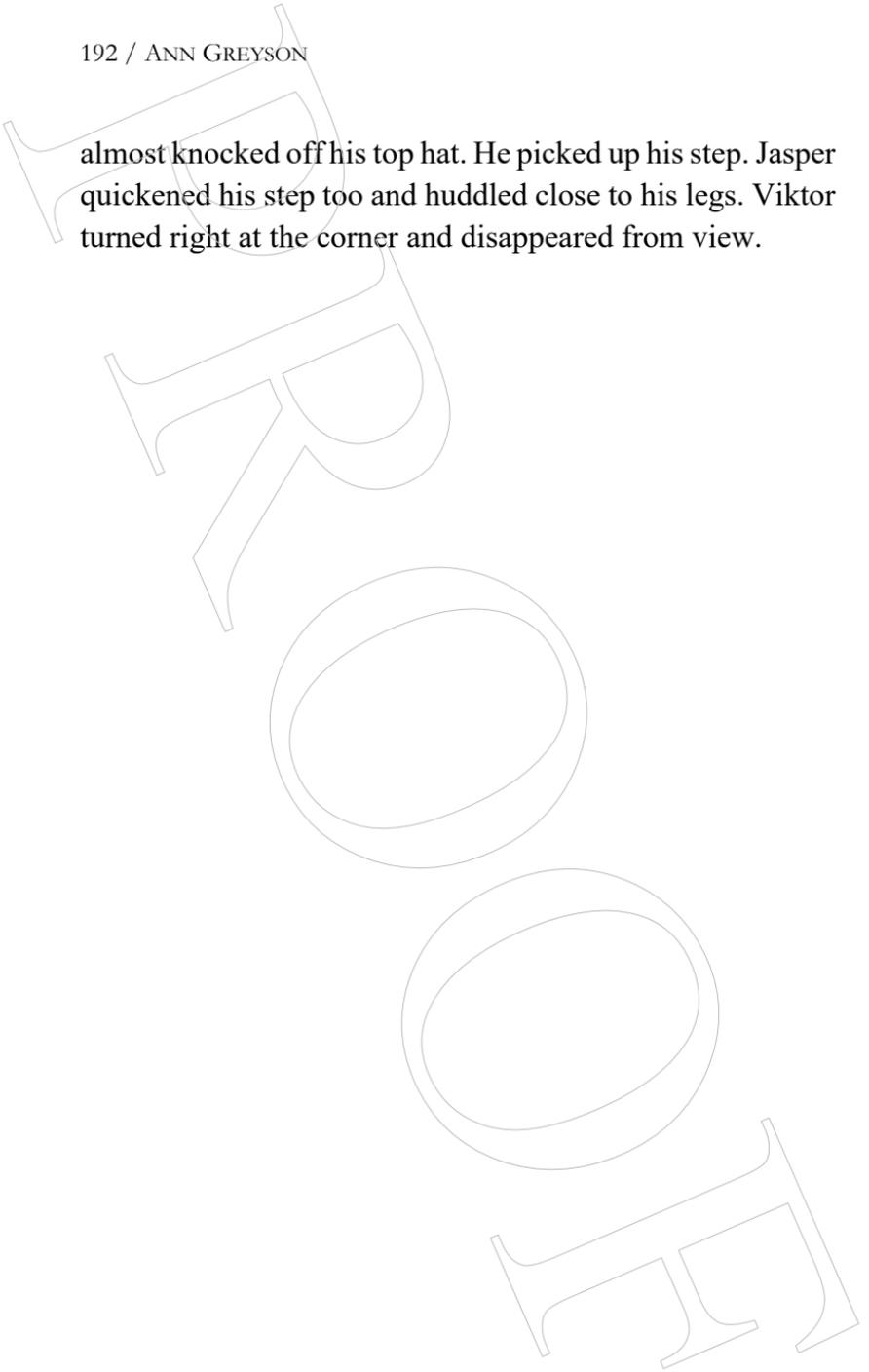
"Come along my friend," he said affectionately as he pulled lightly on the leash.

Jasper let out a few screeches in response.

"Yes, we are going," he said and started walking.

As he passed a trash can, he dropped the empty cigarette pack into it. The wind kicked up a bit, sent a rush of air, and

almost knocked off his top hat. He picked up his step. Jasper quickened his step too and huddled close to his legs. Viktor turned right at the corner and disappeared from view.



Chapter 33

IT WAS exactly 4:21 p.m. when I pulled into the curb by the walkway leading up to the entrance of a small brown painted house with white-shuttered windows on Jesmond Dene Road. Near the streetlight was a red sign with white letters that read “Private Property” affixed to a low wrought iron fence on top of a stone wall. I knew it was the right place because the house looked lived in. Going by what Lorraine Krag had told me, she was living in the only house that was occupied for streets around. For reasons she couldn’t fathom all the other houses had been deserted by their owners long ago and their doors and windows were boarded up.

After taking off my helmet, I sat there on my Honda scooter for a little bit trying to prepare what I was going to say. The first thing I saw when I glanced toward the house was Lorraine Krag at her living room window looking at

me from behind the curtain. In this quiet area, there was no doubt that she heard the sound of the bike's engine just before I turned it off. I took that as a sign that she might be willing to talk to me.

After stepping off the scooter, I trotted to the front door of the house. Lorraine Krag left the window closing the curtains. Was she capable of pretending she wasn't there? I hoped not.

Perhaps I spoke too soon when I thought earlier that she would speak to me because when I rang the bell nothing happened. I rang the bell again and waited. No one came to answer. Relentless, I reached for the doorbell a third time. Standing on the doorstep, I wasn't sure what to do next.

"Maybe she doesn't want to talk to me," I spoke out to myself.

The most obvious thing came to mind. It was the most vulnerable point and was the reason I was there in the first place. I turned my head around so I could see the castle. My focus returned, and I asked myself the most obvious question. Where was the caretaker? From the distance I was standing, it seemed vacant, a lonely place. One would think nobody lived there.

Still, I stood there looking at the castle, hoping it would trigger something in my mind. It didn't. Nothing appeared in my mind. It just looked like an old castle.

The dying light of the day and looming clouds in the sky attracted my attention. Glancing upward to the sky, then back to Lorraine Krag's front door, I needed to act if I was going to get any answers. Instead of ringing the bell, I

knocked on the door hard enough to rattle the frame. This was going to be my last attempt.

“Hello? I know you’re there. I’m not leaving without talking to you,” I called out in a loud voice.

“Yes. What can I help you with?” Lorraine Krag’s voice called out from behind the door.

“It’s Myrna Ivester. You know my aunt, Eowyn Dymtrow. She introduced me to you at your Rotary Club meeting last July. I know you don’t know me well, but I thought you could give me some information. I have a couple of questions about Wightwick Hall. I promise I won’t take much of your time,” I said, sounding desperate.

“The castle? Oh, for goodness sake! Why on earth would you be interested in that place?” she asked, with a hint of suspicion in her voice.

“A friend of mine wants to know, Lorraine. She’s interested in buying it,” I said with impatience.

Almost immediately she swung the door open wide and stood in the doorway looking at me with a displeased expression on her face. She didn’t invite me inside her house. While she was looking at me from top to bottom, I looked at her the same way and noticed she was wearing a pink and white dress to her knees under a white cardigan sweater and a pair of white house slippers on her feet.

“I’m Mrs. Krag to you,” she said sharply.

“Certainly, Mrs. Krag.”

“Why are you here wasting my time?” she asked with a sneer on her face.

“My friend really wants to know if the castle is for sale. And who owns it exactly? Since you live nearby, I thought you might know.”

She studied me for a moment, then said, “Very well, Myrna Ivester, if you must know, I think the castle is haunted. I’ve seen a strange woman dressed in black coming in and out of there all the time. And every so often, I hear the sound of animals screaming. It is the creepiest place. I tell my husband Arthur, all of the time.”

I sighed as I took it all in. Hearing the words that came from her mouth almost seemed unbelievable.

When she heard footsteps approaching her, she turned her head around, then back to me.

“Who are you talking to Lorraine?” came a man’s voice.

It was her husband. I couldn’t see him because she was in the doorway blocking my view.

“Is there anything else you can tell me?” I asked, pressing for more information.

Mrs. Krag cut me off with a wave of her hand, turned her head to her husband, and said, “Just a minute, dear.”

“You don’t want your friend to buy it. Don’t go near the place!” she barked at me.

And with that Lorraine Krag turned on her heel and left, slamming the door behind her.

“Sure, Mrs. Krag,” I said in a low grumble.

Her warning came too late. I was already hooked on that castle. I knew I would have to come back to this neck of the

woods. But next time it would be the castle I would be visiting. It was my only resort.

I could hear Mrs. Krag's cranky voice carrying on a conversation with her husband about me, telling him I was asking about Wightwick Hall. I didn't knock on her door again. There was no need to bother her anymore.

It was time to leave. I walked back to my scooter, grabbed my helmet out of the cargo hold, and strapped it on my head before getting on and starting it up.

While the bike was idling, I sat there a little while. Looking up briefly toward Mrs. Krag's house, I saw her at the window of her living room. She was looking at me in an eerie way. But her staring was short lived. Even though the helmet was on my head, the second she noticed me looking at her, she quickly moved out of sight of the window and closed the curtains.

As the darkness was falling, the wind shifted and started to pick up. The sky made rumbling noises like that of an empty stomach. Still no rain fell. I decided it was best I go. I pulled onto the road and headed toward home.

Walking into the house after a long day, I was thinking about Siobhan Mulcahy now. Lately, it felt like we were going in different directions, as if our friendship was drifting apart. Tired and feeling weak, I wasn't looking forward to going out. But I couldn't tell her no. If I didn't go with her, she would wonder and start asking questions I couldn't answer. So, there I was, heading to my room to get ready for a night out.

As I was walking through the living room, Siobhan spotted me and asked, “Interested in an evening of wings, beer, and girl talk?”

I stopped walking and half-heartedly said, “Yes, I’m in.”

“That sounds great. I’ll go get dressed,” Siobhan said, and left to her bedroom.

In contrast, I was too tired to change. My blue tie-dyed V-neck short sleeved T-shirt, black jeans, black leather sandals, and scarf around my neck, I had been wearing since this morning would have to suffice. After taking a quick shower, I threw it all back on.

Entering the living room, all I wanted was a place to rest, and think about what was happening to me. I simply slumped into the brown leather recliner next to the floor lamp by the sofa and waited for Siobhan.

Just when I was about to fall asleep, I heard keys jingling and footsteps entering the living room. Siobhan was wearing a pink tie-dyed V-neck short sleeved T-shirt, stonewashed jeans, and colorful flip-flops. We often dressed similar, but Siobhan looked better. Well, in my eyes, she did.

Chapter 34

SIOBHAN MULCAHY opened the door to enter Clyde's just as the rain started to fall. A bolt of lightning struck across the sky and lit up the area as I stepped inside behind her. We sat down in a booth by the window where I could see a full-scale downpour in progress. The dark sky was interrupted by the occasional strike of lightning. I did my best to get comfortable, knowing we might be here a while because of the storm.

The place on Mill Rise was one of the best bars in the city. It was dimly lit, with a hardwood floor and free-standing light maple-wood tables covered by brown gingham tablecloths and chairs with brown leather cushions piped in white in the middle of the room. There were brown vinyl booths lining the windowed walls except for one corner, where there was a small stage.

It was happy hour on a Sunday night and packed tight to the walls. The music was as loud as the crowd. To top it off, the Newcastle Falcons winning rugby match against the Sale Sharks, played last Friday at AJ Bell Stadium, was being replayed on the widescreen television mounted above the bar. The noise in the place made it impossible to hear a conversation unless you were right up next to the other person. Siobhan and I could only shout and gesture with our hands.

Normally I would have loved it, but everything was not right in my head. It couldn't be worse. I felt tired and just couldn't get into what was happening around me.

A woman in her late thirties walked up to the table wearing a blue and white checkered apron over a white blouse and black skirt. She held up a small notepad and took out a black pen from the top pocket of her apron. The plump waitress with her blond hair in a bun stated that she would be taking care of us, and that the happy hour special was two for one on drinks and burgers.

She smiled and asked, "What can I get you girls?"

Siobhan jumped in immediately and said, "I want to order wings and two Fuller's beers."

I let Siobhan order for me. There wasn't any time to intervene. Besides, I wasn't in the mood to talk anyway.

Roughly twenty minutes later, the waitress appeared at our table with a large plate of chicken wings and put it down in front of us. Soon afterwards, she set two glasses of beer on the table.

Siobhan took a swig of beer and said, "These tasty wings are guaranteed to cure anything that ails you. I know they will put you in a glorious mood."

She said that with a warm smile that was contagious. So, surprised on that, I forced a smile. But I couldn't concentrate, let alone eat anything.

"Myrna, what's wrong?" Siobhan asked, interrupting my thoughts. "You hungry?"

My mind was on something else. I felt a million miles away from Siobhan, even though I was sitting across the table from her. It was like I was watching it all from a distance.

"Huh?" I asked, confused by what she said.

Siobhan tapped me on the shoulder and said, "I thought you might want to eat something."

After snapping out of it, I grabbed a wing and said, "Oh, yes."

Trying to appear interested, I picked at the wing. Eating was the last thing I wanted to do, even if I hadn't eaten a thing all day. Deep within I realized that I was craving something other than food or drink, but precisely what I could not say.

"Waitress!" Siobhan shouted, snapping me back to reality.

Seeing me almost jump out of my seat, Siobhan cracked up and burst out laughing. She laughed so hard that tears came to her eyes.

I put on a make-believe smile and asked, "Am I missing something? What's so funny?"

“I remembered,” she sputtered, trying not to collapse in laughter, “the way you looked this morning, when you told me about your dream about how you just couldn’t get away.”

The reason Siobhan Mulcahy was my best friend in the first place was that she could push my buttons like nobody else.

“I’ll drink to that,” I said and took a swallow of beer.

It was the best I could do. I tried to put on an act that I felt well, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth.

Siobhan lifted her beer and said, “To us, down the hatch!”

We touched our glasses across the table with a satisfying clink. It just so happened we got caught up in the moment.

It didn’t last. An annoying live performance was in progress. A lounge singer was belting out the tune of a 1970s song on the stage. And not a pleasant one either. His raspy voice flowed over and around our bodies.

Siobhan and I both took a gander at him. His long-sleeved black button-down shirt was unbuttoned to mid-chest. Heavy gold chains mingled with his black chest hair. The man with thick dark hair and eyes as black as coal, appearing in his forties, was also wearing a pair of cream-colored bell-bottom pants.

“Feelings, nothing more than feelings. Trying to forget my feelings of love,” he sang embarrassingly.

It was impossible to talk over the awful crooning because he was holding a microphone. It was fine with me because I didn't want to talk.

It got even worse when the people seated at the nearby tables joined in singing with him, "Feelings, wo-o-o feelings. Wo-o-o, feelings."

As far as I could hear, the singing did nothing for the Morris Albert song "Feelings." It was a shabby attempt of the classic.

Siobhan laughed careful not to seem like she was laughing at him. His singing had given her the giggles, which in turn affected me. For the first time that evening, I presented a smile, and a real one at that. I even laughed a little.

After gaining her composure, Siobhan said, "I feel sorry for him."

"Yeah, he's clearing the place out," I said, and we laughed again.

After wiping her mouth with a napkin, Siobhan brought the subject back to food, "There's one wing left."

"You're welcome to it."

"Sure, Myrna. How about a sweet treat?"

"I'm done for the night," I said politely.

After the plates were cleared, Siobhan ordered her favorite dessert, Yorkshire pudding. The waitress returned with the dessert and placed it on the table. She picked up a pitcher to pour some more beer and noticed that my glass was more than half full. I placed my hand over my glass to signal that I didn't want anymore.

Suddenly, I felt the urge to get up. I began sliding out of the booth.

“Please, excuse me for a moment, Siobhan. I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Sure, go on ahead.”

Siobhan looked on with a gloomy expression, watching me as I walked toward the women’s room. It wasn’t difficult to tell that she was aware that most of the evening it seemed as though I was someplace else. She knew it was time to call it a night.

Chapter 35

IT WAS HALF PAST TEN when Siobhan and I left Clyde's and arrived home at a quarter to eleven. I went to my room, locked the door, and headed for the bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I took a good look at myself in the mirror above the sink. Noticing that I was very pale and looking tired, I took off my clothes. I filled the bathtub with cool water and lay down in it with my eyes shut for about an hour without moving. After that, I changed into my pajamas and got into bed.

I felt a good night's sleep would help. Maybe tomorrow I might feel better and everything would be back to normal again. It was wishful thinking on my part.

That night in bed, I was feeling restless. My mind was reeling a million miles an hour. It was beginning to frighten me. After tossing and turning in bed for what seemed like an eternity, I felt myself fall into a deep sleep.

When I woke up in the morning something strange had happened, something completely outside of any experience my twenty-four years had shown me. My body was floating in the air and I was really scared. Now I knew something was up because this time I wasn't dreaming. I was about four inches above the bed, with my head and arms unsupported.

Somehow — like magic — my body gently fell back into bed. Instinctively I buried myself under the blanket laying there quivering. There was no doubt that I was terrified by what had happened.

I wanted to tell Siobhan, but something inside wouldn't let me do it. In retrospect I couldn't tell her or anyone else what had happened to me. I needed to sort this out for myself, alone.

There was no way I could go to work.

I rolled over to my right side and looked at the clock on my nightstand. It said 8:24. I got out of bed and grabbed my smartphone off my dresser. I calmly dialed my work number and spoke to the receptionist who transferred me to Joyce Gunn's voicemail. She must be away from her desk because she reported for work at 8:00 a.m. on Mondays. I left her a message telling her I would not be coming in today.

After I hung up, I turned around and went right back to bed. There were chills running up and down my body. But I found that I wasn't craving anything to eat.

I heard footsteps outside in the hallway. It was Siobhan. She was coming from the kitchen. Not much later, a soft knock came on the door.

Like lightning I sprang from the bed and it felt like I flew in the air. My fingernails were clenched in the wood of the door. I was clinging to the door.

My senses were heightened so much that I could feel Siobhan standing on the other side of the door. What was more unusual was that I sensed the blood running through her veins. I was attracted to it. I was longing for it. Well, not specifically hers, just any blood.

“Myrna, are you going to work today?” she asked loudly.

For a long moment I didn’t answer. I stalled for time to get my thoughts in order. I also wanted to pretend that I was in bed, not wanting her to know that I was behind the door, smelling her blood. I could even taste it. There was an urge inside me that I couldn’t understand. It was something I couldn’t control.

“No, I’m not going to work. I’m feeling really tired. I’m sure I’ll be all right by tonight,” I said, finally, hoping it was enough to ease her worries.

Considering the way, I was feeling last night, she would probably believe it.

“Do you need anything?”

“No, thanks. I’m just going to stay in bed and rest.”

It wasn’t a conversation I wanted to go any further. I was worried that my desire for her blood could cause me to hurt her.

“I’m leaving for work now. Call me on my cell phone if you need anything.”

Thankfully, she didn’t pry any further. I had the sense that she didn’t have a clue what was happening to me.

I responded with the first thing that came to my mind. “Okay. We’ll talk later.”

“I hope you feel better,” she said as I heard her walking away from the door.

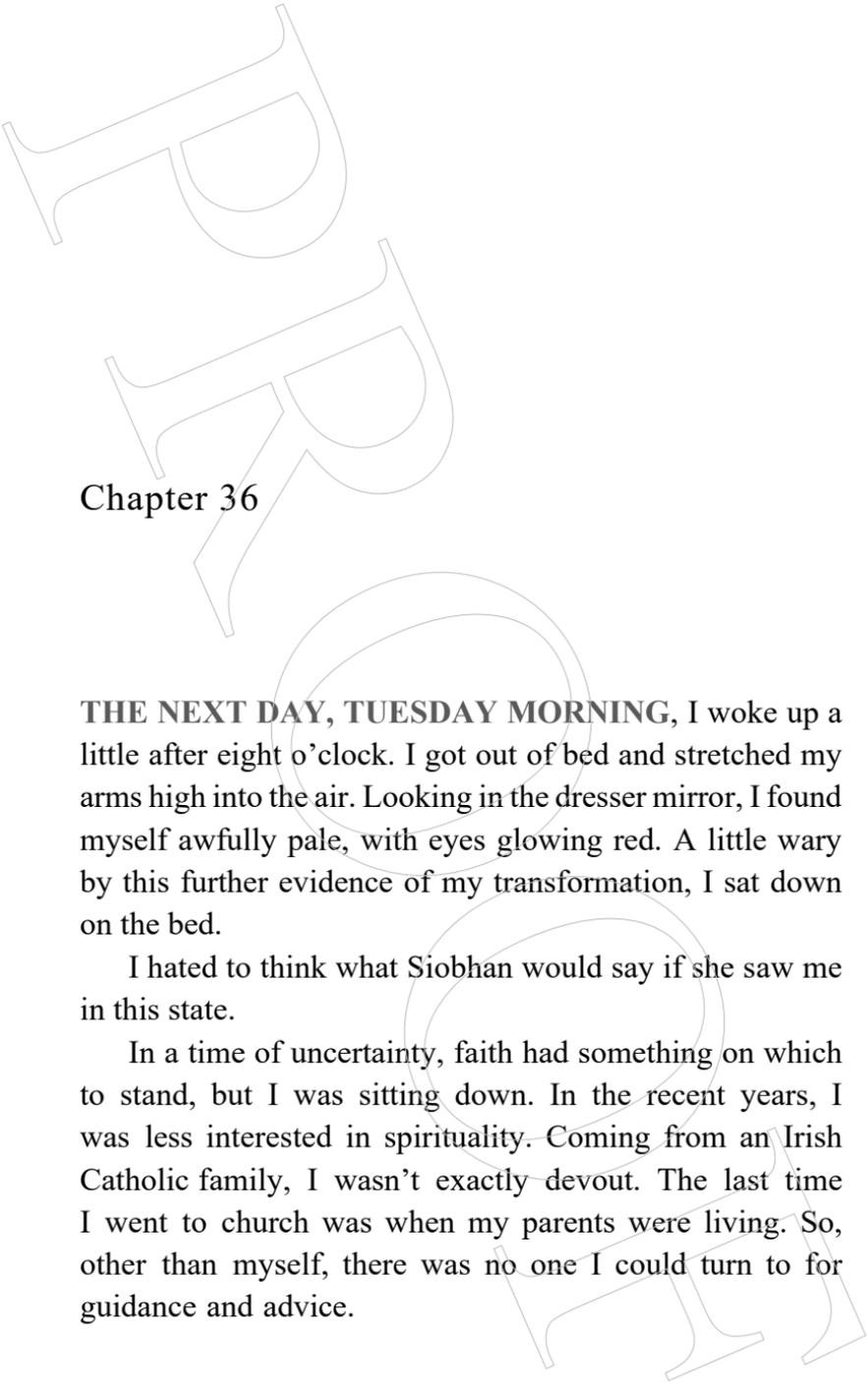
My emotions and thoughts were running faster than I could keep up with them. Major changes were happening to me. It felt like I was in the process of becoming someone new. But, who, and what, I didn’t know yet?

One thing I did know was that Siobhan Mulcahy was drifting further and further away from the world I was living in.

The revelation hit me like a ton of bricks. I slowly turned around in agony, leaning my back against the door. My hands were trembling, and tears formed in my eyes. I couldn’t stay here anymore. With things the way they were, I didn’t see any other choice. I didn’t know what I might be capable of.

It had been sometime since I heard Siobhan’s car drive off. I went to the window, pulled back the curtain not knowing what I was looking for, or maybe I did. Thoughts of that woman, I had caught staring at me in the library, resurfaced. The images of her were still fresh in my mind. I thought, with a sigh that perhaps I expected her to be outside somewhere. She wasn’t out there, just in my mind.

I couldn't analyze it because I was feeling strangely emotional. I left the window and got back into bed. I needed to sleep. Again. I felt weak and faint, as if I would pass out. I wanted to plan something out, but it would have to wait a little longer, maybe even another day. With that last thought, I was out cold shortly after.



Chapter 36

THE NEXT DAY, TUESDAY MORNING, I woke up a little after eight o'clock. I got out of bed and stretched my arms high into the air. Looking in the dresser mirror, I found myself awfully pale, with eyes glowing red. A little wary by this further evidence of my transformation, I sat down on the bed.

I hated to think what Siobhan would say if she saw me in this state.

In a time of uncertainty, faith had something on which to stand, but I was sitting down. In the recent years, I was less interested in spirituality. Coming from an Irish Catholic family, I wasn't exactly devout. The last time I went to church was when my parents were living. So, other than myself, there was no one I could turn to for guidance and advice.

This was a turning point in my life. I knew it was time to take a risk.

I didn't get dressed for work. I came off the bed, grabbed my smartphone from the dresser, and called my job. While the phone rang a few times, I knew I was never going back there. Finally, the receptionist picked up.

"Can you hold?" the voice answered on the other end.

"Sure, I'll wait."

There was a pause, but the voice returned quickly, "Longwood Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, how can I help you?"

"Hi, it's Myrna Ivester. Can I speak to Joyce Gunn?"

She came on the line at once. "Myrna, how are you feeling?"

"I'm all right, thanks for asking Joyce. I'm actually calling you this morning for another reason."

"What is it that you want to tell me?"

"I'm sorry, but I won't be returning to work."

Joyce asked me if I was sure about my decision. All I could think to tell her was that I had other job prospects lined up after I return from a long sabbatical. Lying to her didn't sit right with me, but I couldn't exactly tell her the truth. She said that she was going to miss me and that she hoped that I would come visit her some time. After that I told her that it was nice knowing her. Then I hung up and sat back on the bed.

Since, I quit my job, I felt relieved, not sad in any way. I had wanted to quit for a long time.

Utterly alone with my thoughts, my gut was telling me something about myself that my head wasn't ready to hear but needed to confront. I had a notion, a theory of the metamorphosis that was happening to me. I had ascertained that I was undergoing a transformation into a vampire. Me a vampire? It felt plausible. Actually, it made all the sense in the world. I had seen movies about it but didn't think it was possible. And it was so much like a movie, I was having trouble believing it was real.

I couldn't talk about this with anybody. Not my Aunt Eowyn, not even Siobhan.

Was I bitten by a bat? Maybe it didn't happen that way. My assumption was that it was a vampire disguised as a bat. There was something, somewhere in my mind, something swirling like a stain of ink in a glass of clear water, and I could not quite hold on to it. I couldn't grasp what had actually taken place.

Looking back on recent events, I thought about the dream I had the night of my birthday. There was a bat flying around the cemetery. My body was in a coffin for burial. Then I came to life from the grave. It was like I was being reborn. It was as if I was looking through a window at my future self. I wholeheartedly believe that it was a premonition of things to come. That I would be living a new life as a vampire.

Was this the life I had longed for? I asked myself that very question, because now I was faced with the imminent possibility that the very thing, I had been waiting for all my life was finally here. As an afterthought, I hoped it was.

I decided here and now that it was a path I really wanted to follow.

My mind started flashing back to that woman from the library. There was just something about her. I was still thinking about the way she had looked at me and what it had made me remember. The directness of her eyes nailed me to the spot. Her eyes were so fascinating that I couldn't look away from them. As if in a trance, I kept seeing her eyes, seeing her soul.

What interested me the most was the conclusion I reached about her. Intuitively, I knew she was a vampire. I was sure she was.

Was she the reason this was happening to me? Had she made this happen? The questions resonated but yielded no definite answers.

The other burning question in my mind was whether or not she was the caretaker of Wightwick Hall. Something inside me told me she was. It fit with what Lorraine Krag had said concerning a strange woman in a supposedly haunted castle.

Vampires had a sixth sense, and paranormal abilities. I sensed all of this because I was changing. I was going to transform into a supernatural being. That being the case, what should I do next?

Not that I needed time, I knew what I wanted to do. I would go to Wightwick Hall. The best thing to do was to go now. Assuming that woman lived there, I hoped she would assist me. Surely, she could provide me some answers.

Since I was dead set on leaving, I looked around thinking if there was anything I should bring. Nothing in the room meant anything to me. I grabbed the locket hanging from the gold chain around my neck and gazed at the picture of my late parents. I would keep this with me. But what else?

After a few minutes, I went to my closet. Rummaging through my clothes, I pulled out a couple of outfits. After placing them on the bed, I searched the closet again and found my large brown canvas backpack. I threw the backpack on the bed and put the clothes in it. Then I emptied the contents of my crossbody bag into the backpack and threw in my cell phone.

Nothing else was coming with me. Starting a new life, I didn't want to bring anything that would remind me of the past. And I didn't want to hold on to a bunch of things I didn't need. Things were going to be different now. And I was prepared for that difference.

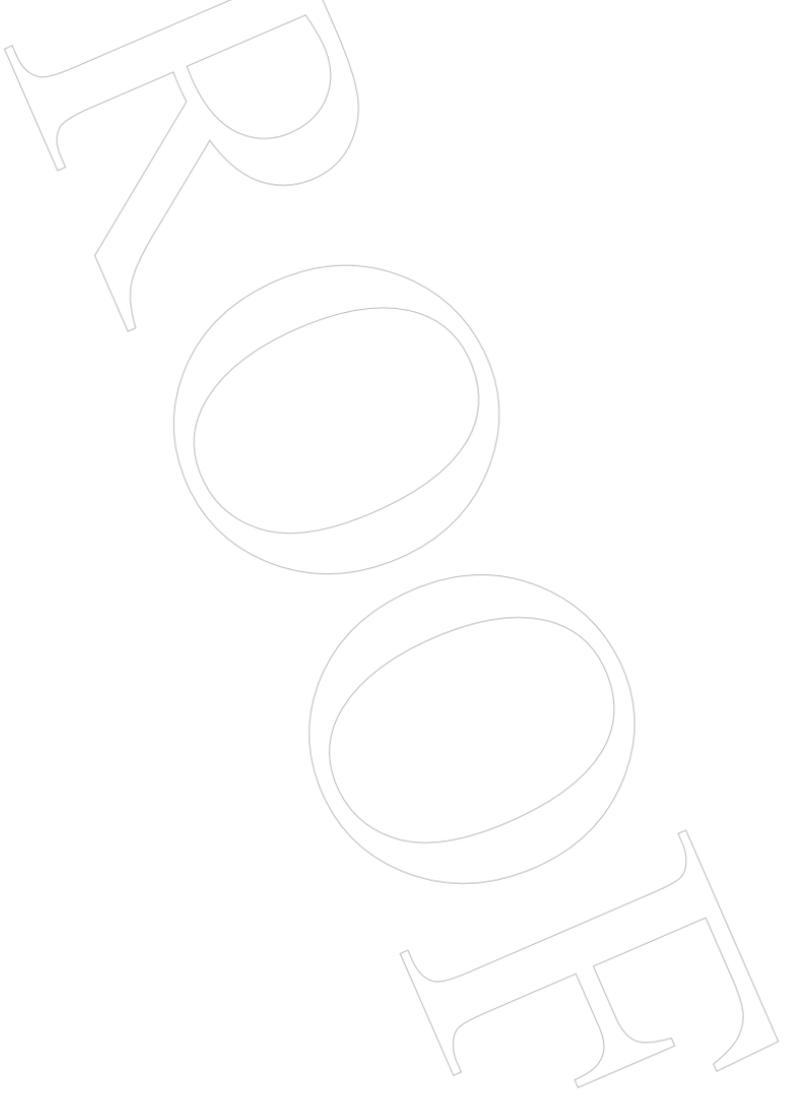
After getting dressed, I realized that I was leaving a lot of things behind. It also hit me that I was heading into a future filled with equal parts excitement and uncertainty.

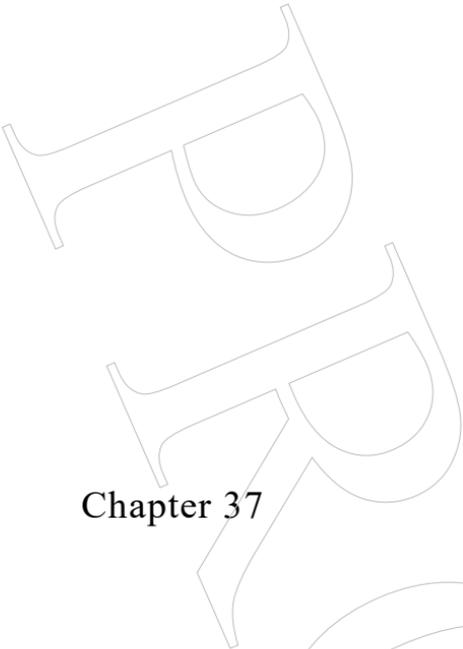
I looked at myself in the mirror on the dresser and grimaced. The holes in my neck really stood out. I grabbed the white silk scarf imprinted with Fifi Lapin illustrated bunnies from the top dresser drawer and tied it around my neck.

As the daylight crept into the room, my body shrieked out against it. I had developed a sensitivity to light. It was

another sign of my changes. I took the sunglasses from the dresser and placed them over my eyes.

There was only one thing left to do. I needed to talk with Siobhan Mulcahy. There was no more procrastinating.





Chapter 37

I OPENED THE DOOR of the bedroom and quietly stepped into the hallway. As I was turning away from the door, Siobhan appeared in the hallway and began to approach. It was her day off because she was still wearing her pajamas. When she was about five feet away, she stopped, and looked at me closely.

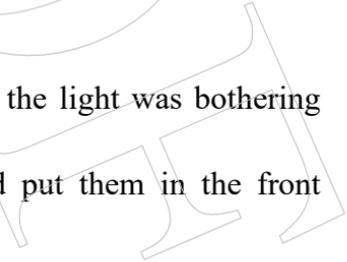
“Myrna, are you all right? You’re not going into work today, are you?” she asked with a worried look on her face — and then some.

“I’m not going into work, but I’m feeling better,” I told her.

“What’s with the sunglasses?”

“I had a headache earlier and the light was bothering me. I just forgot to take them off.”

I took off the sunglasses and put them in the front pocket of my black jeans.



“Since I’m off today, how about I make you some herbal tea?” Siobhan asked with her gentle smile.

I gave in and said, “Okay, if you insist.”

I knew she was concerned about me, so I let her help as much as she wanted. She reached over and took my hand and led me to the kitchen. Her hand tightened on mine and I could feel the blood pulsing through her veins. I suddenly felt euphoric. My thirst for blood was growing.

She let go of my hand and went to the cabinet and took out two tea bags. I sat down at the square oak table, trying to sort out my emotions and settle down my nerves. All the while Siobhan filled the kettle with cold water and set it on the burner of the stove.

When the tea was ready, Siobhan took a seat across from me at the table. We were mostly quiet.

She took a sip of her tea before asking, “Better?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

Siobhan swallowed the last mouthful of her tea, and then went to the sink and rinsed out her mug.

“Siobhan, we have to talk,” I said and stood up from the table.

I knew this conversation was going to be painful for both of us, but it was time I got it off my chest. She wasn’t going to like what I was going to say next, but it needed to be said. At this stage of my transformation, I couldn’t postpone the conversation any longer.

She quickly put the mug in the cabinet and asked, “What is it? Something bothering you, Myrna?”

As far as I could make out, she was nervous and unsure about what would happen next. She knew something heavy was on my mind. I could tell by the look on her face that she felt she was about to find out something she would not like.

After careful consideration, I prepared in my mind what I was going to say and how I was going to say it, because I was about to drop a bombshell on her.

I hesitated for a moment before I said, “Siobhan, please don’t be mad.”

“It’s okay, Myrna. I could never be mad at you.”

Laying it all out upfront, I said, “I wish there was an easy way to tell you this, but I’m leaving. I can’t live here anymore.”

Not once did she look away from me. Her grim expression told me that this wasn’t what she was expecting to hear. It was like a punch to the stomach. I was bracing myself for whatever it was she was going to say.

There was a long pause before she asked, “What’s happened? Why did you wait till now to tell me?”

“I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure. I wasn’t ready. Now I am.”

“Are you certain about your decision?” she asked, fighting back some emotions.

Siobhan waited for me to tell her more. She looked as if she wanted to know what was going on and was eager to hear me out.

“Too many things have changed for me. Please don’t try to talk me out of it or try and stop me,” I said with some emotion in my voice.

I could see she wanted to argue with me, but she didn’t answer back. She didn’t beg me to reconsider, as I thought she would. So much had changed between us since first meeting at Northumbria University. I think she saw how much I was changing and decided it was best to let me go.

We stared at each other for another minute. Not a word was spoken. A trace of sadness lingered in her gaze as silence embraced us both.

“I’m your friend in this,” Siobhan said softly.

I could hear the hurt in her voice.

“I know you are. And I will always be your friend. But I need to do this for me,” I said meaning every word of it and wondered if she could hear it in my voice.

She almost never cried. A little lump started to form in her throat as she fought back the tears. I came closer to her and hugged her. The emotions inside of us were running so deep that I didn’t once think about her blood, while I held her in my arms. We embraced for the longest moment. It lasted long enough for tears to fill her eyes and stream down.

“What’s your plan?” she asked, wiping the tears off her face.

I considered my response. “It’s not something I can talk about. For your reassurance, know that I will be fine.”

She took a deep breath before she asked her next question. “Will I hear from you again, Myrna?”

I shook my head and said, “Probably not.”

She took a step backwards. It was clear that she was hating every second of this conversation. Nothing she heard had left any room for hope. Staring into her eyes, I could see sadness and worry.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to stand in your way when...,”

There was a stiffness in her voice. She was trying to say more but couldn’t get the words out.

Even after all this time, Siobhan adored me and would do anything for me. Even if it meant stepping aside and watching me leave. In all the time she had known me, this was the first time I had been indifferent to her. But it wasn’t on purpose, it was just that I was changing.

She looked down into my mug on the table and noticed it was almost full. I barely drank any of it, only took a couple of sips. I didn’t have the appetite for tea or any food.

“I have to go, Siobhan.”

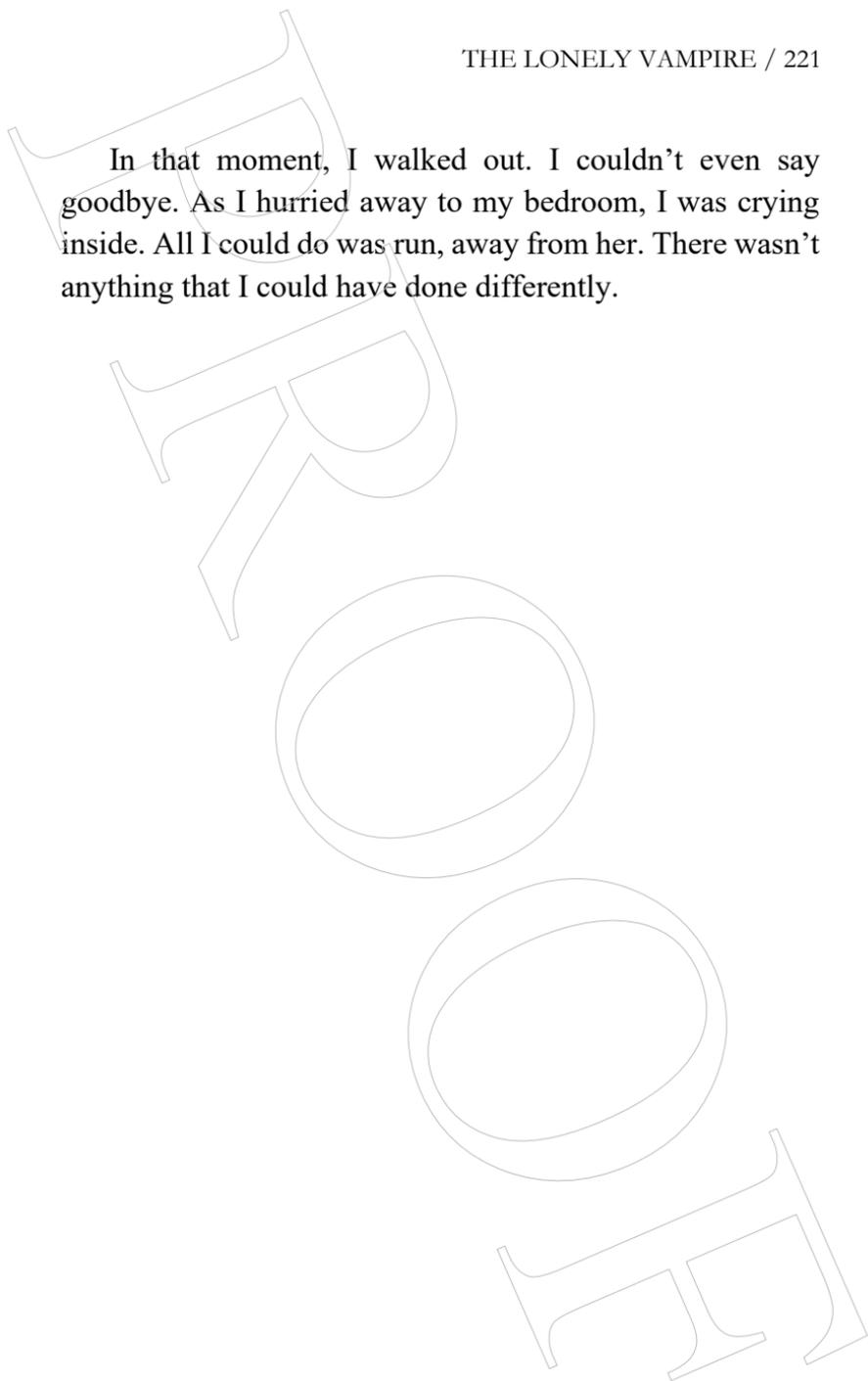
“Don’t you want to finish your tea?”

As the words hung in the air, she waited for an answer. Looking into my eyes, she was searching for something, but not finding it. Instead she sensed that I didn’t want to talk to her anymore.

I felt I should say something, but I couldn’t think of anything. There was nothing left to say. There were no words for what I was feeling.

Siobhan lowered her head and tried to contain her emotions. She was the one who couldn’t speak now.

In that moment, I walked out. I couldn't even say goodbye. As I hurried away to my bedroom, I was crying inside. All I could do was run, away from her. There wasn't anything that I could have done differently.



Chapter 38

I ENTERED MY BEDROOM and closed the door behind me, my heart in agony as if it were being torn apart. It all hit me, all at once, all the feelings that I had been suppressing. I sagged back against the door balling my eyes out. Trying to muffle the sounds of my cries, all that came out was a pathetic, whimper of a sound. The emotions were real.

Siobhan couldn't see me like this. She would think I was confused. And there was no doubt about my decision. I knew exactly what I was doing.

I had never lied to Siobhan, and this felt like a lie. A part of me wanted to tell her what was going on. She had kept many of my secrets in the past, but this secret couldn't be shared with her.

Well I cried so hard that at some point I felt some sort of relief in my heart. I went over to the nightstand and

grabbed a pen and pad of paper out of the drawer. There were things I couldn't say to Siobhan and could only put on paper. I needed to thank her for her friendship.

Looking through tear-soaked eyes, my hands were trembling, and I could barely keep my grip on the pen. It was harder than I thought to say goodbye to her.

I paused, inhaled deeply, released my breath slowly, searching for the proper words to end the letter. Then I put my dearest thoughts down hoping that when she reads the letter, it would touch her very soul knowing I meant every word of it.

After finishing the letter and leaving it on my dresser, I couldn't dwell on it anymore. I put on a long red wool cape, that made me look like Red Riding Hood, for the walk ahead of me. The weather outside was cool. I estimated it was a twenty-five-minute walk, but I welcomed it, wanting to be close to nature. It was one of my cravings since I had been undergoing changes.

I wasn't going to take my scooter. As hard as it was for me to believe it, the scooter didn't thrill me anymore. I didn't feel the same way about it.

Another thing I noticed was that my hair was loose, wilder looking than before, and a lighter shade of blonde. It was darker before. All my life I had had dirty-blond hair. Not anymore. The new hair color complimented my skin, which was paler.

All these changes kept me in a state of anticipation. It was all going to take some getting used to. There was probably more to come. I felt it.

It was getting a bit overbearing and I was anxious to move forward, curious about what would come next. My instincts told me it was time for me to go. I took the sunglasses out of my pocket and put them on. Then I did a final once-over of the room, threw my backpack over my right shoulder, and made my way toward the door.

Exiting the bedroom, I headed toward the living room. I looked around the house one last time. I thought it would leave an impression on me that would live with me forever.

Siobhan wasn't around. I thought maybe she was in her room or in the kitchen. I wasn't going to look for her. There was no time for more goodbyes. She would find out soon enough, I had left. Although it would take her some time to get used to it, she would be all right. At times I had thought that she was emotionally stronger than me.

It made me feel pretty strange thinking about never coming back. A memory that crept into my thoughts was when I first moved into the house. How Siobhan and I loved it and were excited and nervous. Now I was practically running out the door. It didn't feel like my home anymore.

Here it was, the moment of truth. I took a deep breath as I dropped the keys to my Honda scooter on the small round oak table in the hallway. It was the last thing I did before I opened the front door and stepped outside. I didn't even look back for Siobhan or tell her about it. I was sure she would make good use of the scooter.

As I started to walk away, I looked at the scooter parked by the house and frowned. There was no desire in me for it.

I wasn't going to miss it. I had changed — in more ways than I, perhaps, even knew.

As I headed southwest on Lilburn Gardens toward Freeman Road, I thought there was a chance that Siobhan could follow me, but there wasn't anything I could do about that except hope that she wouldn't try. Just in case, I looked about to make sure that she had not followed me, because I couldn't ever go back. She hadn't, from what I could see, and I was relieved.

It scared me to think what would happen if Siobhan found out. If there were any, I wasn't sure what the consequences would be if she discovered the truth. Above all, I didn't want to tell her the true reason why I left. What would she have said if I told her that I was turning into a vampire? I was afraid she wouldn't accept it and could cause trouble down the line.

I walked on, reflecting on the excitement of it all. Being a vampire was my calling. The feeling inside of me was hard to describe. Only that it felt as though it had always been a part of me. There were still many things I didn't know. But I was ready to learn.

When I got to Freeman Road, I made a left, heading toward Castles Farm Road where I would make a right. I wondered what would happen when I got to Wightwick Hall. Should I just knock on the door and wait for a response? It seemed the most logical thing to do. Would this woman, who holds the key to my future, let me into her home? A woman whose name I didn't know.

Would she answer my questions? There was so much I wanted to know.

I was assuming they were one and the same. I strongly sensed that the resident of Wightwick Hall was the same woman that had been gawking at me at the Newcastle City Library. Last but not least, was she a vampire? I was hoping to soon find out. I felt an attraction to her spirit. It was deep and intense. I had never felt this way for anyone before. Most of all I didn't expect to have feelings for a woman.

Suddenly nothing made sense to me — and then everything made sense. Now, I understood why I was naturally attracted to her. It was as if our souls were coming together in which I was a part of her, and she was a part of me. The vampire connection. All my thoughts led to the same conclusion — that such a bond was possible.

Chapter 39

“IT WASN’T LIKE MYRNA TO DO THAT,” Siobhan Mulcahy thought to herself.

Her arms were folded across her chest as she leaned with her back against the kitchen counter. She was utterly heartbroken. Her grief obvious on her face that was set in a worried frown. She noticed that Myrna had been unusually withdrawn lately, as if she was a completely different person.

Siobhan’s mind swirled with thoughts as she realized Myrna Ivester was no longer in the house. Some time had passed since hearing the front door slam shut from Myrna’s waltzing out the door — which left her in a state of shock, after being taken completely by surprise. Slowly the message began to sink in, and she was doing her best not to cry.

What had inspired her to leave? So many questions were running in her mind. It was too late to ask Myrna now. And she was powerless to do a thing about it because things had changed quickly between them.

Thinking about all that had transpired, she considered talking to someone about it. The only person who came to mind was Myrna's aunt, Eowyn Dymtrow. She nixed the idea because she didn't want to go behind Myrna's back and meddle in her life. Her aunt might not know anything anyway.

As she stood pondering, something suddenly occurred to her. Myrna couldn't have taken all her things with her. She decided to go to Myrna's room to see what she left behind. Maybe there were some clues to be found there. Or maybe not. But either way, she wanted to see what was there.

Curiosity got the better of her and she walked out of the kitchen into the hallway heading to Myrna's bedroom. Upon entering the room, she was slightly astonished to see that Myrna had left behind a significant amount of clothes, decorative items, and furnishings. She was standing by the closet, not knowing what to think, only that something wasn't right. The sight alone sent her mind into disarray.

"What is going on?" she asked aloud.

There was an uneasiness in her gut, and she didn't like what she was feeling. Something must be wrong with Myrna. Why would she leave so much stuff behind?

It was taking her time to accept that Myrna wasn't coming back either. Missing her badly! She wondered as

she looked through the clothes in the closet. Siobhan couldn't believe she'd left her favorite Juicy Couture clothes behind.

She came out of the closet and saw the Precious Moments figurine she had given Myrna last Christmas on the dresser. Myrna had said she loved it. Yet, there it was. On the dresser. It irked her seeing many of Myrna's favorite things lying about, which meant only one thing. They meant nothing to her anymore. And she wondered if their friendship mattered to Myrna at all.

Until Siobhan found a personal handwritten note on the dresser. It was a letter addressed to her from Myrna. She quickly grabbed it up. Now she hoped it would shed light on why Myrna had left so abruptly. Dear Siobhan, it said. Her hands were trembling as she read it.

I can't seem to find the words to tell you to your face what I want you to know, so I am writing them in a letter. I'm hoping it will be enough for you.

Thank you for your friendship these past six years. I will never forget you. I hope this letter helps you to realize the depths of my feelings for you.

You may keep or dispose of leftover belongings in my old bedroom. I won't be coming back for them.

Do not be upset if you never hear from me again. And please don't be mad at me. The reason I left isn't because of you. But instead, because of me.

After I lost both of my parents in a car crash at the age of five, I spent the rest of my life longing for something. Something I can't

describe. Not sure of finding it either. Until now. I can't tell you what it is, only that I want it. It is not a man, nor is it religion, but something else I can't explain, not even to you, my best friend of many years.

Please don't go looking for me. The life I am living now is for me, but not for you. In any case, I will be grateful if you look in on my Aunt Eonyn every so often. This way we will always be connected.

I remember you mentioning a nurse at work, I think her name is Ahsa, the one who is looking for a place to stay. Why don't you ask her to move in with you? The timing can't be any better. It will help to have someone around for support during this time of transition for you.

Just know that I adore you, and I want you to be aware of how much you mean to me. You are the best person I have ever come to know. I cherish our moments together. And love you dearly.

Always your friend,

Myrna

There were tears in Siobhan's eyes now. The flood of tears was distressing to say the least. She took a deep sigh and put the letter down on the dresser. It had brought some comfort reading it, but it didn't answer all of the questions inside her mind other than the fact that it was exactly as she suspected. Myrna wasn't returning.

The letter proved that Myrna did care about her. But something had torn them apart. Myrna was just caught up in something she didn't fully understand.

It was a hard thing for her to understand. This new life Myrna was now leading. It was such a sudden decision, in

leaving her home and going to God knows where. Was she in danger? Should she inform the police? She didn't want to cause Myrna any trouble. But she didn't want any trouble for herself either.

The more she thought about it, the more she fretted. What was she going to tell people if they asked her where Myrna was? Was she considered a missing person? People might think she killed her and buried her in the backyard. She assumed that people always thought the worst.

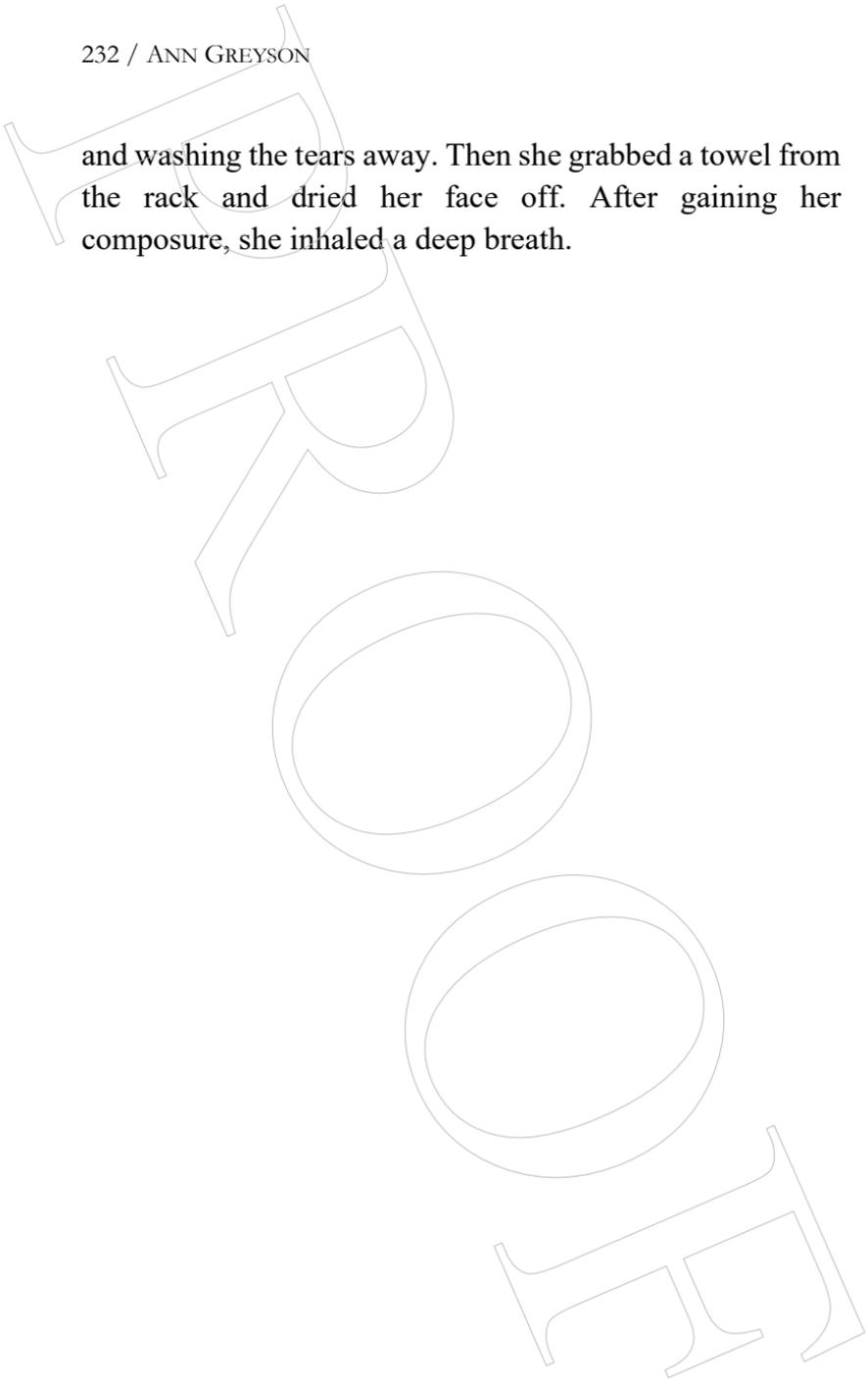
She didn't want to think along those lines. But she needed to consider all the possibilities. Nevertheless, just in case, she would keep the letter from Myrna in a safe place.

She carried the letter to the office. After entering the room, she put the letter inside a folder in a file cabinet where she kept important papers. It was something she would always have to look back on, a memory of one of her best friends in life.

Thoughts about the incident in the hematology unit of the hospital where she had seen a woman disappear, fluttered through her brain. She meant to tell Myrna about it, but it skipped her mind. She believed Myrna would have gotten a kick out of knowing about it because of the kind of dreams that she sometimes had. A smile and a tear came to her face, and for a moment, she wished she could go back in time to when their friendship began.

She closed the file cabinet drawer, left the office, and headed to the bathroom in her bedroom. After stepping inside the bathroom, she switched the light on. She leaned on the sink, then ran cold water, splashing it on her face,

and washing the tears away. Then she grabbed a towel from the rack and dried her face off. After gaining her composure, she inhaled a deep breath.



Chapter 40

WALKING ALONE BENEATH THE vast shimmering blue sky with only a few clouds, I was close to Wightwick Hall. At ten thirty in the morning, the temperature was seasonably cool in the high fifties. As I drew nearer, I realized that this was real, not a dream, I was really almost there.

High over the castle I could see the shining golden orb of the sun. Its rays cascaded over my body. It made my hair look fiery. The bright sun was warming my face and the wind soothed me. The combination of warm and cool felt nice.

A bit breathless, I hesitated. I stopped approximately six yards from the castle because I began to feel the jitters. My eyes slowly went up and down the front of the building, then around the grounds. The sun was casting a dark

shadow on the right side that made the castle hauntingly beautiful.

I needed to ask myself, “Are you sure this is the right move?”

I stared longer at Wightwick Hall wondering if anyone would look back. No one did. I didn’t see anyone inside. All I could see was a darkness as if the place was empty. How could such a lonely looking place be the key to my future?

“Myrna, what are you doing?” I asked myself.

I was disappointed that the woman didn’t come out and invite me in. Could she see me?

“Maybe she wants to talk to me as much as I want to talk to her,” shot back my inner voice.

It was just fear of the unknown. That was what was driving me. My questions needed to be answered, I reminded myself. I couldn’t continue without some resolve. In order to fully embrace the woman, I was becoming, I needed to seek out the woman who could help me through it.

Thinking about my next move, I paced around a little bit along the grass. I was deep in thought and shaking. Excitement jitters were building inside me. You’d think I was getting married. I wondered if this was how you felt on the day of your wedding.

Imagine the courage it took to step into an uncertain future. Did I have it in me? The newness of it all excited me to the bone. The danger enticed me, like falling in love with a stranger I knew nothing about.

“Well, this is it! I was hooked,” I said encouragingly.

A little lightheaded from it all, I stopped walking around in a circle. As I looked around, I saw a curtain move at the window of Lorraine Krag’s house. Staring intently toward the window, I wondered why Mrs. Krag, or her husband was staring at me because I was sure someone had been watching me from the window. The moment I looked that way, the curtain closed. I stared a little longer at the window to see if whoever looked before, would look again, but the curtain didn’t budge an inch. So, what if Lorraine Krag, rather than her husband, saw me. Well, I didn’t care.

Just then, it occurred to me that when I had gone to Mrs. Krag’s house asking about the castle, she told me not to go there. She tried to ward me off, claiming the place was haunted. What if she was right? Should I be scared? From where I was standing, the castle looked quite beautiful. I didn’t sense anything strange, other than Mrs. Krag herself.

If it was Mrs. Krag looking at me from the window, all I could do was hope she wouldn’t come out and tell me to go away. In pondering this, a thought came to mind that Mrs. Krag could make a scene. She seemed to be a crabby old lady. However, some more minutes passed and not a sound or movement came from her house. I was relieved.

Turning my attention back to the castle, I was startled when three black carrion crows flew overhead cawing loudly. Was that a sign? For one fleeting second, I wondered if that was a warning not to go. I looked up, only to see them circle about and fly off into the woods. The

whole incident was over so quickly. Perhaps, after all, it was nothing to be worried about.

Just as I was about to make my move, my thoughts scattered in many directions. Beneath my sunglasses, I squinted into the sunshine, scanning the castle for a glimpse, any sign of the tenant. It was like no one was there at all. What if that was the case? What if the trip over here was for nothing?

My skepticism quickly faded. I couldn't let myself believe that all of this could come to nothing. Despite the empty look of the place, I just knew I would find something there.

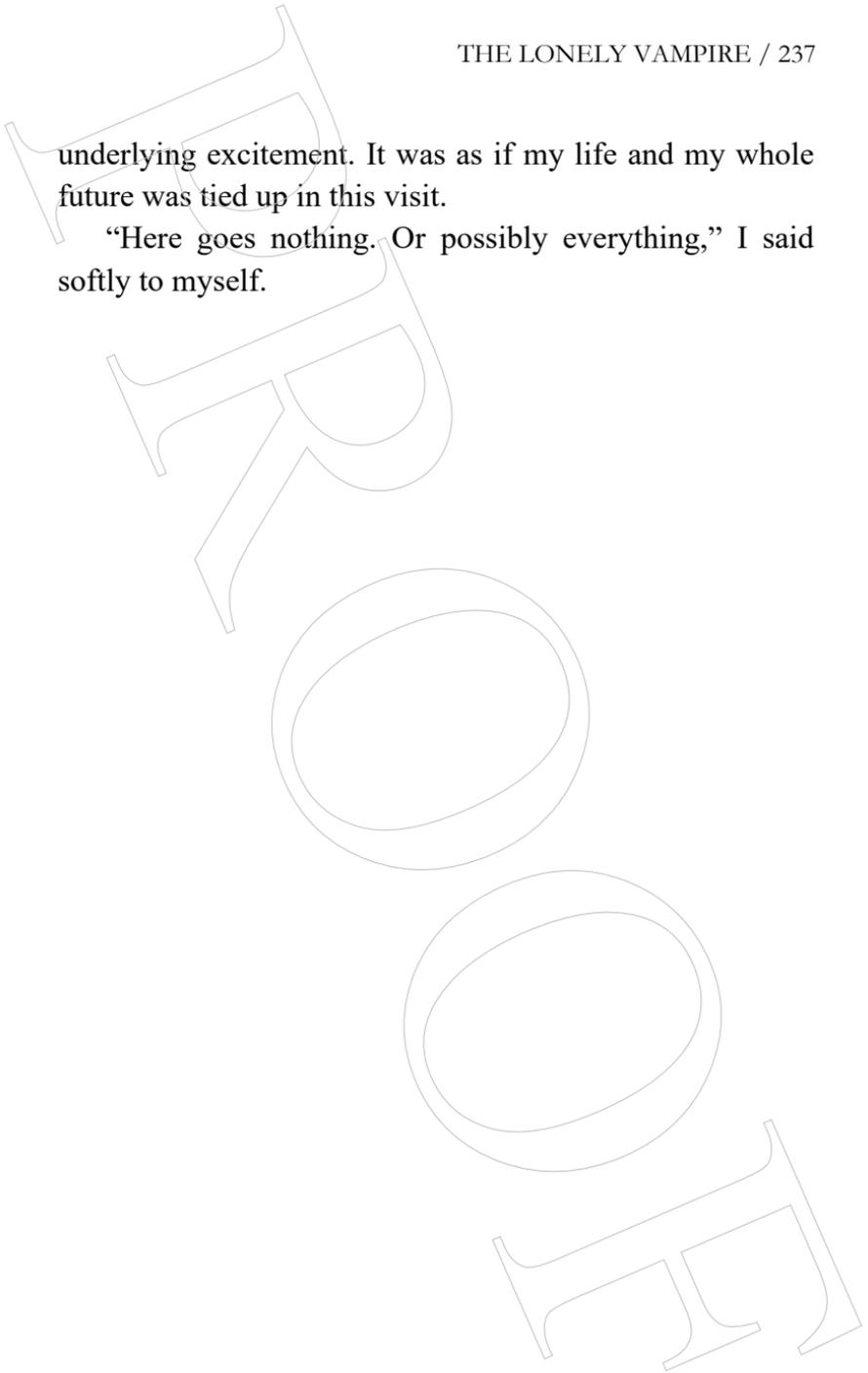
It was time to make my debut. I started my trek forward. The closer I got to the castle, the harder it was to turn back, not that I wanted to anyway. I wasn't going to turn around and leave at this stage.

I slowly walked the stone path to the front door. Now only a few steps away, here I was about to enter the place without a clue as to what was coming next. The suspense was killing me. A little voice inside my head was telling me to go. The worst that could happen was that she would tell me to leave.

My big moment was at hand. I took off my sunglasses and slipped them in my backpack. I stood close to the door, which was slightly ajar, and listened, taking it all in. What waited for me in there? Although I couldn't see any person, I felt a presence of some sort. I could hear a faint moan of a soft wind. It was peculiar, to say the least. But something, sheer curiosity, propelled me forward with a sense of

underlying excitement. It was as if my life and my whole future was tied up in this visit.

“Here goes nothing. Or possibly everything,” I said softly to myself.



Chapter 41

AS CRAZY AS IT would have seemed to Lorraine Krag a brief moment ago, she felt the way Myrna Ivester had looked at her was frightening for some reason. She could tell something wasn't right with Myrna's facial expression, despite the sunglasses covering her eyes. That was precisely why she had quickly closed the curtain when Myrna had glanced her way.

Standing near the living room window, she was feeling so rattled by it all that her mind spontaneously remembered that she had suggested to Myrna that she stay away from the castle, and yet, there she was. Why was that? Why wouldn't Myrna heed her warning? In the first place, she still didn't understand why Myrna had visited her last Sunday, asking her questions about Wightwick Hall, of all things. Either way, one thing was certain. Now that she had seen Myrna near the castle, her suspicions of something being amiss were confirmed, and then some.

Lorraine Krag's suspicious eyes darted around the living room. Her thoughts were spinning wildly around in her head, like clothes in a dryer. Myrna didn't look the same at all, and she wondered how it was possible. Her complexion was pale, and her hair was wildly loose and a lighter shade of blonde. Seeing Myrna in such a state, Lorraine was on the verge of a revelation of some sort. She felt certain she was on to something, though she couldn't put her finger on it.

She pondered on the possibilities of what she could do. Should she go out and ask Myrna if she was all right? Was it wise to confront her? Her eyes narrowed as she couldn't get the thoughts out of her head. But then again, perhaps she shouldn't do anything. So, it was settled.

Naturally, she wanted to tell Arthur, but he had stepped out earlier that morning to buy some groceries at Tesco. If only he could have been here to see Myrna. Then it crossed her mind that if Arthur had been home, he would have prevented her from looking out the window, and she would have missed seeing Myrna. Seeing her was an act of destiny. She believed that it was meant to be.

It had been some time since she saw Myrna. More than likely, she wasn't there anymore. Was Myrna inside Wightwick Hall? How could she know for sure? She didn't want to look out the window. It was the look Myrna had shot in her direction that prevented her. It gave her the willies just thinking about it. Something just didn't feel right on the inside of her. In spite of her curiosity, she

couldn't bring herself to look out the window again, at least not at the present time.

"Yes, that's it!" she exclaimed, as an idea sprang into her head.

Excitement overtook her and she ran to the telephone to call Siobhan Mulcahy, Myrna Ivester's roommate and friend. Stopping halfway, she remembered that she didn't have Siobhan's cell phone number, nor Myrna's.

Or did she? With her recently acquired Rotary Club Membership Directory, she could locate Eowyn Dymtrow's phone number. She would have to telephone her first.

She opened the drawer of the mahogany end table and took out the small book. In searching through the pages of the alphabetical list of members, she turned to the D section and found Eowyn Dymtrow's telephone number.

Quickly, she grabbed the telephone on the end table and dialed, putting it to her ear. After two rings Eowyn Dymtrow answered, to her delight. Her face got all twisted, contorted with a dark mood, listening to dogs barking in the background.

She spoke straight away. "Hello, Eowyn. It's Lorraine Krag. How are you?"

"Hello, Lorraine. What a nice surprise to hear from you," Eowyn responded.

Lorraine Krag got right into it. "Let me not waste any of your time. I'll get right to the point. I know how busy you are."

"Actually, I'm not busy at all."

“Yeah, yeah,” Lorraine said, talking right over her. “Would you have Siobhan Mulcahy’s cell phone number? My garden needs some work. She and only she can do it.”

“Work in your garden?”

“Myrna Ivester came over to my house on Sunday and told me Siobhan could do it. But Myrna didn’t give me Siobhan’s phone number.”

Lorraine Krag told the little white lie with a devilish expression on her face. What it came down to was that she had an itch that needed scratching. She was determined to get to the bottom of the goings on of that woman of Wightwick Hall.

“Well, if Myrna thinks it’s alright.”

“Yes, she does,” Lorraine insisted.

“Okay, let me go find Siobhan’s number. Can you hold a moment, Lorraine?”

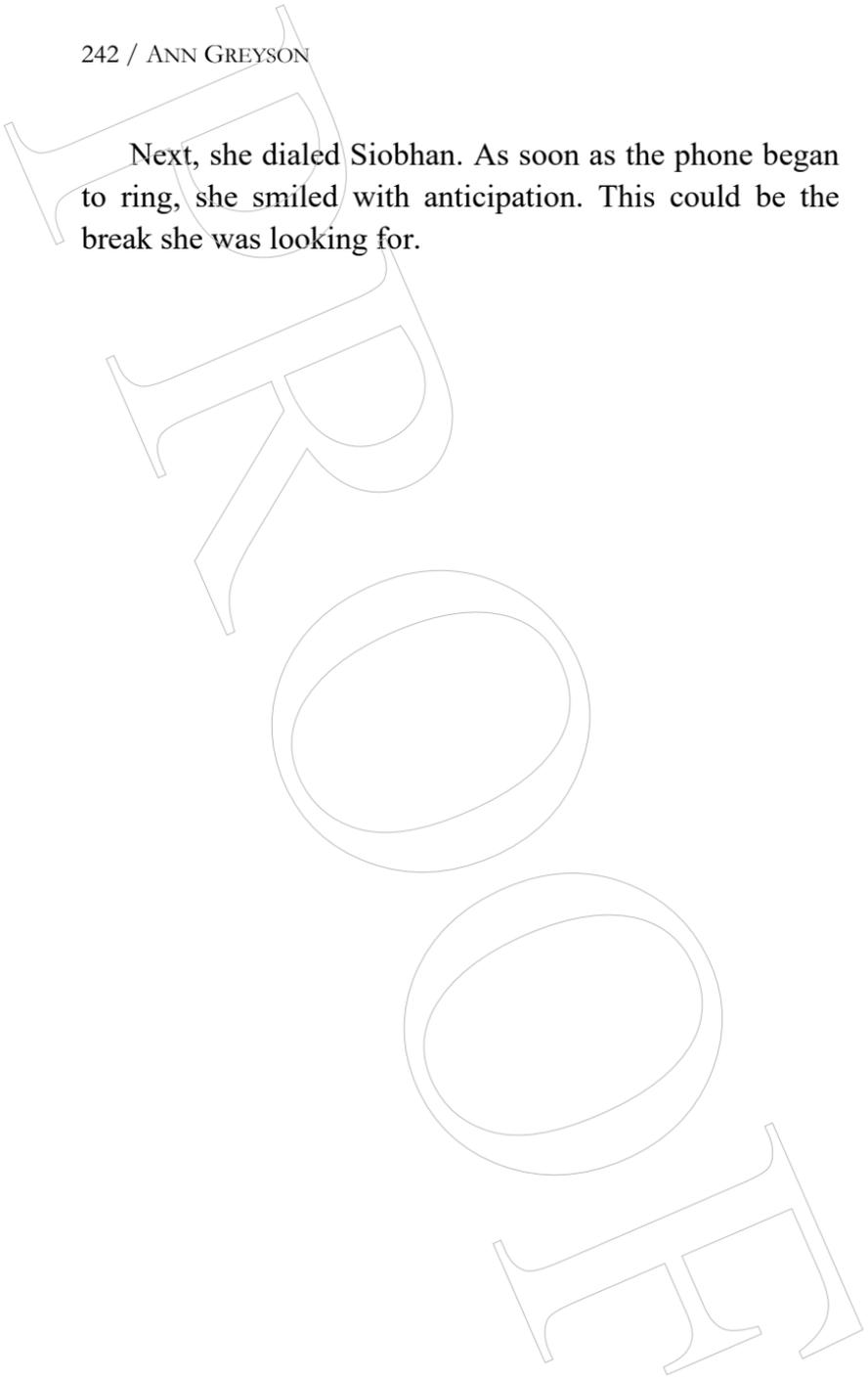
“Certainly, dear.”

In the time she was on hold, she thought about how those pesky dogs, who were babbling, annoyed her. She didn’t know how Eowyn could deal with it. Still, she maintained her composure. There was no other choice for her but to carry on this sham of a conversation.

Just as she had hoped, Eowyn returned to the phone and gave her Siobhan’s cell phone number. Lorraine felt on top of the world that she had pried it out of her. As she ended the call, she poured on a little charm.

“Give a big hug to those cute little dogs of yours. See you at the next Rotary Club meeting,” she ended the call without letting Eowyn get in another word.

Next, she dialed Siobhan. As soon as the phone began to ring, she smiled with anticipation. This could be the break she was looking for.



Chapter 42

THE TELEPHONE RANG. Siobhan Mulcahy got excited thinking it could be Myrna. She squashed that thought as soon as it arose though. It would take her some time to come to terms with the fact that she shall never see, nor hear from Myrna again. She pulled herself together enough to come out of the bathroom and slowly trudged over to her Apple iPhone ringing on the nightstand next to the bed.

After putting the phone to her ear without checking the caller ID, she answered, “Hello?”

The woman’s voice on the other end asked, “Is this Siobhan?”

“Yes. Who is this?” Siobhan asked suspiciously.

Siobhan couldn’t even begin to speculate who it was.

“It’s Lorraine Krag. Eowyn Dymtrow introduced me to you at the Best Western New Kent Hotel after a Rotary Club meeting in July. Don’t you recognize my voice?”

How did Lorraine Krag get her phone number? She didn’t care to ask. In her current state, she wasn’t in the mood to deal with this woman whom Eowyn Dymtrow had mentioned was more than a touch nosy, the little that she knew about her.

“No, not really.”

“You’re probably wondering why I’m calling. I saw...”

“This is not a good time, Lorraine. Could I call you back later?” Siobhan interrupted, cutting her off and with frustration in her voice.

Siobhan wasn’t in the moment. She just wanted to hang up the phone and deal with the sadness that came over her since Myrna left.

“Actually it’s Mrs. Krag. And I think you may want to hear this,” she sang into the phone.

From what Siobhan could tell, Lorraine Krag wasn’t the type to back down. She obviously needed to tell her something. Siobhan caved into it. It might be worth her while to hear what she was going to say.

“All right. Go ahead and tell me.”

“I just saw Myrna Ivester outside the castle, across from my house here on Jesmond Dene Road. Who is the woman living there? I didn’t know Myrna knew her. A woman can’t live in Newcastle upon Tyne without knowing something about her neighbor.”

There was a stunned silence. This news took Siobhan completely by surprise. She sat down at the edge of the bed.

“Myrna is at the castle across from you?” she asked, sounding about to cry.

Lorraine Krag came back with, “Didn’t you hear a word I said?”

Not a word was spoken by either of them for almost a minute.

Another moment, before Lorraine pressed on. “Who is the tenant of Wightwick Hall? Do you know?”

Siobhan tried to speak, but in her emotional state, only a sigh left her lips. Still not a word was spoken, as she was quiet for a long time, thinking. She wasn’t ready to answer. Then most involuntarily there came another sigh.

“Of course, I know who she is,” Siobhan said slowly with a tremble in her voice.

Siobhan was trying to act as if everything was all right, buying some time to come up with an explanation as to who the woman was. The fact was, she didn’t know.

Lorraine’s impatient voice came over from the other end, “I’m waiting.”

“Myrna’s half-sister from her late father’s first marriage lives in that castle,” Siobhan finally blurted out.

“Myrna has a half-sister? I didn’t know that,” Lorraine exclaimed.

“Well now you do. Anything else, Mrs. Krag?”

“No. I have to run. Bye for now!” Lorraine said and quickly hung up.

Siobhan stood up and put the phone down on her nightstand. Already her mind was racing in all the wrong directions. Lorraine Krag was right to ask. Who was that woman in the castle? Wightwick Hall? It underscored how out of the loop she was.

Siobhan was standing by the bed taking it all in. It was getting to her. She wasn't one to speculate on many things, but in this instance, she couldn't help herself. An uneasy feeling gnawed at the pit of her stomach as she flashed back to the night of Myrna's birthday party at the Cinema 'N' Draffhouse. Myrna had insinuated her invited guest Casey wasn't a man. That could have been the case, Siobhan supposed, assuming Myrna hadn't made Casey up all together.

In light of this revelation, there was no other alternative but to believe that Myrna was on the other bus. Maybe the signs were there all the time, and she just didn't want to see them.

"I guess I didn't see it. Sometimes you just don't know people like you think you do," she said to herself.

It all made sense to her, but at the same time it didn't. She hadn't picked up on it before, hadn't paid close enough attention to notice. Come to think of it, she'd never actually seen Myrna on a date with a man. Although Myrna had claimed to have been on a double date once when she was attending Northumbria University.

This was a rude awakening for her. She was surprised that Myrna had a relationship of some sorts with the woman of Wightwick Hall. Although she wouldn't have cared that

Myrna was interested in girls. For whatever reasons, Myrna couldn't bring herself to tell her the truth. As hard as it was to accept, she was determined that she wasn't going to pry into that part of Myrna's life.

On the brighter side of things, she knew what to tell people if they asked her where Myrna was.

She couldn't take a shower, nor change her clothes. Emotionally despondent, she walked into the living room, threw herself down on the brown leather sofa, and laid her body across it. She curled her legs underneath her and rested her head on the small black throw pillow.

The quiet, empty feeling of the house was getting to her. A wave of sadness filled her heart and soul. All of a sudden, the impact of it all was finally hitting her with full force. It wasn't going to be the same without her longtime friend.

A rush of tears came into her eyes as she asked the empty room, "Oh, Myrna, what am I going to do without you?"

She could think of nothing but Myrna's angelic face, her sweet smile, and her enthusiasm about things. She could still hear her voice. How she ached to hear it one more time. Just the thought hurt her heart. How she wished she was with Myrna now.

Quite recently, she had told Myrna that she didn't take enough risks in her life and had played it safe for too long. So, she understood that Myrna needed to follow her heart, which made her proud of her for taking a chance. Still, she missed her so much.

As much as she wanted to stem the flow, the tears fell down her cheeks anyway. Her eyes were so wet, she could hardly see. She couldn't hold back the emotions of how saddened she was. Her breathing turned into sobs.

She grabbed the crocheted black and burgundy afghan from the end of the sofa and used it to wipe the tears off her face. Next, she wrapped it around her. She curled into a ball, facing the back of the sofa, and closed her eyes. Why did it have to be that way? She wondered to herself as she cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 43

THE CALL didn't go the way Lorraine Krag had wanted. She hated not getting her way and being left with questions instead of answers. She felt that she had been lied to, and that infuriated her.

As she placed the Rotary Club book of members back in the drawer of the mahogany end table, she thought about what she had not said to Siobhan Mulcahy. Myrna Ivester had visited her and had shown such great interest in the castle and its tenant. Myrna didn't know who lived there. Plainly that was at odds with what she had heard.

She closed the drawer thinking that Eowyn Dymtrow had told her that she was the only family Myrna had left. That Myrna "had no other family but her because her parents had died in a car accident" — those were the exact words Eowyn had used on one of the occasions she had spoken with her at their Rotary Club meetings.

Was she supposed to believe what Siobhan had told her about the woman in Wightwick Hall? No way! She knew better. That woman could not be Myrna's half-sister. She rejected that explanation swiftly. Lorraine insisted to her reeling mind.

As she stood by the end table, she came to one conclusion. This meant Siobhan was fibbing. Although why would she lie? It was odd indeed, since she hadn't sounded like she was lying.

"No, that's not possible. Myrna has to be lying, not Siobhan," she thought out loud.

Lorraine kept thinking about the call. She remembered that Siobhan had answered quickly and sounded as if she was expecting someone else to be on the other line — probably Myrna. She could hear the disappointment in Siobhan's voice, which was low and shaky. When Siobhan discovered who she was talking to, she was reluctant to talk to her. But when she told her that she had seen Myrna outside the castle, Siobhan was all ears. Was it possible Siobhan didn't know anything? Something was amiss and she didn't like not knowing what it was.

One thing puzzled her in particular though. Siobhan had sounded like she really believed it. It was likely that Myrna told her she had a half-sister living in that castle. It was possible Myrna had lied about that and about other things. By the way she was acting lately, she wouldn't put it past Myrna to do something like that.

There must be a reason why Myrna had lied to her friend. Why would she lie to me? Lorraine shook her head

and started thinking about how Myrna said she was asking about Wightwick Hall because her friend was interested in buying it. What friend? Another lie.

Something was definitely wrong between Myrna and Siobhan. Why should she believe either of them?

Lorraine walked around the cream-colored Victorian sofa and was about to pick up the newspaper from the coffee table and toss it in the trash when she realized that she was still wearing her white apron embroidered with gillyflowers over her peach linen dress, cut above her knees, with a high neck and short sleeves. She tugged at the tie-strings on the back of her apron and pulled it off.

She went to the kitchen, holding the apron in her right hand. After hanging the apron on a hook near the kitchen door, she felt there was something unclear. Something still didn't gel. It struck her that Siobhan should know that Myrna didn't have any other family. After all, she was her roommate. And she appeared to have a particularly close relationship with Myrna.

This led to more questions: Could Siobhan be lying? What would she want to hide? Had she failed to grasp the whole of the truth about the relationship between Myrna and the woman of that castle? What kind of relationship? What was the real story with Myrna Ivester?

"Wait a second," she said as she entered the living room.

Lorraine Krag started seeing things in a way that she hadn't seen before. She remembered when Eowyn Dymtrow had introduced her to Myrna and she had

questioned her as to why she didn't have a boyfriend. Eowyn had told her that it was nothing to worry about. After a little more snooping she found out that Siobhan also didn't have a boyfriend, which was odd in itself.

"Myrna must be on the other bus," Lorraine murmured to herself.

Lorraine raised an eyebrow, thinking that she understood the secrecy. She could definitely see it. Searching for a reason for all the lies, that made more sense to her.

It was alarming to think that she had never seen any men at the castle. There was only that strange woman, who was always alone. How Myrna got entangled with that woman was beyond her comprehension.

She scooped up the newspaper off the coffee table and headed toward the kitchen. After placing the paper in the trash can in the corner of the room, she glimpsed the clock on the wall. It was ten to 11 a.m.

Returning to the living room, she wanted to take a gander at Wightwick Hall. Curious in her own right, she walked over to the living room window and pulled back the curtain. At first glimpse, Myrna, nor anyone else, was out there. Not that she was disappointed. She sensed Myrna was inside the castle. That she knew for sure.

To her surprise, she heard footsteps enter the room. Then the footsteps stopped. There was a hint of panic stirring inside her as she knew who it was. It could only be Arthur. It had completely escaped her mind that he would be home soon. Her mind was so engrossed with the events

of the day, that she failed to hear him come in through the front door. She didn't know how long he had been in the house, but it couldn't have been more than a minute.

There she was looking out the window. She knew it was the last place he wanted to find her, and he was going to chastise her about it. There was no way around it.

Chapter 44

AS LORRAINE KRAG TURNED AWAY from the window, she saw Arthur standing in the living room. He was holding two full, plastic, Tesco shopping bags in his hands. The look on his face was not one of amusement.

The sour expression on her face gave it away. Caught in the act, she knew what was coming. She let out a gasp and stood by the window, waiting for him to speak.

Arthur stood still, staring, but saying nothing. He didn't have to think hard about what this might be. It was clear to him Lorraine had been spying again. It wasn't the smartest thing for him to do, but he needed to ask why.

"Lorraine, please tell me you're not spying on Wightwick Hall again?" he asked, louder than he meant to.

"Myrna Ivester is out there," she said, rolling off her tongue as if she couldn't wait to tell him.

“What was Myrna doing here again?” he asked in a softer voice.

“Not here. She was at Wightwick Hall,” she said, all huffy.

“What’s she doing...”

Arthur’s voice trailed off in confusion, so she finished the sentence for him.

“At the castle? That is precisely what I want to know.”

He dumped the shopping bags on the coffee table and pushed past her.

“Let me have a look,” he demanded. “I have to see her for myself.”

“But, she’s...” Lorraine stopped herself from saying anymore.

He pulled back the curtain of the window and looked out. His head moved left and right. Then he closed the curtain quickly and turned to her with suspicion in his eyes.

“She’s nowhere that I can see.”

“That’s because Myrna’s in the castle.”

“Are you certain you saw her?” he asked as he picked up the shopping bags from the coffee table and headed toward the kitchen.

“Of course, I did,” she said following him to the kitchen. “I told her to stay away from there.”

Pressing the matter further, he asked over his shoulder, “What are you trying to say?”

After setting the bags on the kitchen counter, he opened a cabinet and began to put away cans of soup.

“She didn’t listen to me,” she said, standing with her hands on her hips in front of the white wood kitchen table.

Before he could say anything, she kept going, “Aren’t you in the least bit suspicious?”

“I’m sure it’s all innocent. Your old husband knows not to waste time on insignificant matters.”

If only she would give it a rest, he thought wishfully. After closing the cabinet, he removed vegetables and a carton of eggs from a grocery bag and placed them on the counter. Gathering them up, he walked to the refrigerator to store them.

“I had thought something was fishy with the tenant of Wightwick Hall, and now with Myrna there, that reinforces my gut sense. I just...”

She stopped herself before she could say anything else. Her arms dropped to her sides so fast, her wrists bounced on her hips.

Arthur closed the refrigerator door, thinking how she hadn’t uttered a word worth listening to.

“Lorraine don’t put your nose in other people’s business. You’re going to have to find another way to distract yourself.”

“Actually, there’s,” she said, but that was as far as she got.

He interrupted her in mid-sentence. “Why are we even having this conversation?”

Arthur grabbed the empty plastic bags, opened the cabinet under the sink, and tossed them in a metal bin. After

shutting the cabinet, he proceeded to wash his hands in the sink.

Lorraine Krag seemed determined to get something off her chest.

“But there’s more, Arthur.”

“There is?” he asked a bit nervously and accidentally spilled some water on the green and black argyle sweater and forest green corduroy pants he was wearing.

“Yes, I’ve been trying to tell you,” she snapped back at him.

“I can’t imagine what else there is.”

Lorraine wasn’t going to let up until she finished saying what she needed to say.

“Are you going to let me talk or are you going to keep interrupting me?”

He grabbed the dark brown hand towel from its hook, and said, “Just go ahead. I’m ready for it.”

“I telephoned Siobhan Mulcahy, Myrna’s roommate and friend.”

“Why on earth did you do that?” he asked after drying his hands and hung the hand towel back on its hook on the wall above the counter.

“I wanted to know why Myrna was at Wightwick Hall.”

“Did she give an explanation?”

“Yes! According to Siobhan, the woman that lives there is Myrna’s half-sister.”

“This is getting more ridiculous by the minute. What’s the big deal if Myrna has a half-sister?”

“Don’t you get it?” she asked him.

Arthur turned away with her words ringing in his ears and headed out of the kitchen toward the living room, with her following behind. Once in the living room, he sat down on his comfy beige suede chair. If only he could ignore her. But she wasn't going away.

"Last Sunday, Myrna didn't know anything about Wightwick Hall. She was here asking all kinds of questions. Now, the tenant, that woman is her half-sister. I'm not buying into it," she said, standing in front of him.

"This is getting oddder and oddder," he said and folded his arms across his chest.

"My point exactly."

Arthur shook his head but didn't argue her point. This time she was right. Instead, he attributed the circumstance to the misunderstood youth of today's generation.

"You know how young people can be. I just don't understand them. And neither do you apparently. Next time you see Myrna you can ask her all about it. I'm sure she'll tell you the same thing Siobhan told you. That she has a half-sister," he said as he unfolded his arms.

She sighed in exasperation, threw up her arms and said, "I don't know why I bother."

Lorraine headed over to the cream-colored Victorian sofa to sit for a spell hoping her frustration would dissipate itself.

"Yes, it's best not to," he added to irritate her.

Arthur wouldn't cater to her whims. He felt that she was meddling too much.

"Easy for you to say," she jabbed back.

“Best you forget all about it.”

“Whatever you say, dear,” she whispered sarcastically and gave him a scowl.

After a deep breath, she tried to wrench the frustrating thoughts from her head. That was when it dawned on her that if she continued the conversation, she would just lose her temper with him. In her current state, she was likely to say something she would regret later.

Lorraine Krag didn't know who frustrated her more — her husband or herself. That was hard to decipher.

Chapter 45

IT SEEMED LIKE TEN MINUTES had passed since I knocked, and the door opened a crack wider on its own. I had pushed it just enough to stick my face through the gap.

All I had gotten out was, “Hello?”

Another couple of minutes went by, and nobody had come to the door. I had mustered up the courage to walk inside, not waiting any longer for a response. Could there be anything ruder than someone entering without being invited?

During my wait, I stood in the middle of the impressive, chandelier-hung foyer and had appraised everything in the room. There were a couple of things I couldn't help noticing. First was the twenty-two-foot ceiling, and a spiral staircase that wound upward, round and round and stopped at the third level as far as I could see.

The breathtakingly beautiful, enormous, ornate Venetian glass chandelier hanging from the plasterwork ceiling reminded me of the chandelier in Andrew Lloyd Weber's "The Phantom of the Opera" musical, Aunt Eowyn had taken me to see for my sixteenth birthday.

Now it was probably around eleven o'clock. Was she even here at all? In my boredom, I glanced over at a painting. The landscape canvas mounted on the wall was embellished in an ornate gold-leafed frame. The painting and frame were obviously old. Nearby it I saw something that caught my eye. On the narrow shelf below the painting sat a small figurine of a bat. I picked it up for a better look.

There was no doubt I was in the right place.

While I held it in my hand, I felt a presence in the room that I knew was her. A shadow fell across me and a familiar cool breeze came from behind me. I could feel her stare even though my back was turned. She had probably been watching me all this time.

My eyes darted around to see her gliding across the floor like a ghost, closing in on me until she stopped very close to me and said, "It's carved, jade porcelain."

Up close, I found that she was even more beautiful than I remembered, given her striking European features. She was dressed in black — just as Lorraine Krag had told me she'd seen her wearing. The loose black, short-sleeved top, black leggings and black leather sandals complimented her pale complexion.

Speechless, I merely stood there, riveted to the spot. Whatever I had planned to say was long gone out of my memory.

After putting the figurine back on the shelf, I took a quick breath, trying to remain calm and not to let her see how nervous I was.

Recollecting my thoughts, I bounced back and said, “Excuse me for intruding, but I didn’t think anyone was here.”

She stole a sideways glance at me and introduced herself. “I am Ileana Vladislava. Welcome.”

“I’m Myrna Ivester. But I guess you knew that already.”

As far as I could make out, she wasn’t surprised by my appearance. Maybe she wanted this visit.

“Now then, Myrna, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” she asked with a smile that indicated pleasure, and deep brown mesmerizing eyes that sparkled with delight.

“I want to talk to you,” I said with a sincere look on my face.

After I said that, Ileana’s eyes came up and met mine. It seemed there was nothing to say. Her gaze bore into my soul like she could read my thoughts. I carried on the conversation even though I was doing most of the talking.

“I know what you are,” I said, and I lowered my voice to her, “I came here to see you because I need help trying to understand.”

Her face lit up with interest. She didn’t say a word, didn’t even blink. Based on this reaction, I could tell she knew exactly what I was talking about.

My right hand fluttered nervously around the knot in the white silk scarf around my neck. It covered the bite marks. That was the key reason I was here.

“You know what I’ve been dealing with,” I said, untied the scarf around my neck and let it float down to the floor.

There would be no more covering it up. It was a pivotal moment for me indeed. The marks were from a vampire’s bite. It was all out in the open now.

“Are you responsible for this?” I asked, pointing to my neck.

“Yes, I am,” she said with a calm collectedness.

“It was you I saw at the Newcastle City Library, wasn’t it?”

“It was me.”

I knew the moment I put my eyes on Ileana that she was the woman I had seen at the library, but I had to ask.

Reluctant to ask my next question, I paused for several seconds. I felt lightheaded with the thought of what I was about to ask her.

“Am I like you? A vampire?” I asked, before I’d even realized the words had left my mouth.

Just then I realized I answered my own question. I already knew the answer. The look on Ileana’s face told me I was right.

Ileana quickly broke eye contact with me, looking down. She didn’t reply right away, and I wondered if she was thinking. I was staring at her with anticipation to hear what she would say.

“We are one and the same,” Ileana said, nodding.

Hearing her say that, gave me a sense of relief. She didn't say the actual word vampire, but that was what she meant. And that was that.

Suddenly her eyes fell upon me. She looked like she thought I would run away. It was possible that she thought the truth would scare me off. But it wasn't fear I was feeling. It was curiosity. And she appeared as curious about me as I was about her.

"I want to know more," I demanded softly.

Ileana stared straight ahead and didn't say anything.

Using the direct approach again, I decided to press her a little more. So, I launched into some questions about the vampire's life that I'd been saving up for her.

"How do you satisfy your taste for blood? How old were you when you became a vampire? Are there more vampires? How long have you lived here?"

She paused a second before speaking. "I feed on the blood of wild animals. Thirty-one years old. To my knowledge I am the only one. For eighty-eight years, I have lived at Wightwick Hall."

"Thanks for answering my questions."

Her eyes locked on mine, but she fell silent. I looked into her eyes and saw uncertainty there. It appeared as if she was overwhelmed from what she had already said.

Suddenly she broke eye contact with me and averted her gaze to somewhere else in the room. All I got was the back of her head.

Suffice to say, Ileana was done. She wasn't talking anymore. The silence that engulfed us was overpowering. I

was longing to speak to her, but I was out of questions to ask. And I was tired of thinking too much, analyzing too much, dissecting every moment I spent near her.

BOOKEND

Chapter 46

AS SHE SAT ON THE SOFA Lorraine Krag didn't bring up the matter anymore. It was best to keep her temper in check. And that she was determined to do. She wasn't giving up and would only convince Arthur that she was.

Before saying another word, she stood up, straightened out her peach linen dress with her hands and regained her composure.

Unable to argue with him, she conceded, saying, "You have a point, dear."

"That's the spirit," Arthur said, which made her feel resentful.

When she crossed the living room, she tried to be coy, and smiled at him, facetiously.

As she headed toward the kitchen, she looked at him and stated with a smile on her face, "It's got to be after eleven o'clock. How about I fix us some lunch?"

Arthur didn't respond. Rather, he was shocked when she smiled at him again. He wasn't sure exactly what she was up to, and he wasn't in the mood to find out.

"I will tell you something else, too," she said loudly as she stepped into the kitchen. "I think I'll accept your suggestion. As soon as I see Myrna Ivester, I will ask her about her half-sister."

"That's a wise thing to do," he called out from the living room.

"I figured I might as well get acquainted with the woman, being our neighbor and all. Don't you agree?" she called out.

"Lorraine let's just take it one step at a time. Baby steps, my dear," he called back to her.

"Baby steps, indeed," she mumbled under her breath, as she grabbed her apron from a hook on the wall by the kitchen door and began wrapping it around herself.

After closing his eyes, Arthur slid down a little in his chair with his legs thrust out in front of him, leaned his head back and got comfortable. Perhaps a short nap would ease up on his mood, which seemed a little perturbed because of the earlier conversation.

Lorraine took out two plates from the cabinet and separated them on top of the counter. After she shut the doors of the cabinet, she turned around and grabbed the wheat bread out of the refrigerator along with the mayonnaise, lettuce, scallions, and other fixings for lunch.

For the time being, she was going to act this way, playing all nicey nice, but only as a means to an end. And

she pretended the situation with Myrna Ivester and the castle was long gone from her mind, determined to convince him she wasn't interested in the matter. She wouldn't bring it up anymore.

But in reality, she was secretly planning to go out and spy on Wightwick Hall. She thought she could find out how Myrna was mixed up with that woman. Maybe there was something more to their relationship. Call it instinct or intuition, it was something she couldn't ignore.

After setting the plates of chicken salad sandwiches and cheese and crackers on the table, she said in a singsong voice, "Lunch is served."

Lunch was exactly what she needed to calm her thoughts. And entertaining Arthur with polite conversation would surely convince him that she was off the subject of Wightwick Hall for good.

"Coming, dear," Arthur said and got up from his chair.

"I made your favorite chicken salad," she said with the best smile she could muster.

"How gracious of you! I'm looking forward to it," he said with a hesitant smile as he sat at the table.

Setting two glasses of fresh lemonade on the table, she winked at him and sat down opposite of him.

His eyebrows raised as he took a swig of the lemonade. He was pleased to see her in such a good mood. She resembled the woman he had married many years ago. Though perhaps it was wishful thinking on his part.

They sat quietly eating for several minutes. Arthur tore into his lunch, while Lorraine casually took bites of her sandwich, occasionally glancing and smiling at him.

Not wanting to draw any suspicions, she thought it was a good time to start a simple conversation.

“Anything of note happening at Tesco today? she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“Nothing of interest. It was just a quick shopping trip.”

“I’m just curious,” she said with a smile across her face.

“Well, dear, thanks for asking.”

“It’s my pleasure,” she said with another smile and a wink.

Arthur was warming to the conversation. But he was in no mood for any hanky-panky, not now, or even later tonight. He hoped she wasn’t, either. So, he simply smiled back, and began eating the cheese and crackers.

After he thought about it some more, he decided to test her. He put down the lemonade he had been drinking and leaned toward her.

“You know what, I like the way you’re talking to me,” he said, eyeing her mischievously.

Lorraine got the hint. She suddenly realized he had obviously misunderstood her. Clearly, she needed to scale back her attempts to pretend she had forgotten all about their earlier conversation.

Noticing his plate was empty, she asked, “All done?”

“Why yes,” he replied.

“Allow me,” she said as she stood up.

Arthur watched her as she took his empty plate off the table without looking at him. As she turned away from him, he sat back in his chair and picked up his glass of lemonade. Of course, just as he thought, she was teasing him, for reasons he didn't question.

Lorraine dropped the plate in the sink and asked, "Was it cool outside?"

"Yes. It was a bit nippy this morning."

"I've decided I would like to go shopping with you next time," she said with a wicked flash in her eyes. "That is, if you don't mind?"

Surprised by what she had said, he didn't say a word right away.

While waiting for him to respond, she took her empty plate and glass to the sink and began rinsing it under the tap. A wicked smile spread across her lips while her back was turned to him. She didn't say anything either and kept herself busy washing up the dishes.

Now that he thought it over, he finally answered her, "Of course, dear. We need to go out together. However, I told Allan that I would stop by the restaurant later in the week. Maybe we can go out next time. You're not disappointed, are you?"

"By no means. Another time is fine with me," she said compliantly and grinned sinisterly.

She knew he would say something to that effect. It was typical of him to do that, postpone their activities. Little did he know that that was exactly what she wanted. She wanted him out of the way so she could go spying.

Arthur drank the last of his lemonade, wiped his mouth with a napkin from the table, and said, "I'm glad. The last thing I want to do is upset you."

Still with her back turned, she grabbed the peach towel hanging on a hook next to the sink and began drying the plates that she had washed.

"No need to worry yourself. I wouldn't be upset with you at all," she responded slyly.

Chapter 47

EOWYN DYM TROW was standing at the counter of the kitchen. She had just put some food in two bowls for her two little dogs. After wiping her hands with a paper towel, she tossed the empty cans of dog food and paper towel into the garbage pail in the cabinet beneath the sink.

“Trudy, dear,” Eowyn said, holding up a bowl.

Trudy looked up at her with her soft, sparkling black eyes.

After placing the bowl on the floor, she said, “There you go, cutie pie.”

Her soft whine made her grin as she put the bowl down for Lindy.

“That means you, too, Lindy,” she added, not wanting to leave out the other poodle in her affections.

Now that both dogs were elated, she quickly washed her hands in the sink. After drying her hands with a pink towel

that had been hanging on a hook above the sink, she pulled the sleeves down on her thin white knit sweater and stood there watching the dogs eat their meal as she thought. Something was nagging in the back of her mind. Why did Lorraine Krag really want to call Siobhan Mulcahy? She had a growing feeling that her story wasn't to be trusted. Was something going on that she didn't know about? The whole thing seemed fishy to her. She didn't want to pry, but at the same time she desperately wanted to know.

That was the first time Lorraine ever called her. She had been suspicious, hesitant to provide her with Siobhan's cell phone number. But the urgency in Lorraine's voice gave her the feeling that there could be some truth to the story she had told her. She had thought hard on the matter. What harm could possibly come from giving her the number she was so desperately trying to wring from her? Eventually she had given in to Lorraine.

Now, more than ever, she wanted to call Myrna.

"A fool of a woman like Lorraine Krag is not going to get the better of me!" she murmured to herself as she came into the living room.

She picked up her iPhone from the small, dark oak side table by the suede camel sofa and dialed up Myrna. After four rings she was directed to her voicemail.

"Hello, Myrna. It's Aunt Eowyn. Can you call me when you get a chance? There is no rush. I just want to chat with you about something."

Eowyn hung up and put her iPhone back on the side table. She was sure that Myrna would call her back very

soon, which she usually did. In the meantime, she went to her bedroom, took her dirty clothes out of the hamper and carried them to the laundry room in the basement.

After starting the washing machine, she realized the phone hadn't rung. Still no call from Myrna? She wasn't worried, though, not a bit. Not much time had passed since she phoned her. Likely, she was at work and not available for personal conversations.

Suddenly a thought arose. She should call Siobhan Mulcahy. This way she could explain why she had given Lorraine Krag her phone number. She quickly headed upstairs.

Back in the living room, she was dialing Siobhan's number. Three rings later, Siobhan answered.

"Hello?" she asked, sounding like she just woke up.

"Hello, Siobhan. It's Eowyn. I'm sorry, did I wake you up?"

"It's fine. I was lying around, being lazy on my day off from work. It's so nice to hear your voice. Is Myrna with you?"

Why would she think Myrna was here? Now Eowyn was a little worried.

"No, she isn't with me. I called to tell you that I gave Lorraine Krag your phone number. She said that Myrna had come over to her house last Sunday and told her you could work in her garden."

"I already spoke to Mrs. Krag. She didn't mention anything about her garden," Siobhan told her precisely.

"Is Myrna working today?" Eowyn asked for curiosity.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line that Eowyn almost thought she had hung up.

“I asked you earlier if Myrna was with you because today is her day off.”

“Do you know where Myrna is?” Eowyn asked, eagerly wanting to know every detail.

“Mrs. Krag told me that she had seen Myrna across from her house at Wightwick Hall. She wanted to know what Myrna was doing there. That was the reason she called me.”

“You don’t say. That Lorraine Krag sure is nosy.”

“I remember you telling me she was during lunch at the restaurant inside the Best Western New Kent Hotel last July.”

“So, I did. Now that you mentioned Wightwick Hall, I’ve seen it a few times when I was visiting Jesmond Dene. But I didn’t know that Myrna knew the owner.”

“All I know is that she met the owner on her job at Longwood Nursing and Rehabilitation Center.”

“Well, that makes sense. She’s met people at her job before,” said Eowyn.

“There’s more I need to tell you,” Siobhan said in a serious tone of voice.

“Okay Siobhan, please tell me.”

“You may as well know that Myrna is no longer my roommate. She’s living at Wightwick Hall now.”

“Well, this comes as a complete surprise to me, Siobhan. What happened?”

“Don’t be alarmed. Nothing happened. It’s just what she wants. I’m sure she’ll explain it to you when she gets around to it.”

“I gave a call to Myrna and left a message on her cell phone to call me.”

“I’m sure Myrna will call you soon,” Siobhan reassured her.

“I hope you’re not upset with me for giving Lorraine Krag your phone number.”

“I completely understand.”

“You go back to your nap. And I hope we talk again soon.”

“Don’t hesitate to call me anytime, for anything,” Siobhan said before she hung up.

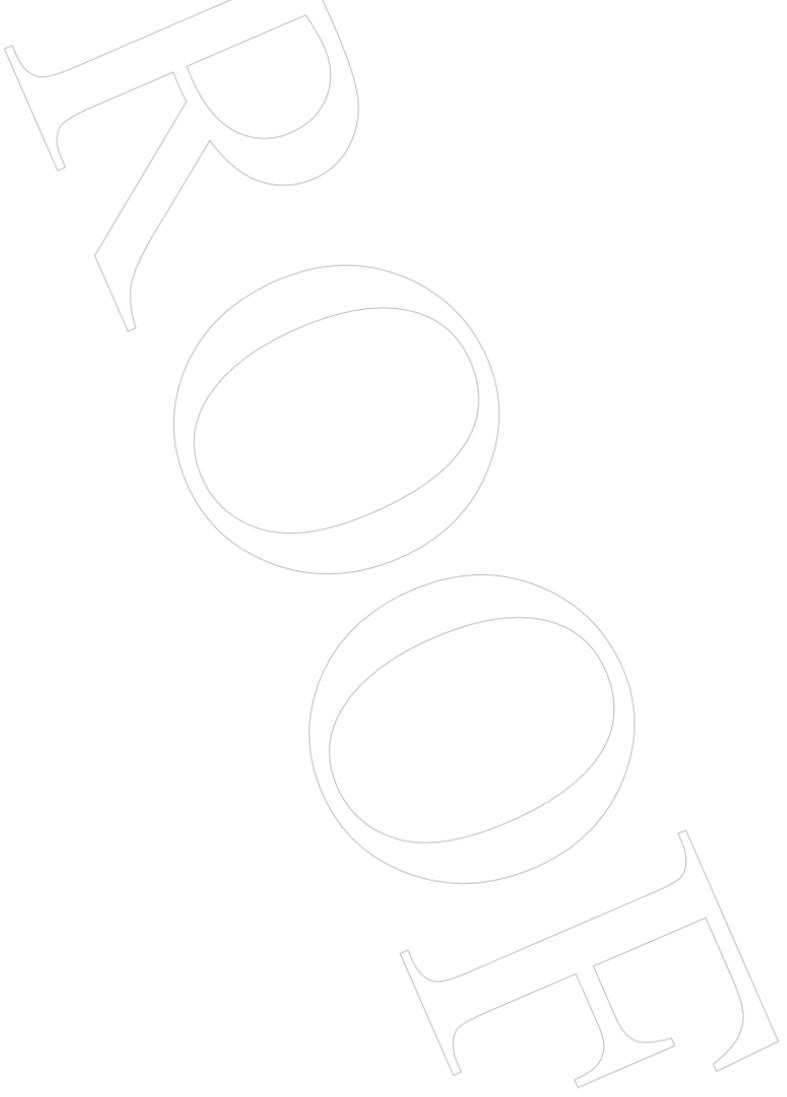
Eowyn hung up the phone feeling much better. However, she was up in arms about Lorraine Krag pilfering Siobhan’s phone number from her for the purpose of gossiping about Myrna, no less. It didn’t surprise her, though. She had noticed in the few months Lorraine had lived in the area, that she was asking many questions about things that she shouldn’t have asked.

What was Myrna doing living in that castle? It was something even she couldn’t have imagined.

The dogs barking attracted her attention. Up till then they had been quietly resting on a small oval rug on the floor. She looked in the corner of the room to see that Trudy was spinning around chasing her tail. And Lindy was pawing at Trudy with dainty swipes of her paws.

“What is it, my little sweethearts?” she called out to them.

The dogs whimpered and sat down. She knew how to calm them down in a short amount of time.



Chapter 48

ILEANA VLADISLAVA CAME CLOSER and looked at me in a way that made me feel as if she was trying to read my thoughts, but I didn't have anything in my head. My mind was devoid of thoughts. Whatever she was looking for, she wasn't going to find it.

"A moment ago, I heard a noise coming from your bag. The sharp ringing of a phone broke into my thoughts," she said, catching me off guard.

"It was probably my smartphone."

"You didn't answer it."

"No, I didn't."

In a flash she turned her face away in another direction. It was as if she was gathering her thoughts with difficulty. While I could only guess she was trying to think of something to say next, she moved her head in a semi-circle

to the ceiling, then to me. It looked like she was about to say something except she only stood there.

Loneliness is what I felt looking at her face. I could sense she found herself not wanting to look at me because of how she felt when she did. It seemed to me that Ileana had been alone for a very long time.

“You look tired. You can stay the night,” Ileana said, showing no emotion at all with a slight coolness in her tone.

I was so immersed in my thoughts that I failed to notice how tired I looked.

Stretching my arms up over my head, I nodded and said, “Yes. Actually, I am tired.”

She smiled at my answer. “I’ll take you to the room.”

Ileana was in front of me as we were walking up the staircase. She kept her head and eyes forward. Not a word was spoken by either of us. All you could hear was the stairs creaking.

For a short moment it felt as if the stairs would never end, as if I would never reach the next level. I looked up the spiraling staircase and felt faint. Perhaps I was more tired than I realized. I put my fingertips on the railing to steady myself as I took the last few steps to the second level.

At the top of the stairs, I turned left, following her down a hallway. I studied her as she walked ahead of me. Her raven, shoulder-length hair was striking, definitely her most valuable asset. She was about five foot four and weighed maybe one hundred and twenty. And while she was in excellent shape for a woman of her age, she was still a woman of her age in vampire years.

Ileana glanced over her shoulder to find me studying her. On some level, she had probably sensed it as well. I merely smiled briefly and kept following her as she walked. Turning her head forward again, she turned right into another hallway. After a few steps, she stopped in front of a door.

Still keeping her back to me, she opened the door to an elegant bedroom. “You can stay in here.”

It was as lavish as everything else in the castle. It appeared to be a guest room because it lacked any personality, as though it had never received any guests before. I wondered why that was.

“I trust you’ll find it comfortable. It has a private bath attached with anything you may require,” Ileana said, as she stood near the doorway.

“This is really lovely,” I said looking around the room.

In the middle of the room, against the wall, stood a large four-poster bed, covered in a burgundy counterpane that matched the draperies. The dark wood gleamed as if it had just been polished. Gold-tasseled red velvet pillows were piled high on the bed. At the end of the bed was a curved burgundy settee. A 5’ X 8’ Persian rug was positioned just in front of the settee. To the left of the bed was a large, chestnut armoire polished to a blinding gleam. There was a kerosene lamp sitting on the bedside table. And in the corner of the room, opposite of the armoire, was a bathroom door next to a small window to the outside.

“I am pleased you like it.”

Ileana's eyes lit up as she glanced at me. I felt it. I saw it. Her incredible eyes bore directly into mine. A brief smile formed on my lips. I wondered if she noticed, and if so, what did she think?

My mind raced with thoughts. In that instant it became clear there was a spark between us. I could not deny to myself that I was powerfully drawn to her, something I hadn't felt before with any other person.

We were quiet for the next minute or so. Then she walked a few steps forward and threw a quick stare in my direction.

Not a second sooner, she looked away as if in thought, then turned back and looked at me in an odd way for a moment, and then looked away again. She had been acting this way since my arrival. I could only assume that she was awkwardly, again searching for something to say.

There were so many things I wanted to ask her. But still it didn't feel like the right time. I looked at her about to say something but changed my mind quickly. The thoughts had escaped me. There was no reason to mention anything to her. Not now, at least.

When she saw me yawn and rub my eyes, she took a couple of steps backward toward the door. It looked like she was getting ready to leave.

"I will come to check on you later."

"What if I need to find you?"

"Don't worry, I will find you," was the last thing she said to me.

Ileana glided out of the room, gently shutting the door behind her.

“All right, thank you,” I said, watching her go.

After putting my backpack and red wool cape in the armoire, I sat on the edge of the bed, taking in the room. I felt strange because I still felt Ileana’s presence. For all I knew she could be standing on the other side of the door, listening to me. I thought that because of the way she looked at me when she left. It was as if she thought I would leave as soon as she turned her back. Smiling to myself, I knew I wasn’t going anywhere. I came here with the intention of staying. And even stranger was the fact that I didn’t miss my old life. Didn’t even cross my mind.

The sound of lightning striking a tree, ripped through the air. I was surprised that the weather had changed so fast. The sound of pouring rain startled me, yet it soothed me.

I quickly went to the window to take a look. Pulling back the curtain, I could see dark clouds in the sky and drops of rain bouncing off the window.

All the sudden the sound of the rain made me even more tired. The air in the room felt cool against my body that felt weak. I couldn’t focus anymore. I closed the curtain and turned toward the bed.

After stripping off my black boots and jeans, I laid down on the bed and wondered what would happen next. Whatever it was, I was ready to accept all of it. The unexplained and the unexpected was exciting to me. I knew I was undergoing the most profound and the most overwhelming transformation. It wasn’t easy to put into

words the feelings inside me. It seemed as if somehow, I was metamorphosizing like a butterfly from a cocoon and I was loving it. I fell asleep with this thought on my mind.

BOOKEND

Chapter 49

“AT LAST, SHE IS HERE!” Ileana said to herself.

Myrna had suspected right. Ileana was standing in the hallway, outside the door. Listening to the movement on the other side, she was concerned about her new friend, and felt responsibility toward her.

Now that she was sure Myrna was resting in bed, she stood there not sure what to do next. So, Ileana started pacing in the hallway outside the bedroom door.

It had been so long since she had felt that sense of belonging, to anyone, that she had forgotten what it was like. A part of her was fearful of Myrna changing her mind and turning around and leaving. By all accounts, Myrna’s visit had gone off well. This intrigued her the most and she was curious of that. It seemed that her intuition was correct, for Myrna to want the life of a vampire.

Now, she wanted to go to her study and reflect on the matter further with some soft music in the background. She breezed down the hallway, and into the room.

Flipping through a stack of albums next to the turntable on top of the square oak cabinet, she selected one and put it on. “La Lisonjera” by Cecile Chaminade started playing as she sat down on the Victorian armchair to the right of the cabinet. Closing her eyes, she let the music engulf her.

The charming tunes of the music brought memories flooding back. Just like that, she was remembering things she hadn’t thought about in years. The time when she had become a vampire. Images rolled through her mind like a movie.

On a cold and rainy evening in December 1539, a week after her thirty-first birthday, that she remembered well from her days in Toplita, a commune in Hunedoara County, in the southwest corner of Transylvania, she sat in a wooden chair in front of the fireplace in the living room. She was lonely and tired of working on the farm.

She hadn’t married and lived at home taking care of her father until his death of cirrhosis of the liver. It had been six years since her father had died. Still she had not met anyone significant to spend her life with. Working on the farm, gave her no time to develop close relationships.

A knock on the door had surprised her and disrupted her train of thought. It was odd considering the horrible weather.

“Ms. Amanar, it’s Simona Bellu. Open the door,” the girl said in Romanian.

She opened the door to find the fifteen-year-old girl whom she had tutored in reading and writing skills some years ago, solely as a favor to the girl's father who had been a friend of her late father. Three years had passed since she had last seen Simona, and she barely recognized her. Simona had on a long hooded black cloak over a white dress with a short ruff collar that was wet from the rain. Although she wore no shoes on her feet, she showed no sign of grass or soil stains.

After letting her inside, Ileana closed the door and led her near the fireplace to dry off. Simona immediately moved away from the fireplace and stared at her in the most peculiar way.

"What brings you out in this weather?" Ileana asked her in Romanian.

Simona told her that she could offer her a better life than the one she was living.

"A life that didn't involve hard work and loneliness," Simona specifically had said in Romanian.

Ileana's defenses were weakened from years of a solitary existence, and she had caved. For the heck of it she told Simona that she did want a better life for herself but didn't know how to go about finding it. Simona came close to her and sunk her teeth into her neck.

The next thing she remembered was waking up in her bed the next day. She had lost her appetite and was physically changing. Her desperation for blood drove her to attack the pigs on her farm and consume their blood.

Four days passed before Simona Bellu came back and explained to her that she was a vampire. That she had to go with her to be with the others and live in a castle near Brasov, Romania, for which she did. She never returned to the farm.

The record was no longer playing music, and she just noticed that it had stopped. Her thoughts returned to Myrna Ivester. She wanted to know how Myrna was doing. Her concern was to assist in Myrna's transition. Would she need another neck bite?

After much thinking on the subject, she decided that one more bite would help. It should speed up her transformation. She wouldn't take much blood.

With that in mind she got up, went to the turntable, turned it off, put the record back in its cardboard and put it back with the other records on top of the cabinet.

She briskly left the study and stopped in front of the door of the room where Myrna was sleeping. The only sound she could hear was the rain falling hard on the castle.

Quietly entering the room, she floated around thinking how she was going to seduce her. She hadn't worked out this part yet. Stopping by the window she studied her sleeping form where she lay under the beige wool blanket and burgundy counterpane with gold-tasseled red velvet pillows all around her.

The soundtrack of heavy rain beating against the window took her out of her concentration. After briefly looking at the window, she pulled the curtain and peered outside. The pounding sound of the rain soothed her

nerves. She took in a deep breath while watching the downpour. The spot by the window was ideal for what she planned next.

She turned around to face Myrna with a look of desire. As she gazed on Myrna, her thoughts turned to the blood running through Myrna's veins. Now her brown eyes glowed reddish.

Chapter 50

UPON HEARING THE SOUND of lightning sometime after its flash, I rose to a sitting position in bed, looked all around. Hazy furrows of light fell into the room and drifted around me. The curtain on the window was drawn aside, but I didn't remember leaving it that way.

I quickly turned my head away from the window. That was when I saw a figure in the shadows and realized it was Ileana. There she was in the room.

I wondered if I was awake or asleep. Or somewhere in between? Was I in a hypnotic state? It sure felt like I was. It was as though I was looking at myself from the outside. Like a dream within a dream.

As I looked up to find Ileana's eyes focused with hypnotic penetration on my face, there came a flash of lightning. I couldn't turn away from her hypnotic stare. It was all I could see. I was looking at her just as intensely.

Her beautiful, sparkling reddish-brown, enticing eyes burned into my skull. I had never seen eyes like hers — so filled with feeling. It was as if I could feel Ileana's feelings inside of me, and those feelings were good.

With her gaze fixed on me, I left the bed and went toward her. As I came closer to her, I started to feel this deep excitement and exhilaration within me. My heart raced faster as my emotions intensified.

Standing in my long-sleeved white button-front, cotton blouse and underwear, not being able to contain my state of wonder, I looked directly into her eyes. Face to face with me, I saw how magnificent she really was. I thought she looked beautiful in the dim light, with her wonderful eyes, shining down on me.

We both grinned, mirroring each other's delight as we moved closer to each other. It seemed important to make something as beautiful as possible out of each moment, to live it to the full, as I gazed, enraptured.

Sensing what was coming, I took a quick breath. The agony and ecstasy of it was beyond anything I could have imagined. I was giving in, without a single protest. No words needed to be spoken. She knew I wanted the same thing she wanted. I needed it as badly as she did. The vampire's life was very desirable to me. And I knew she sensed this feeling in me. She was a vampire after all.

The rain continued to beat against the window without letup. The sound added to the alluring atmosphere. Another vivid flash of lightning came illuminating the room, which

highlighted Ileana's features and made her look more attractive.

My mind was a jumble of thoughts and emotions. What should I do, and what shouldn't I do? I thought for a second or two. I was aware that something unique was happening, something unimaginable before now. This moment seemed to mark a turning point in my thoughts, my concepts and all the familiar notions of what women should want. There was something unusual in this, nothing like this had ever happened to me before with a woman. I couldn't intellectualize about it. Our connection was deep rooted, bordering on spiritual. The absolute nature of the bond between myself and my vampire maker, and the certainty which it was intimately close. We might be the only two vampires in the world. That made us even closer.

I continued to look into Ileana's eyes from this close proximity. What I saw in her eyes was genuine. I looked forward to her next move.

Ileana spoke, her voice just a soft whisper. "You are so beautiful."

Whatever she had said in the vampire language, I knew it was something nice. She didn't have to try because I was eating out of the palm of her hand. Nothing could stop her.

I tilted my face toward her, closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the falling rain. Her fingers lightly caressed my cheek. I liked the way she touched me, as if I was something precious. I actually liked it a lot. A chill ran up my spine just as she brushed my hair away from my neck with the back of her hand.

I gasped a soft moan as her sweet lips were on my neck. Her lips glided down my neck, forming delicate kisses as she explored the carotid artery pulsating beneath my skin.

Her tongue found the little holes she had made. She kissed them and then softly licked them. I trembled on the spot. It was a sensational feeling.

My eyes opened slightly to see her eyes had gone fully red. Her upper lip pulled back, exposing her elongated incisors. The bloodthirst took over, she nuzzled into my neck then inserted her fangs in the holes. My eyes closed again as I felt her sucking the blood out of me. It didn't hurt. I fluttered so needful. It was stimulation overload. I was filled with passion and ecstasy.

Ileana pulled her teeth out. I felt her tongue brushing against the bleeding holes in my neck. It seemed like it was over in a flash. Though it felt like it had just begun.

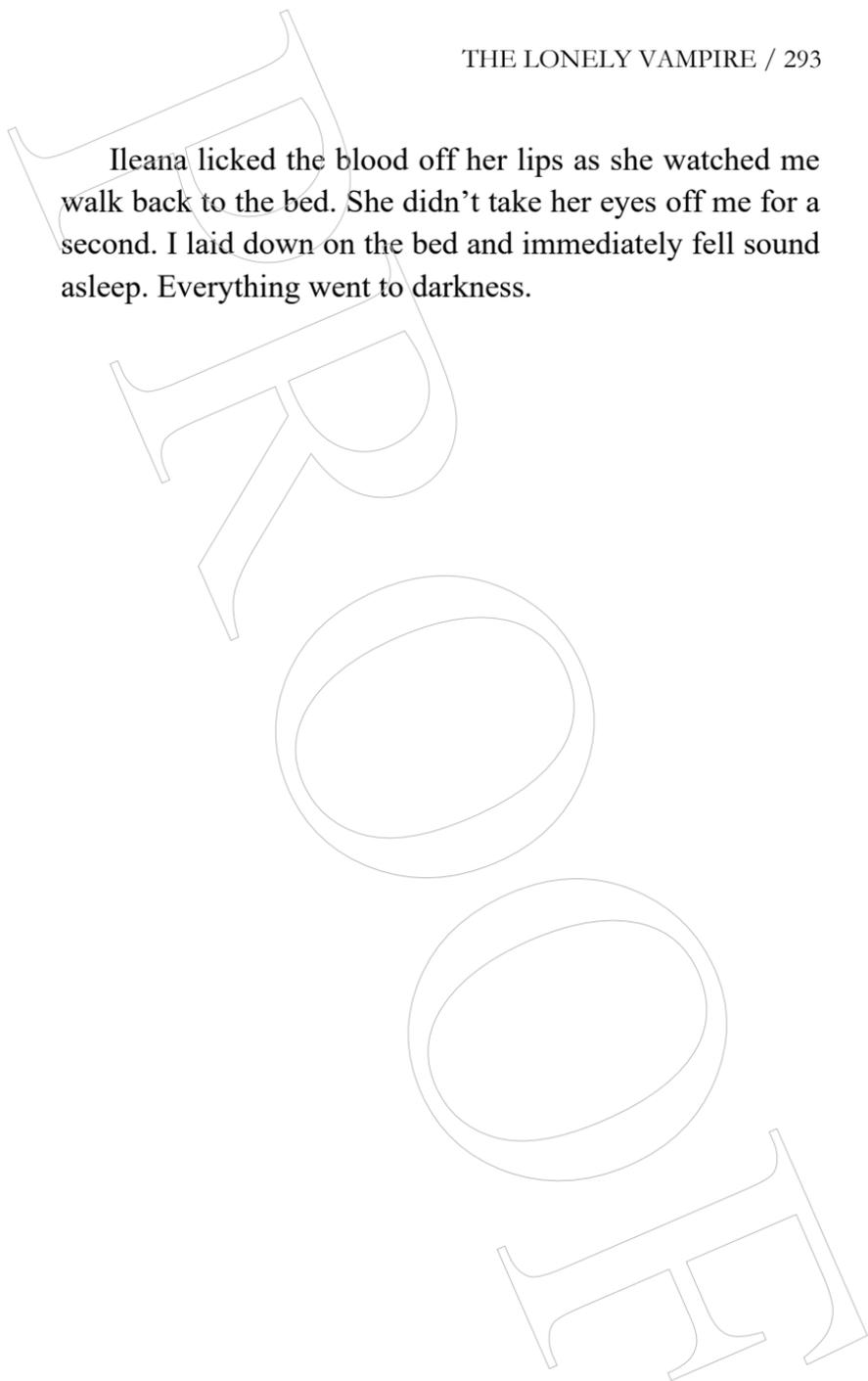
When she slowly released her mouth from my neck, I slowly opened my eyes and attempted to steady my emotions.

A bolt of lightning broke across the sky and light penetrated the room, briefly illuminating her. Ileana tilted her head back and sighed with pleasure. A trickle of blood seeped out from the corner of her mouth as she lowered her head to my level.

She put her right arm around my shoulders and ran her fingers over the right side of my neck.

Ileana whispered up close to my ear, "Sleep well, Myrna."

Ileana licked the blood off her lips as she watched me walk back to the bed. She didn't take her eyes off me for a second. I laid down on the bed and immediately fell sound asleep. Everything went to darkness.



Chapter 51

I SLEPT, awoke and slept some more. I was tossing and turning in the bed because my body was changing, and I was in an altered state of consciousness. At times I wanted to scream out loud between shuddering breaths as my body shook uncontrollably. I was constantly in a cold sweat. Finally, I awoke, sometime in the evening, perhaps late in the evening, I figured because of the curtain drawn back and looking at the darkness through the window.

As I watched the moon in the distance rising over the sky, I found myself levitating in the air a few inches over the bed. Just coming out of the hypnopompic state of consciousness between sleep and wakefulness, I was returning to the possession of my faculties. As I was slowly returning to the bed, my actual weight seemed much less. I was certain I had lost a few pounds, ten perhaps.

Lying in bed, I wondered how long I had been asleep. I had lost track of time. I didn't even know which day it was.

As I was preparing to get up, my mind drifted to Ileana. I remembered the softness of her lips on my neck. And her gentle touch with her soft hands made me shiver. The more I thought about it, the more I was turned on.

I put my fingers on the holes on the right side of my neck, to make sure it wasn't a dream. The way that they felt, I could tell they had been tampered with.

It struck me that Ileana was a lonely vampire. Initiating me into her secret society, biting me, changing me into an immortal, seemed like an act of desperation on her part. This was her way of reaching out, the only way she could, as a vampire.

Before my mind wandered off again, I got up from the bed. In doing so, I realized there was no mirror anywhere in the room. How odd, I thought to myself. And though I couldn't see myself, I knew that my body had undergone more changes.

"I'm a vampire. I know it," I whispered to myself.

There was only one person who would know for sure. I needed to find Ileana.

After slipping on my black jeans, I started to walk toward the door. On the way there, I noticed how weak I felt. There was another thing, too: I excruciatingly wanted blood. My body ached for it.

Quickly leaving the bedroom, I went in search of Ileana. At every turn in the hallway, something told me to be careful or I would get lost. I breathed a sigh of relief when

I saw the entrance to the spiral staircase coming up on my right.

I carefully worked my way down the staircase to the floor below. Crossing through the foyer, I turned toward the hallway where I saw the door of a room open. I could sense Ileana was there.

When I came into the room, I saw her there, sitting in a Venetian chair of ebony and mother-of-pearl, turned away from me reading under a purple laced Victorian lamp next to a large ornate vase on a dark brown cherrywood end table. She was dressed in a simple, long-sleeved, gray tunic with draping sleeves and matching leggings, with thin-soled dark brown sandals on her feet.

The room was a library of sorts. I marveled at the fanciness of it. Most impressively, the marble floored room was filled with books on four dark oak bookshelves on the west wall. From what I could tell they were mostly classical literature, opera, art, and music.

A pair of large ornate vases sat on two dark brown cherrywood end tables at either end of the bookshelves. At the far end of the room, there was a small window next to an Edgar Degas painting on the wall you could raise an eyebrow at. I took a glance at the portrait of ballerinas, staring at it briefly, then looked at Ileana.

“What are you reading?” I asked, startling her into looking up at me.

“It’s a rare edition of the Grimm’s fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, and it is my joy,” she said.

"I've read it. I recently saw a movie version of it," I said and managed a weak smile.

The corners of my mouth turned up before I could hold back the smile. Besides, I didn't want to. Feeling a little embarrassed, I hoped she didn't mind me walking around the place in my bare feet.

"Interesting," she said, thinking, "How did you sleep?"

"Very well thank you."

"What time is it?"

Ileana pointed to the clock on the wall, which read a quarter past eleven o'clock. "You will eventually get used to being awake in the night and asleep in the day."

"The vampire schedule," I said jokingly to lighten the mood a bit.

Without stopping to think, I said the first words that came into my head. Judging by her lack of reaction, she didn't get it. Maybe she couldn't relate to my sense of humor.

Ileana put the book on the shelf, took me by the arm, and began to walk me around the mahogany wood-paneled walled room, explaining the significance of the more notable books. There were leather-bound volumes and first editions by well-known authors.

"I'm glad you are still here," she said after her tour.

"I'm not planning to leave."

"That's good to know."

She released my arm and sat down in the Venetian chair again.

"How long have I been sleeping?"

“Today is Thursday, September 14. You’ve been in bed for two days.”

“I would never have guessed.”

The sudden onset of weakness on one side of my body took me by surprise. Feeling I was going to faint, I staggered as I reached for the other Venetian chair and gripped it so hard that the knuckles of my thin hands went white, as if holding on for my life. I hadn’t had nourishment in four days. My body was a little more than a pint low on blood, on an empty stomach. I found myself painfully aware of my hunger for blood.

When I looked back, I saw that Ileana was already standing by my side. With one glance at me, she had seemed to intuit what was happening to me without me saying the words. She kindly helped me sit in the chair.

The conversation got serious really quickly.

“My body is cold all over and I feel very weak,” I said in a near whisper.

“I’ll get you something,” she said too quickly.

Ileana left the room for a few minutes and returned with a smoked-glass goblet, filled to the rim with blood and a straw. She handed it to me. I pushed myself up a little straighter in the chair, held the goblet of blood with two hands and sucked half of it down through the straw. Then I sipped from the straw slowly until it was all gone.

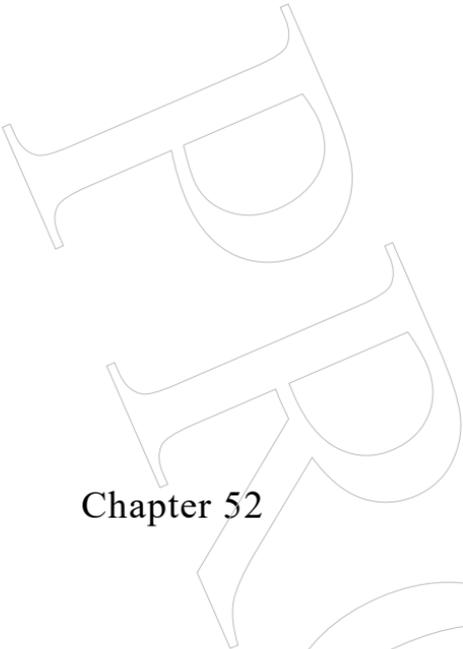
“Feel better?” Ileana asked as I handed the empty goblet to her.

“That does make me feel a lot better,” I said, relaxing back in the chair, smiling a bloody smile at her.

I was feeling the dizzying effect of the blood rushing through my body. It did wonders for my insides. And I felt the urge to say something more. Instead of words, a yawn came out of me and the sensation of oxygen enriching cells tingled through my body. An overwhelming tiredness fell upon me. Perhaps I drank too much, too fast.

“Why don’t you have a short nap, Myrna? I’ll check on you in a while.”

The last thing I remembered was I thought I saw her leave the room. As I closed my eyes, I faded off into sleep, hoping it wouldn’t be a long nap, just a two- or three-hour power nap. I didn’t want to be sitting in this chair for another couple of days.



Chapter 52

AFTER TAKING THE GOBLET to the kitchen, carefully washing it, and putting it back in the cabinet, Ileana came back into the library. She seemed to be very relaxed, standing there watching Myrna sleep in the chair, but in reality, her mind was preoccupied with many things.

Little did Myrna know why she had been looking over *Little Red Riding Hood*. She knew what it was like to fear a wolf, specifically a werewolf. For years she had tortured herself about it. The lesson she had learned from *Little Red Riding Hood* was that no matter how the wolf might have attempted to kill her, she discovered her courage and found the strength within herself to overcome her fears.

With Myrna in the picture, she felt the fear again. She worried for the both of them. Naturally, she couldn't share these feelings with Myrna. All she could do was try to stay cool and hope that the werewolf would never find them.

Knowing that Myrna could be asleep for hours, she thought she should bring her to the guest room. She carefully lifted Myrna into her arms — and that without so much of an exertion. Ileana carried her up the spiral staircase to the next level and into the hall that leads to one of the six large bedrooms.

Upon reaching the room, she pushed the door open with her shoulder. She laid her gently down on the bed and arranged the pillows comfortably around her.

“Rest well, Myrna,” Ileana whispered softly near her ear.

After a sideways glance out the window, she pulled the curtain shut. She left the room closing the door behind her and headed for her greenhouse, knowing that working with her plants was a way to get lost in her thoughts. In 1940 she had taken up horticulture — a rather unusual pastime for a vampire, but it suited the environment of her home within the leafy valley and public park of Jesmond Dene.

Ileana made her way up the spiral staircase to the room and headed right for the section of geraniums. They had grown significantly because they absorb a lot of light coming through the skylights which also opened and closed automatically allowing much needed fresh air to circulate in the room.

After trimming the geraniums with scissors, she made her way around a section of marigolds, to the sink in the corner of the room. She picked up a watering can from the floor next to the sink, filled it with water, and went to water the geraniums.

Two brightly colored butterflies flew past her face, one moving from right to left and the other moving from left to right, as she walked to the far side of the greenhouse, where pansies and orchids grew. It looked like a jungle because of the scores of shelves of white and orange orchids, with at least half of them in full bloom. After watering the orchids, Ileana's next task was to repot the azaleas.

With so much to occupy her time, her hands worked on their own and her mind was free to wander. The first thought that entered her mind was the day she had arrived at the stone castle with reddish-brown roofs, sixteen miles southwest of Brasov in Transylvania.

The first vampire Simona Bellu had introduced her to was Ruxandra Tepes, who served as the right hand of Morsus the Elder. At first sight, Ileana thought she looked like an angel. She had long, sandy blonde hair, and hazel eyes and had on a light green flowing dress that fell to the ground and brown sandals on her feet. As she walked, her flowy long sleeves billowed down to the tips of her fingers, and the fabric seemed so bright, it shone with a light of its own.

Ruxandra caressed her face with her hand and said with a smile, in Romanian, "It is with pleasure I welcome you, Ileana Amanar. From now on you will be called Ileana Vladislava. You deserve a new name for your new life."

While Ruxandra entertained her by giving her a tour of the lavishly decorated castle, Simona wandered down a vaulted hall and disappeared through some doorway. Ruxandra went on to explain how in the early 1200's, Turcu

Castle was built as a wooden fortress of the Teutonic Knights, to protect Transylvania from the Turks. In the late 1300's it had been reconstructed with stone by Saxons to guard a mountain pass between Transylvania and Wallachia, the south part of Romania. In the early 1400's the castle and adjoining territory passed into the hands of the House of Basarab. Thus, the Draculesti family, a splinter branch of the House of Basarab, and the city of Brasov had invested interest in the castle.

"Now it is the home to nearly fifty vampires, who come and go as they please," Ruxandra had said proudly in Romanian.

After the tour she was given a new set of clothes. After changing into them, she was taken down a narrow staircase carved in the stone that snaked to the bottom of the castle. Not unlike a large cellar in appearance, the dark vaulted chamber had been called the sanctuary. This was where the vampires slept while hanging upside down.

For the next thirty-eight years, she rarely left Turcu Castle. There had been plenty of blood in supply. It was served in silver goblets any time you needed it. She had assumed the blood came from animals, or maybe even from people. She didn't ask.

She had spent her time learning the vampire language and listened to stories told by other vampires. At night there was music and dancing, but, more than often, she sat outside on the steep cliff overlooking the plains below.

The next time she saw Simona Bellu was in 1561, for a special ceremony celebrating one hundred years of

vampires in Transylvania. Everyone had dressed up for the occasion. Naturally, at the time she had believed Simona spent all of her time traveling around Transylvania, possibly creating more vampires. That evening was the first time she had ever seen Morsus the Elder. He had shoulder-length black hair, dark brown eyes, a slightly crooked nose, thin lips and had on a white dress shirt beneath a black velvet jacket, black pants, and knee-high black boots. He made a powerful speech to the vampires gathered in the dining hall.

From what she had learned about Morsus the Elder, he was the oldest vampire in existence as far as anyone knew. He had become a vampire during the time of Vlad III, ruler of Wallachia and a member of the Draculesti. Morsus the Elder made the important decisions for the different vampire clans who sought to control their own areas in Europe. He kept sacred scrolls of the vampire language, culture and the genealogies and records of the clans.

Ileana was the happiest at Turcu Castle. She had received nothing but kindness from the vampires. So, in July 1578, when the people rose up against the vampires, she was completely shocked. She knew there was fierce rivalry among the vampire clans but had no idea they were killing and torturing people.

All of the vampires had to leave Turcu Castle. They scattered themselves to towns in Transylvania. That was when she fled to Gheorgheni.

Even after all these years in England, Ileana missed her past life. A tear slipped from her eye as she stood up holding

pots of different sizes. Despite her emotional remembrances, she was immensely pleased with her work. The azaleas looked perky and fresh.

After the pots were stored, she headed toward the sink to wash her hands. Then she left the room, thinking, it must be five in the morning, which meant it was time for a nap. She worked her way down the spiral staircase heading for the cellar.

Chapter 53

EITHER THAT NIGHT, or the next day into the night — not sure which exactly — I found myself in bed in the guest room again. Tossing and turning throughout my sleeping hours, I didn't remember how I got into the bed. I could only assume that Ileana whisked me away from her library and put me into the bed.

I was lying here thinking about all the strange images in the dream I just had. It was spectacular enough to feel real and chilling at that. Strange dreams were part of the baggage I had carried with me way before Ileana bit into me.

Just how it started was not clear. No matter. The first thing I could remember was that I was breathing hard and running as fast as my feet could carry me in a forest I didn't recognize. My speedy steps rustled the leaves on the

ground. Tree branches scraped my dress that I was holding with both hands to keep myself from tripping over it.

It had struck me as odd that I was wearing a dress from a time in history that could be something my ancestors had worn. The European-style floor-length, long-sleeved, white dress with ruffles across the bottom half was absolutely stunning and could pass for something out of the Renaissance era. My hair, in one long braid hanging down my back and tied at the end with a yellow-and-white bow, contributed to the fairy-tale look.

When I glanced over my shoulder, I could see my stalker trailing about ten yards behind. It was a dark-haired werewolf. His black eyes had fallen on me the instant I looked at him. The beast reacted by growling more vigorously. His mouth was wide open with razor-sharp teeth on full display and blood dripping from them. He looked vicious and determined to grasp me with its claws and tear off my head.

I turned my eyes forward and ran faster. As I heard the cry of the werewolf linger in the misty air, my fear was stopping me from looking back again.

Despite my efforts not to look, I took a quick peek over my shoulder to see how close he was to me. That was when I tripped over something and went down, ending up on my hands and knees.

Tired from the chase, I slowly started to raise myself up. I didn't look behind me, but I could hear the growling of the werewolf in the distance.

As I stood up, I could see my dress was soiled. I took a look at my surroundings, realizing that I didn't even know where I was. When I looked down, I saw a most gruesome sight. In the midst of all my fear, I just found out that I had fallen over a dead body.

The dead woman had been wearing layered Renaissance period clothing that was a dark-blue dress under a short red cloak. Her head was lying just a few feet away from her body. The woman's red eyes were wide open in terror and sharp fangs were exposed from her lips. To my horror and astonishment, I discovered by the light of the moon that it was the body of a dead vampire.

My brows furrowed and I wondered how it could have happened, and what it might mean, but I didn't have any more time to devote to figuring out the mystery. My mind was too consumed with worries about the approaching werewolf. Running was all I could think to do at the time.

Panting heavily, I was running faster than before. I could hear the howls of the werewolf, but I wasn't going to look behind me. This time I was looking fiercely around for dead bodies on the ground to avoid tripping over them, or worse, stepping on them.

That was when I ran into Ileana. She caught my upper arms to steady me, her face dropping into worry. The way she was dressed made her look pure and attractive. She had on a low-cut, long-sleeved embroidered gold dress and a sheer silk veil draped over her shoulders. Complimenting the outfit was a simple white flower in her raven hair that was pinned up loosely at the back of her head.

I spoke to her, but she didn't answer me. Instead she released her hold on my arms, lifted her arm, and pointed toward the approaching werewolf.

"Beware of the werewolf. He knows what you are, Simona," she said in the vampire language.

The only word I understood was Simona, the name she had called me. Who was that?

"Ileana, it's Myrna. Please, let's go...from...here," I said, desperately trying to catch my breath.

"He is coming for you," she said again in the vampire language.

"Hurry, we must leave now," I said, unable to keep the fear from my voice.

I pulled on her arm and pleaded with her to run away with me. She wouldn't budge at all. I grabbed her by her shoulders and looked at her with desperation in my eyes. Still, she wouldn't move. Why wouldn't she come with me?

Frantically, I looked back and saw the werewolf moving closer to us. I looked back at Ileana, then on the werewolf not knowing what I could do. I looked again at the werewolf and saw him leap up to pounce on the both of us. It was a terrifying image.

At that point, I woke up. The memory of this dream was still vivid in my mind. Still with no idea why I dreamt this, though I didn't believe in reincarnation, I might call it a vision from a past life. The dream felt so real. It was as if I was witnessing someone else's life through their eyes.

Immediately, I remembered the dream that I had the night of my birthday about the German Shepherd chasing

me. Was there a link between the two dreams? Now I could chalk this up to mere coincidence, except it happened to me a second time. Perhaps this was something I should talk over with Ileana. She might have some thoughts about it which might be beneficial.

I got up from the bed feeling renewed and stronger than I had in days. Perhaps I was returning to my former self, or rather adjusting to the changes my body had undergone. Overall, it felt as though my whole body was completely rearranged as if new pieces were inserted by some unseen hand and the old pieces were removed.

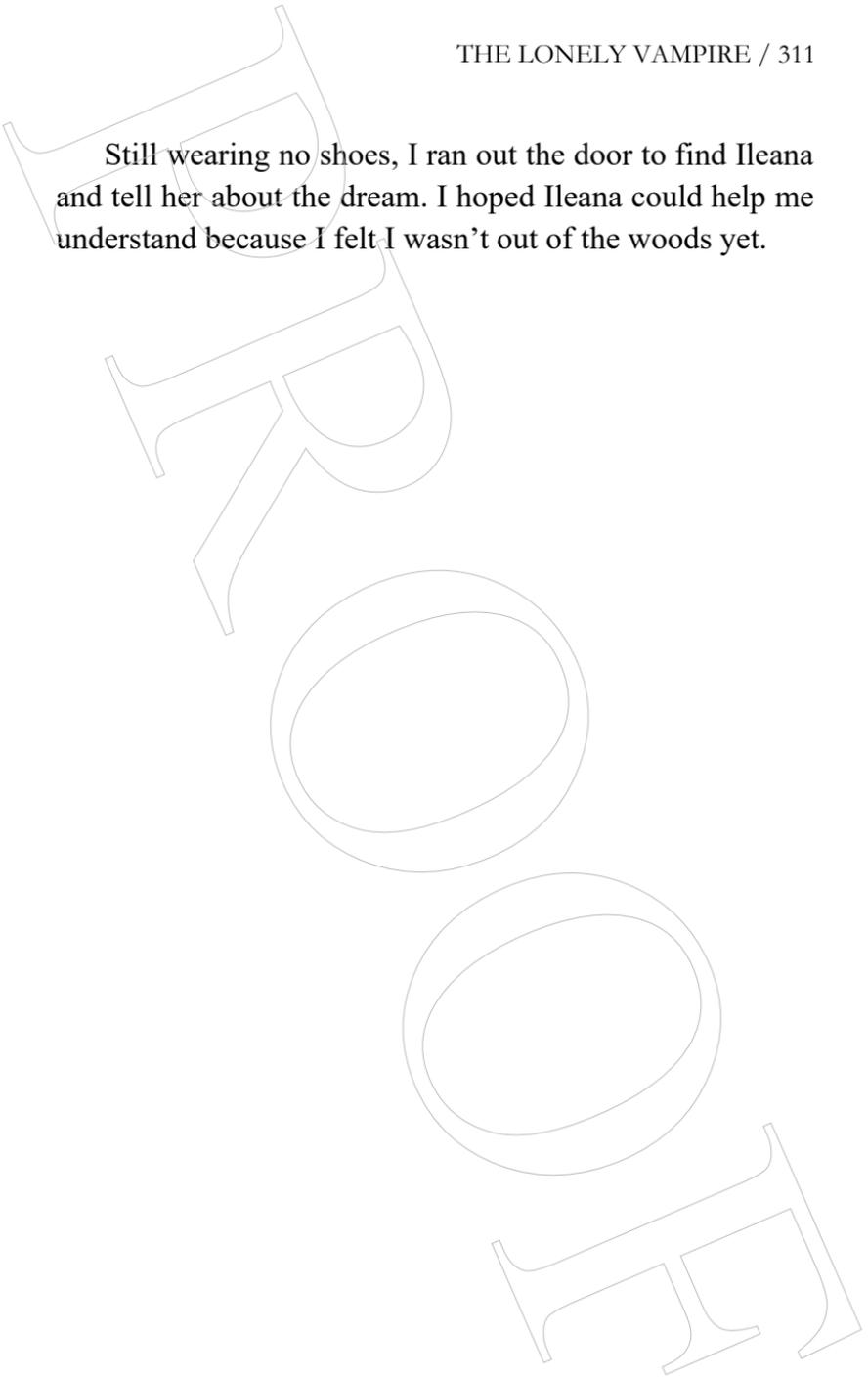
Though I wasn't sleepy, I stood beside the bed, lifted my arms above my head, and yawned a couple of times. It was an automatic reaction, probably from being in bed so long.

Meanwhile, I was liking my new-found energy, in both meanings of the word. So, what if I was a bloodsucker? I must face the facts. That was what I was. And I really liked it.

Entering the bathroom, I ran the cold water in the sink, washed my hands, and splashed some water onto my face. Although I couldn't see myself straight-on, I felt refreshed. I braided my hair in one long braid as I found it more comfortable that way.

Retrieving my backpack from the armoire, I dug out a change of clothes. I removed my white button-front, cotton blouse and black jeans and threw it in the backpack. Then I put on a pair of faded blue jeans and a light-blue long-sleeved crepe blouse.

Still wearing no shoes, I ran out the door to find Ileana and tell her about the dream. I hoped Ileana could help me understand because I felt I wasn't out of the woods yet.



Chapter 54

I OPENED THE DOOR to the roof and inhaled deeply the cool fresh air as I stepped outside. Something in my gut told me that Ileana would be here — and that she was. There, alone, she stood with arms outstretched on the ledge of the roof, sixty feet above the ground. She looked light enough to fly off like a bird. With the crescent moon in the background, it was an impressive sight. I wondered what she might be thinking as she stared across the wooded valley of Jesmond Dene.

I decided to step up and join her on the ledge. As I came close to the ledge, Ileana said nothing, but watched me out of the corner of her eye.

“Sure, is chilly out here,” I said rather casually.

She remained silent, tilted her head at an angle and looked back over her shoulder with her dreamy eyes into mine. It was just something she did now and then.

The air whooshed around me as I jumped up next to her. I felt the cold air of the night blow on my face and clothes. Startled by my appearance at her side, her eyes widened, and her body jerked briefly. Maybe she needed some time to get used to having someone by her side. Once she adjusted to my presence in her life, I hoped, she might feel more comfortable confiding in me.

I asked her simply, "So, this is the life of a vampire?"

"How do you like it?" she asked with a mischievous glare on her face.

"Would it surprise you if I told you that I like it very much?"

"I am not surprised at all. It's exciting at times."

A smile formed on her mouth and her lips curled into a devious expression. What could she be thinking now?

"What's on your mind, Ileana?"

"My dear, you look divine in the moonlight."

"Why, thank you dear. It's so kind of you to say that. The vampire life suits me after all."

Standing so high above the ground, it was almost as if I was breathing the stars, like a goddess of the wind or another culture, from a time before the modern era, when extraordinary beings walked and shaped the earth itself. Maybe I was overly dramatic. It just felt so good because I had overcome one of my biggest fears. You would never have believed all my life I had been afraid of heights.

"It's a breathtaking view and I'm experiencing a feeling of euphoria up here," I said.

"It is very soothing."

“Do you ever worry about falling off?”

“If I slip, I can just float back up onto the ledge. Vampires can absorb, transform, and manipulate life force energy. You will be able to do that too, as you practice.”

Her saying that made me think of all the things I could do and couldn't do now. Looking to the supernatural aspect of it, it was something I was getting used to, but slowly, and getting hooked on it faster.

“What are you thinking about now?” I asked, focusing on her again.

“You are a vampire. Do you have to ask?”

“I like to hear you talk,” I said, a little playful.

From her expression, I could tell she was taken back from my reply. I tapped into her vulnerability, which could be a turn-on for a vampire. On the surface, she was very attentive and caring for a vampire. Still, I was sure there was a dark side in her, being a vampire and all. If I wasn't already a vampire, I was sure she would have stuck her fangs in me.

“Many times, I have been up here alone. The thought of you being next to me makes me so excited. I need the comfort that you provide,” she said with a slight smile revealing her sharp fangs.

Just as I thought, she was aroused by our conversation at such heights. I too felt a little beguiled from the close conversation.

“That's such a sweet thing to say,” I said gazing at her with my newbie vampire wonder-filled eyes.

Abruptly changing the conversation, she said, "In case you were wondering, it is Saturday, September 16 approximately half past one o'clock in the morning. And we are very low on blood."

"How low?" I asked, rather worried.

"There is one half full blood bag left out of the six whole blood bags I took from Freeman Hospital a week ago."

"Freeman Hospital? That's where Siobhan Mulcahy works."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is so."

"Right! Going back there is not an option. There are some deer out there. Now is a good time to strike."

"There is something else I want to share with you. But I guess it can wait till later."

Ileana gave me a good hard look, and said, "It will have to."

Getting into position, she walked a few steps to her right and stood still with her back facing me. She slowly turned her head to look at me. Her lust for blood was present in her reddish-brown eyes.

"We must hurry up if we want to catch one of those deer," she said in an urgent tone.

There was something really dreadful about killing an animal. On the other hand, a girl needed to eat, right? I didn't want to do it but there was no other way.

"So, are you ready?" she asked impatiently.

As Ileana looked expectantly at me, waiting for my answer, I couldn't help but notice how lovely she looked too in the moonlight that bathed her face with its soft silver.

"No time like the present," I said wittingly.

Before she could respond, I said taking off fast, "I'll race you to the bottom."

Here goes another first, I thought as I plunged forward. I moved straight down the side of the castle wall toward the ground below. Ileana followed behind me with her long-nailed feet gliding down the wall. She caught up with me and we were moving side by side a bare two feet apart.

"Remind me later to tell you about my strange dream," I said, before our feet touched the ground.

Chapter 55

WE WERE PERCHED on a large rock watching two deer in the woods twenty feet away. I couldn't allow myself to think how cute they were. It was bad enough knowing that I was about to kill one of them. Little to say, this creeped me out in a big way, but I tried not to let it show.

Before I knew what was happening, Ileana was on the move.

"Stay near me," she said as she took off running.

Suddenly, and taking me completely by surprise, my head wasn't in it. I took a moment to gather my bearings, to study my surroundings. It was so dark where we were, that I almost couldn't see her. My legs felt shaky from nerves, but I forced myself to run after her.

As I was running at top speed, this was a dream-like feeling of the uncanny. I had done this before — in my

dreams. The only difference was that I was chasing an animal rather than the animal chasing me.

When I saw her wrestling with the deer, I stopped running and walked a little way to stand near her. Hoof-stomping and snorts, the deer was struggling on the ground. The gentle breezes swayed from left to right around the grass in which the deer lay on its side. In front of us stood two tall trees acting as pillars underneath the moonlit sky. The wind breezed through the trees. Branches in the trees waved back and forth in the wind, and leaves fell all around us landing on the grass before rolling to a standstill.

Ileana straddled the deer and bit into its neck. The deer let out a loud whine. A handful of minutes after, she raised her head up and glanced in my direction, looking straight at me with her red eyes, blood trailing down her mouth, pale as the moon. The look on her face indicated that it was my turn.

Was I ready for this? I was in disbelief about the whole thing. Yet, my desire for blood was so strong I cared for nothing else — and couldn't stop myself.

Without thinking I slowly kneeled on the ground opposite of her. My eyes were glowing red. I could feel it. The smell of the blood of the deer overpowered me. My fangs were starting to show. I approached the deer's neck and closed my eyes as my teeth came out and sank into its jugular vein.

The blood of the animal electrified my insides. I felt revived. Apparently, I needed the blood more than I cared

to admit to myself. I liked the taste so much that I kept feeding.

“Uh-hum,” Ileana cleared her throat loudly to gain my attention.

Seemingly, I had gotten carried away with the moment. I lifted my head up and turned toward Ileana. There was a look of shock on her face. So, with as innocent a face as I could muster, I gave her a simple smile with blood on my fangs and lips. Now I found her expression unfazed.

Shifting around I ended up with my butt on the ground. Blood dripped and stained my blouse. I noticed too that my blouse had grass and soil stains on the elbows. There was no other option for me but to rub the blood off my hands onto my jeans. I started to feel icky all over.

Ileana was about to drain whatever blood was left in the deer’s body for our use later. Reaching into her crossbody, she pulled out a plastic bag attached to a needle attached to tubing that resembled an IV infusion set. After inserting the needle into a vein in the deer’s neck, the bag began to fill up with its blood. Quickly the deer lost strength and then went limp as its life drained away.

After putting the plastic bag of blood in her crossbody, she looked at me and asked, “How do you feel?”

“If you want to know the truth, I feel like I just killed Bambi,” I said as I brushed the dirt off my jeans.

“Who?” she asked and threw her crossbody bag over her shoulder.

Looking at her with a funny expression on my face, I suddenly realized that she really didn’t know. Her

childhood was so long ago that there hadn't been Walt Disney movies in those days. I decided to rephrase my previous statement.

"What I meant to say was that I feel bad about killing that deer. I'm not completely comfortable with it yet. It's kind of depressing."

"You will adjust in time. We must obtain blood from animals from time to time. Blood is a source of life force energy we need to survive."

"I know, Ileana. I understand it goes with the territory. Nonetheless, I think it's frustrating being a vampire."

"Is it?" Ileana asked with a perplexed expression.

"Please don't try to humor me. I am just a mess. I just want to get out of these clothes."

"I think you look precious as you are," she said, and looked around her, but nothing moved.

"I am quite sure you mean well in saying that. Just bear with me because I'm not used to this like you are."

Preparing to leave, she stood up. After brushing some of the dirt off of her beige colored, long-sleeved tunic, she came over to where I was sitting on the ground and extended an arm to me.

"Let me help you up," she offered.

Wordlessly, I took her hand and she pulled me up to my feet. No longer able to contain my emotions, I surprised both of us by grabbing her into a hug. I just needed to be comforted feeling that I had acted a little irritable. That she had seen a side of me, she had not seen before.

For what seemed like the longest time, the two of us stood holding each other. We felt like we both needed it badly. Then I suddenly remembered how dirty I was and thought about all the mess I might have transferred onto her.

“Oh my!” I said, releasing our embrace.

I had gotten some dirt on her long-sleeved tunic. Ileana looked where my eyes were staring. Then she dusted it off quickly as if it were unimportant to her.

“It’s fine. I am a mess myself,” she said lifting her arms.

There were drops of blood on the back of her shirt cuff. I also noticed that there were soil stains on her beige colored leggings. Though I was the messiest of all.

The pit in my stomach told me to look down. I saw the deer lying dead on the ground. It died with its eyes open wide. It stared at me in its eternal silence, which was creepy and sad at the same time.

“This will take some getting used to,” I said, with my eyes still on the deer.

“You’ve done very well for your first time,” she said in a reassuring voice.

“I think I missed the vein when I bit into its neck. Did I do it wrong?”

“I have always believed it’s automatic for a vampire to strike correctly. Though I can’t say for certain. No need to trouble yourself about it. You’ll get another chance to do it again.”

After saying that, she looked at me with a gleam of something like humor in her eyes.

“Thanks for reminding me,” I said in a depressing tone.

“You’re very welcome. Shall we turn in?”

“I thought you would never ask,” I said excitedly as I started walking to the castle.

Peering over my shoulder to see her trailing behind me, I felt a sense of peace wash over me. All my tension faded away. There was no other place in the world I would rather be, than right here with her.

Chapter 56

HUNTING was a dirty business. It was the yuckiest thing in the vampire's world. I reflected on this as I stripped off all my dirty clothes and stuffed them into a drawer of the armoire in the guest room.

Once inside the bathroom, I washed the dried blood off my hands in the sink and ran a cold bath to wash the soil from my feet. As I bathed, the cold water soothed my body.

When I came out of the tub, I wrapped myself in a pink towel and released my hair from the braid that I had tied it in some hours earlier. Then I changed into an above the knee gray, tunic-camisole combo, lacy black capri leggings, and short black boots and let myself out of the room.

I followed the sound of music down the hallway to a room that was apparently her study. A few steps inside, the music had stopped suddenly, and I found Ileana removing a record from the turntable.

Dressed in an olive-green long-sleeved tunic, trimmed at the neck with embroidery and matching capri leggings with black sandals, her raven hair accented her attire. I thought she had polished up rather well.

Before I said anything, I checked out the clock on the wall above the inglenook fireplace. Almost four in the morning. I frowned and moved in closer to Ileana.

“You look lovely,” I said to her as she placed the album on top of the cabinet.

She threw me a quick glance and said in a soothing voice, “How very kind of you. You’re not so bad looking yourself.”

I liked her wittiness and laughed a little. Then she laughed a bit, an action which surprised her, so she attempted to stifle it.

Ileana surprisingly asked, “Did you have a dream that you wanted to share with me?”

It was good that she mentioned it. The truth was that I was actually building up to telling her.

“I’m so glad you remembered.”

“Be my guest. Tell me, Myrna.”

Ileana stepped over to a Victorian turquoise velvet buttoned back armchair and sat down. I walked over to stand next to the chair she deposited herself on.

“I’ve had dreams like this off and on since I was a child, so I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Tell me everything you remember.”

“In the dream, I had on a Renaissance period dress. I was running from a werewolf. I ran into you in the forest.

You just stood there and warned me of the werewolf. I told you to come with me. You didn't budge."

"A werewolf. How interesting," she said, as if reflecting, then asked, "Is there more?"

"Yes, there is more. I had tripped over a dead vampire's body and fell to the ground. Her head, separated from her body a few feet away on the ground, happened to face me. What do you make of this?"

After a beat or two, she said, "It may be a vision into the future or remembrance of the past. Your abilities have increased tenfold. You are more intuitive, you feel, see, and know more. I believe you have tapped into my memories," she said, looking up at me.

"How so, Ileana?"

She took a more serious tone. "It feels like forever ago that I fled Romania. At that time, all throughout Transylvania, the misfortune fell on the vampires, disdained by Romanians and Hungarians alike, hunted down and destroyed with the assistance of the werewolf."

"It sounds terrifying. I'm glad you escaped," I said, hoping it would make her feel better.

"I sense magic in you. You have the gift of sight like Karelyna the Seer," Ileana said, and took my hand in hers.

"It seems my dreams are clearer, bigger, and in a way more intrusive now that I have these new abilities. Tell me more about this Karelyna."

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she released my hand. She sat forward in the chair and clasped her hands in front of her.

She attempted a smile and continued, “For nearly forty years I lived in a castle with vampires near Brasov, Romania. Karelyna the Seer had long red hair and dark eyes, and the sweetest face in the world. No more than your age when she became a vampire, Karelyna could see things no one else could. She was a close confidant of Ruxandra Tepes, a high-ranking vampire, and may well have had a hand in her decisions. Karelyna shared her premonitions with Ruxandra who determined whether they were important enough for transmittal to our leader, Morsus the Elder.”

“I find this all so fascinating. Oops, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Please continue.”

“Her premonitions were never wrong, even if at times they were hazy. Tensions and conflicts with the Ottoman Empire and Moldavia spilled into Transylvania with an invasion in 1541, ending with a raid on Szekely Land. During that time, many claimed Karelyna’s visions had saved the lives of many vampires.”

“If I have this gift, what do I do with it?”

“Take note of your dreams. Interpret them and make the best decisions concerning them.”

“There’s something I almost forgot to tell you. In my dream, you called me Simona. Is that name familiar to you?”

Ileana wasn’t quick to answer. Her expression went somber.

“Must we go on about it anymore? They are all dead!” she declared, her voice rising with annoyance.

She got up from the chair, went to the window, shoved the curtain aside and peered out. Her back faced me, as if what I had said struck a nerve. Now I saw a side of her, I had not seen before.

“I didn’t mean to dig up memories from your past,” I said, as I sat down on the armrest of the Victorian armchair.

She stood, quiet and still, with her back to me and merely waved her hand at me halfheartedly.

“You’re sure you’re the only one who escaped?”

Closing the curtain, she turned around to face me, and enthusiastically asked me, “Have you dreamed about others?”

“Not that I remember. If anything comes to mind, I will tell you.”

“In all these years, I’ve never come across any vampires. I have never left England,” she said stiffly.

“I’ve never left England either.”

Ileana seemed calmer now and interested in the conversation, even though she was still standing by the window.

“For all we know, somewhere out there, there are more vampires,” I said enthusiastically.

Her eyebrows raised on that statement.

“The castle is still there southwest of Brasov. It has a different name now. And it’s a museum. Some years ago, I used the computer at the Newcastle City Library and searched it on the internet.”

“I can search it on my smartphone.”

“I will be happy to show it you.”

“Which reminds me that I should call my aunt before she starts to worry. I’ll call her first thing tomorrow afternoon.”

“That’s a good idea. So, your friends won’t become suspicious,” Ileana added.

“Nobody knows where I am except Mrs. Krag or her husband who I believe saw me from the window of their house last Tuesday.”

“It must be Lorraine Krag. Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I don’t know,” I said and shrugged my shoulders.

“She has been nosing around Wightwick Hall ever since she moved next door to me.”

“Let’s not worry about Mrs. Krag now. We both need to rest,” I said and stood up.

“I’m inclined to agree with you. Let’s shelve the conversation for now and pick it up again later,” she said, then asked with a sparkle in her eye, “Shall we walk to the cellar?”

“We shall,” I said agreeing with her.

We stepped outside the room arm in arm and walked that way all the way to the cellar. Ileana glided right up and hung upside down from the ceiling. I climbed up and hung upside down beside her. Roosted on the ceiling, I actually felt comfortable in this position. The two of us were more alike than I realized. My eyes closed and I fell into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 57

“YOU CAN LEAVE ANYTIME you like. You can go back home right now,” Ileana said in a rather strange tone of voice.

Back in the study, I had just got through telling Ileana that I had spoken on the phone with my aunt. She seemed relieved to hear from me. Lorraine Krag had seen me and told Siobhan Mulcahy who told Aunt Eowyn that I was staying with a friend at Wightwick Hall. I appreciated Siobhan covering for me and I had corroborated the same to my aunt. It was very believable because I often met people at my former job. Rather than being upset about Lorraine Krag’s spying and telling Siobhan, Ileana seemed to think I was homesick.

“What is there to go back to?” I asked her.

She explained, “Your friends, your job, your home...”

I interrupted with, "It's not the same anymore. I'm immortal like you now. I can't go back anywhere."

We stood there in front of her desk and regarded one another silently for a moment. She gave me a smile. This was when I knew she was playing with me, but I felt a little slighted.

"Well, I'm just saying, that's all."

"Has something happened, Ileana? Do you not want me here?" I asked with hurt eyes.

"All I am saying is that one day you may want to leave. And if you do, I'll understand," she said, not wanting me to feel obligated to her.

I firmly said, "I'm not going to run away from you."

Her eyes brightened at my words. And I meant it too.

"If you say so," she said and looked at me with her soft eyes.

I could understand her fear that there was a chance she could lose someone she cared about. It had happened to her before. She had lost people she cared for. I too had lost people I cared for in the past. My parents. Now, suddenly, here I was. And she was apprehensive.

I looked up and the clock on the wall read 11:17. As vampires we had so much time on our hands. I hoped she could drum up something to do.

"The night is still young. Any plans?"

After a moment's thought, she said, "Myrna, there is something I have been wanting to share with you."

"Is that so?" I asked, coming closer to her.

"I have never shown it to anyone before."

“That makes it even more special,” I said and came to stand closer to her.

Lifting my hand, I carefully brushed her hair off to the side. I was making her feel comfortable around me. She needed reassurance, I realized. I wanted her to feel like she could trust me because I was her friend. And then I did something I hadn’t planned to do. When I leaned in close, she understood. I smiled and slowly reached out and took her hand gently into mine. Something inside me said to do it.

Ileana looked at me, dumbly, but her eyes beseeching. “I think you will love it.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” I said as we walked out the door.

Holding hands, arms swinging gently back and forth, we sauntered down the hallway. It felt good to be together, enjoying a carefree moment. She kept her hand firmly clasped in mine as we made our way up the spiral staircase to the third level.

She stopped in front of a door in the hall and released her hand from mine. After opening the door, she walked inside the room. She stopped a few steps ahead of me and looked back in my direction.

A moment’s hesitation and I stepped inside to satisfy my curiosity. Moonlight filtered in through skylights in the ceiling, and my eyes focused on a marvelous sight. I was standing in the most impressive greenhouse. It resembled a small bit of paradise. I could feel the humid air and smell the various aromas of the plants.

“Everything about it is simply spectacular,” I said in awe.

“Feel free to take your time looking around,” she insisted, then turned away to busy herself with something.

By the time I turned around, Ileana was already at work. She was snipping yellow roses with pruning shears on the other side of the room. I think it was therapeutic for her.

My concentration fell on the colorful tulips. They were the loveliest I had ever seen. I walked over to them and gently touched the petals and carefully felt the texture. They smelled like a fresh summer day.

Wandering slowly about the room, I took everything in sight. I was attracted by the fantastic forms and brightly colored flowers. The blooms were so full of life, it seemed as if I could communicate with them.

Nearly two hours later, I was pooped out. I had covered every nook and cranny of the room. Ileana was already standing by the door waiting to go. She wore a quizzical expression as I approached with a smile on my face.

“There is something else we have in common. Besides a love of reading.” I said, bursting with enthusiasm.

“I am fascinated to know.”

“We had both spent too many years not taking any risks. Lately, we’ve been taking more and more chances, and everything is better now. Don’t you agree?”

“I do agree.”

“I have a theory about us. Do you want to hear it?”

“Myrna, please continue,” she said with interest, and added a smile as I came to stand next to her.

“We’re both really afraid of attachments. Because we’re afraid of losing someone we care deeply about.”

She came back with a thoughtful comment. “I like it that we’re friends.”

I said quite endearingly, “I like it, too.”

My feelings were genuine. I was glad Ileana had taken a chance with me, that I had taken a chance, too. That thought reminded me of something else.

There was something I had been meaning to ask her. Maybe this was the time to bring it up. I opened my mouth to ask her, but then I stopped myself from speaking. I was hesitant to say what was on my mind. I was sure Ileana caught it because she looked at me, waiting for me to speak.

When I didn’t say anything, she asked, “Is there something troubling you, Myrna?”

“How did you know? That I was meant for this life.”

Her response wasn’t immediate. She looked at me in a curious sort of way. Her eyes met with mine, and she seemed to be searching for the right answer. Perhaps she was just not used to me always talking. In my case, I was not used to her not talking much.

“You know us vampires, we just know things,” she said earnestly, then asked, “Are you ready to go?”

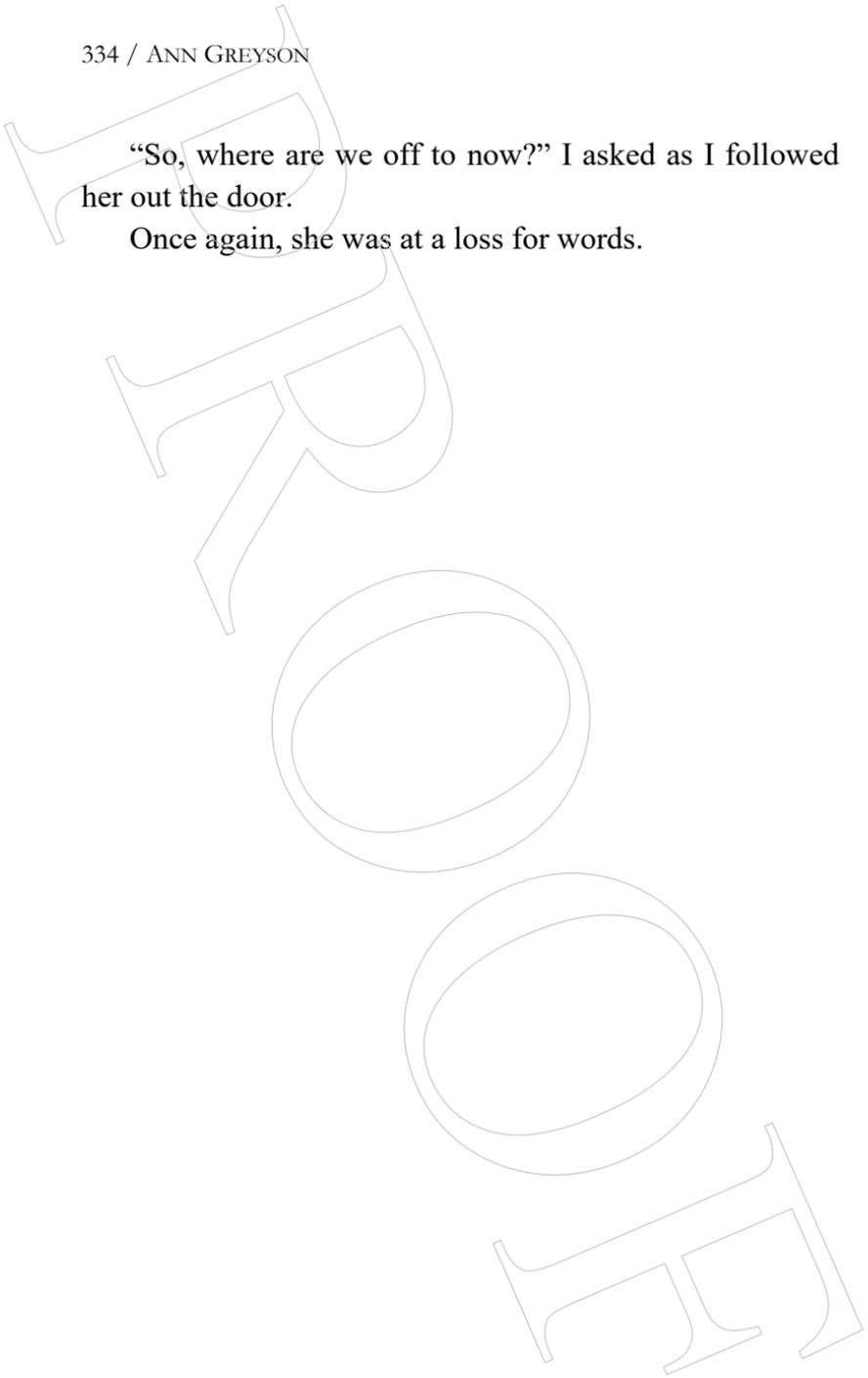
That was all she could say to me. It summed it all up. Far too perceptive for her own good, she knew I was the one that day she had seen me at the Newcastle City Library. It was that simple.

“Lead the way,” I said cheerfully.

“I will gladly do so.”

“So, where are we off to now?” I asked as I followed her out the door.

Once again, she was at a loss for words.



Chapter 58

IT WAS HALF PAST SEVEN O’CLOCK in the evening, on Thursday, September 21. Claymor Elgany sat at a table in The Longbow Tavern on Stepney Bank. While there, he kept his head down low, not making eye contact with any of the customers, doing his best not to draw any attention to himself. The fewer people who saw his face, the better he liked it.

His attire was plain, consisting of a pair of black boots and black slacks worn under a loosely hanging blue and black flannel shirt with a turned-up collar like a vampire. That he was not. A short, well-set fellow, with dark brown bushy hair, he seemed to be in his late twenties, He was unshaven and there was stubble on his face, but it suited him.

“Your steak is served,” the server said with a smile, setting the plate in front of him.

He looked intently at the food in front of him. With a knife, he cut off a slice of the rare filet mignon. He tore into his steak displaying a set of pronounced teeth. Blood seeped onto the plate, spreading outwards like a scarlet flower opening its pedals. Eating in such a way, it looked like the way a tiger or wolf might eat. Needless to say, he was a hungry man.

The server, wearing a light gray shirt and matching pants under a black apron, approached his table and said politely, "I don't mean to disturb your dinner. Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier. I'm Allan Palen the owner of The Longbow Tavern. I hope the food is to your satisfaction."

Barely giving him a glance, and after a few more chews, he said, "It is very tasty, thank you."

"May I interest you in some dessert and coffee?"

"Just the check, please."

"I will bring it right over," Allan happily said.

All that was left on the plate was a little blood. His glass of water was empty. After looking at the check carefully, he took out his wallet, and left twenty pounds on top of his check on the table.

As he stood up to leave, Allan Palen started coming his way, holding a pitcher of water. Claymor did not look at him but turned the other direction. He didn't want anyone to remember him at all. People were to never know that he'd been in their midst.

When he approached the door to make his exit, the door suddenly flung open and a man entered and bumped right

into him. The man was wearing a long black tuxedo jacket over a white dress shirt and black dress slacks. Claymor didn't like this one bit.

"Please forgive me, sir," the man said with a startled look on his face.

"It's no bother," Claymor said, keeping his head down.

"It's good to see you here, Viktor," Allan called out from across the room. "Will that be two for dinner?"

"Yes, Allan, you are right," Viktor answered cheerfully.

Allan lastly added, "Your table awaits you."

While they had talked, Viktor remained standing, blocking the door and Claymor was forced to wait. That was when he had noticed that Viktor was holding a wire leash to a little brown monkey. The monkey had looked at him with fear in his eyes. It moved quickly to hide behind Viktor's leg and buried his face in his knee.

Finally, Viktor began walking forward. Claymor quickly maneuvered around him and made a quick move toward the door. He flung open the door and the monkey screeched at him.

"Don't be afraid, Jasper," Viktor said to his pet, as the door slammed shut.

Claymor walked with a purpose, heading east on Ouseburn Road for about one hundred and twenty-five feet. He then turned left and walked about one hundred and fifty feet before making a right turn. After walking about one hundred feet, he went under Byker Bridge.

With his back against the brick wall under the bridge, he waited for the full moon to come. There were still a few

minutes of sunlight left, but he was eager. He had been waiting for this moment for over four hundred years.

As patient as it was possible for him to be, he took in the scenery around him. It was a peaceful environment. Though it should have calmed him, it did not. His thoughts were erratic and in contrast to his surroundings.

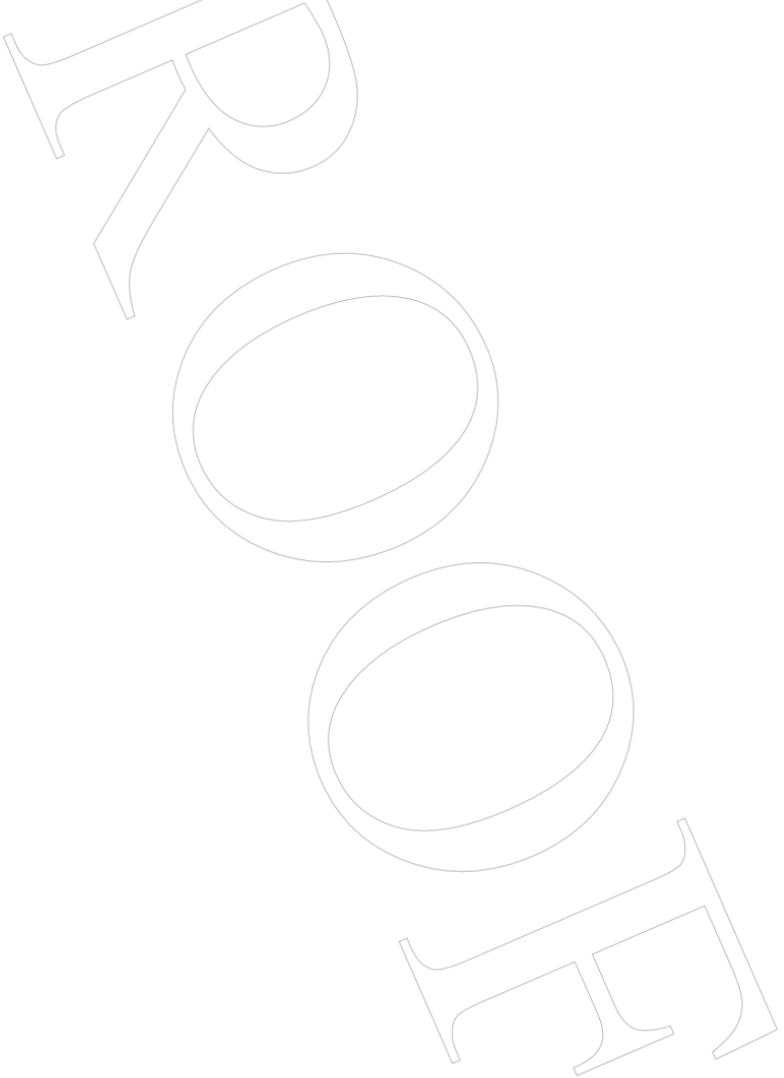
Tonight, he was a long way from his home in Sofia, Bulgaria. Clearly, he wasn't in Newcastle upon Tyne for a social visit. Unbeknownst to him, there had been a vampire living in this quaint city in Tyne and Wear. With old-fashioned churches, old style buildings, where sheep graze among the shrubbery, and a gateway to the Farne Islands that was a home to a colony of puffins, turned out to be the perfect hiding place.

For reasons he couldn't explain, he had discovered the whereabouts of the vampire. It had come to him in a dream, or at least he thought that was what it was. Last Friday night he had dreamed about chasing a vampire in a forest with the Tyne Bridge in the background. And it was an encouraging sign to see, at long last, the vision he had sought had finally come.

Just this afternoon, he had arrived on a British Airways flight out of Sofia and came straight to The Longbow Tavern. He didn't want to delay his planned attack. Every second was precious to him. It wasn't that long ago that he was considered by many to be the most fearsome vampire hunter in all of Transylvania.

When he glanced down at the Ouseburn River, a tributary of the River Tyne that ran under the bridge, a rag

doll floated gently and drifted past him. His thoughts began to drift. The moment he saw the doll, he knew that some child might be missing their toy. For that short instant, it took his mind off of his troubles.



Chapter 59

A SHADOW fell upon the small Ouseburn River in front of Claymor. The sun was fading fast and the mist rising, making the air cool. Anxiously he watched the sun fall out of view. It wouldn't be long now before his transformation would take place.

In the distance a full moon was slowly appearing in the sky. While the gray fog settled around him, his body was changing — slowly, almost painfully. He fell to his knees as the gurgling sounds of an animal came from his lips. If anyone heard them, they would believe it was a bear or a coyote. They could never have imagined what it actually was.

Behold the man had changed into a werewolf.

It was not long until the beast emerged from under the bridge. And he looked like something that crawled out from under a bridge. Lurking in the shadows, he descended by

the Ouseburn River on the outskirts of town. Luckily for him, as far as he could see, nobody seemed to have noticed him. And why would they? No one could possibly expect a werewolf to be in their vicinity, and neither would expect a vampire to be in their town. It was the stuff that fairy tales were made of, and people didn't believe in fairy tales.

He followed the vampire's scent toward City Stadium, creeping through the woods concealed by darkness. In the distance, he blended in with the other animals. He looked like a bear. No one would have the chance to scrutinize him up close to tell the difference. He had hundreds of years of experience in this matter, and spent no time worrying about anyone seeing him.

This was the day he had planned to show no mercy to this bloodsucker. The very one who had managed all these years to elude him. Consequently, he still held a grudge against the clans of vampires who had killed many werewolves in Transylvania before the people's uprising in 1578. All of this crossed his mind as he passed through Heaton Park.

In walking along the side of the Ouseburn River, he considered that he was the last of his kind. At least that was what he believed. Over time, he learned to control his animal urges and turned his aggression on vampires instead of humans. As a result, he had not touched another human in years. Not a bite nor a scratch. Therefore, he hadn't created new werewolves. Although he had heard tales of werewolves in Norway, he had yet to confirm it.

By the time he reached the edge of the woods of Jesmond Dene Road, he was tired and stopped for a short break. He hung his head, closed his eyes, and breathed heavily in and out a couple of times. Claymor wasn't the same, vigorous werewolf he had once been. Still he was confident he would succeed in defeating this vampire. The element of surprise was on his side. The vampire couldn't possibly know he was here.

Once he had his breath back, he walked a little further. Glancing around, he spotted the castle. After a few grunts, he stood there, motionless. The cool wind blew leaves up in front and around him. Leaves fell on his body and disrupted his thoughts. In a fit of rage, he swatted at the leaves with both arms swinging forward. A flock of goldfinches took flight from the trees, soaring up into the night sky. Seemingly, they were in fear of this beast.

The night crept on. The grounds of the castle were empty but for the werewolf heading directly toward it. Each step drew him closer to the vampire he wanted to eliminate. The malevolent werewolf continued on with determination.

Without hesitation, he walked to a corner-edge of the castle. All around him was thin fog. He bent down and rose again wanting to howl at the moon which was glowing above him. But he knew he couldn't afford to bring attention to himself. With some effort he refrained from howling. Low-sounding grunts came from the depths of his throat, whispered in the tiniest way, so that not even a bird could hear him.

Claymor absorbed the moonlight like an energy source. The heat inside him increased tenfold. It truly felt like an adrenaline rush for him. He let out a soft moan of pleasure.

Still a bit breathless after walking a little over two miles, he stayed under the moonlight for a little while longer to build up more strength. He took in a breath of air, shaking his head. Then his fierce eyes glared mistrustfully around. Nothing moved in the vicinity, or anywhere around for that matter. The only thing he heard was the cool wind rustling through the trees that was producing melodious music in the otherwise stunningly quiet and peaceful night.

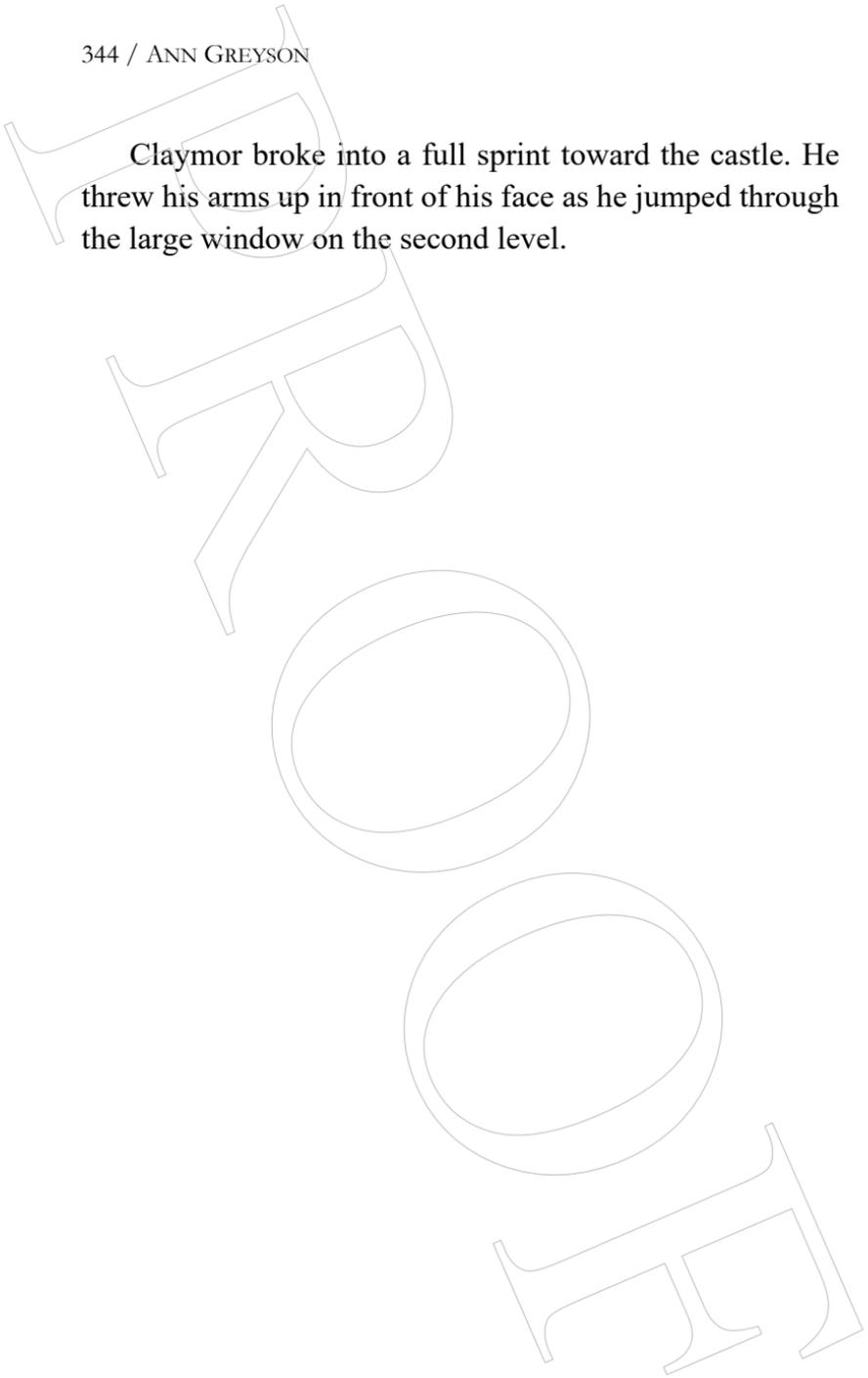
The castle was very quiet, as if no one was there. But he knew that wasn't the case. The feeling of isolation and loneliness was a façade. It was the dwelling of a vampire. He knew this from past experience.

Moving his head from side to side he sniffed the air, scrunching his face and growling. The smell hit him, certainly vampire in origin. Knowing that the vampire was close within his grasp, gave him a feeling of peace and strength.

He circled the castle, looking for the best point of entry. Hidden behind the bushes where no one would see him, he searched frantically for a window big enough to fit through. Soon, after looking around, he stopped under a window at the second level. It was a good size window, ideal for him to jump through.

The moment was at hand. At last he was about to fulfill his destiny. He made his preparation.

Claymor broke into a full sprint toward the castle. He threw his arms up in front of his face as he jumped through the large window on the second level.



Chapter 60

AT A LITTLE PAST TEN on a Thursday evening, I stood at the guest bedroom window with the curtain drawn back gazing at the glowing full moon on this dark night. I had just changed into a pale-yellow chiffon sweater with a V-shaped collar, dark gray capri leggings and black sandals before I fixed my hair into one long braid down my back.

The sound of breaking glass shook me to my core. Where from? Needing to know what happened, I tore away from the window and out of the room.

My mind was all over the place, as I hurried down the hallway. Suddenly the noise came again. I stopped near the entrance of the spiral staircase, noting that it was different. Listening quietly to the sound of footsteps on broken glass, I tried to figure out where it was coming from, but all of a sudden, the noise stopped.

There was this nagging feeling inside me that something wasn't quite right. Then came the unpleasant odor of a wet dog. What in the world could it be?

Before taking another step forward, I needed to know that Ileana was all right, so I called out to her and asked, "Is that you?"

I looked around for Ileana and found myself gazing upon two red eyes in the darkness, on the other side of the hall. I think I found the culprit of the smell. The eyes were moving closer. And the stink of a wet dog was getting stronger.

"Who is there?" I asked with dread in my voice.

The shadow was materializing into an animal. If this was some kind of beast, why was it here? Why was it coming toward me?

It came out of the darkness and into the light. The stinking beast was illuminated by the light of the moon from the window across the staircase. It was a werewolf! The werewolf was the one from my dream. Not believing what I was seeing, I shook my head and blinked my eyes. To my shock, there it was.

A feeling of fear ran through me. I stood there, frozen, watching him approach me.

Without another moment's thought or hesitation, I ran for the staircase. As I descended the steps, I looked over my shoulder to see the werewolf coming after me.

Before I could take another step, my left arm was seized in a firm, tight grasp, and I narrowly missed falling on my

face. Somehow, I managed to grab hold of the handrail with my right hand to keep my balance.

Not even giving me a chance to catch my breath, the werewolf tugged hard on my arm and I slipped onto the stairs. I shuffled around to put my back to the wall close to the top of the staircase.

He growled loudly and moved to stand over me. His eyes glared down at me with anger. My eyes went wide with terror. He was standing. The leverage was on his side.

Escape of any sort was impossible. He was preventing me from getting up and blocking me from running away. I lay immobile, an easy target for this beast.

He swung his arms at me as if trying to grab me. I put my arms out to block him and forcibly knocked his arms back. Fighting back with everything I had, I kept pushing his arms away. Although, he outweighed me by over one hundred pounds, I wasn't going to give up. I fought tooth and nail with frenzied struggles against this powerful opponent.

"Stop! Why are you doing this?" I screamed at him.

I knew I hadn't done anything to deserve this. But he didn't care. The werewolf felt only hatred for me. I could see it in his eyes.

Luckily, the werewolf was tired out. He stopped throwing his arms around. It looked like he was taking a break. He raised up higher and howled at the full moon shining through the second level window across the staircase.

The bright moonlight illuminated some of his features. Standing more than six feet tall, he towered over me looking rather intense. He emitted a low growl as he turned his head to face me. His eyes were bulging with fury. He showed his teeth and stared at me like he was about to bite my head off.

Of anything after that point, I was unsure, for my mind was clouded with distress. I thought this was it. My life was going to end right here. Now. I figured this monster was going to kill me. I didn't know how much longer I could hold him off. He was much stronger than I was. As the grief became too much to bear, I almost started to cry.

My mind was also consumed by Ileana. I didn't know where she was, hoping he hadn't harmed her. My senses were out of whack. I couldn't detect any sign she was around.

"Ileana, where are you?" I called out for her.

She didn't answer. Terrible thoughts battered my mind. I was in such despair about it. It was a horrible feeling, but I tried to focus on the immediate situation.

The werewolf looked around for Ileana. It looked like he didn't know who I was calling out to. It was possible he didn't know that there was another vampire. This gave me a great sense of hope. Perhaps he had not seen her at all, or if he had he might have missed where she went. This meant she was alright. So, where was she?

His attention came back to me. He opened his mouth, growled, and showed off many rows of narrow, sharp teeth. His eyes pierced through mine, giving me a chilling look.

There was so much hate inside him. He was determined to finish me off. It was the most terrifying moment in my life.

How could it all end this way? It wasn't so much that I was afraid of dying, but I was terrified at the thought of dying like this. It was impossible to comprehend it.

Chapter 61

IT SEEMED LIKE ONE SECOND LATER I could feel Ileana's presence. The werewolf, completely engrossed in attacking me, still had not detected her presence by the time she appeared near the bottom of the staircase where I could see her out of the corner of my eye. Just in a flash, my spirits were lifted again. I knew she wanted to protect me. But I didn't know how she was going to do it.

"Ileana, be careful!" I yelled at her sharply, with tension in my voice.

Sensing the fear in my voice, she shouted, "Stay down!"

That was when I saw it. In the span of seconds, the silver .357 Magnum Smith & Wesson revolver in both her hands moved to the werewolf. As I had suspected, he hadn't anticipated, that there were two of us. He was completely taken by surprise. The werewolf was just starting to turn his body toward her.

It would only take a minuscule of a second to pull the trigger, and to the werewolf's misfortune, a lot could happen in that amount of time. The sound of a gunshot rang, and he froze. Then he grunted as a bullet hit him in the shoulder.

Growling, the werewolf turned to face Ileana. She held the .357 Magnum pistol pointed toward the werewolf's face, ready to blow his head off. He opened his mouth wide, showing his sharp teeth, and she pressed the trigger and another bullet roared from the chamber while smoke oozed out of the barrel of the weapon. The bullet slammed into his upper chest, just over the point where his heart should lie.

Even though the werewolf was weak from the impact, he was still determined not to die, and to this end he kept going. He heaved in a full breath before turning toward me with what strength was left in him. I saw him raising his right arm to strike me with his paw at the same instant Ileana pulled the trigger for the third time. The bullet soared through his back and into his heart.

I shrieked in horror when I saw the hole in his chest. On impact, all the air left the werewolf's lungs in a painful jolt. He fell back and tumbled down the staircase, landing with a heavy thud on the floor. Long story short: he was down and out.

His body slowly transformed into a human man. His eyes were closed, his body still. Without the piercing gaze and without that aggravating will of his, he was lying in a pool of blood, naked and dead at the foot of the stairs. If I

didn't know better, I would say he looked like a harmless young man. Though he still smelled like a wet dog.

Ileana dropped the revolver on the floor and stepped forward a couple of steps. The sight of her standing over him victorious would always stay in my mind.

I slowly rose from the steps. Once I was back on my feet, I hurried down the flight of stairs. I couldn't wait to embrace her. She saved me. She saved us.

"Is he dead?" I asked, trying to catch my breath as I arrived at the bottom of the stairs.

Ileana nodded yes, not able to speak. I threw my arms around her and clasped her close to me. All I wanted to do was hold her. Then I kissed her on the cheek, and then lightly on the ear, and on the cheek lightly again. A sense of peace overwhelmed me.

"I was so worried about you," I whispered softly into her hair.

"Silver bullets work every time," said Ileana.

"This stays between us, okay?"

"Don't worry," she said in a promising way, "I won't say a word!"

"I'm so glad you weren't harmed, Ileana."

"I'm glad that you were not harmed," she said and broke our embrace.

Before I knew it, Ileana had gone upstairs into a bedroom and returned with a brown blanket. I was sitting on the bottom step of the staircase watching her as she covered the body of the dead man with the blanket. She knelt on the floor and rolled the body up in it. Then she

tucked in the corners of the blanket tightly. It was obvious where she was going with this.

Her past had come back into her life like a whirlwind. Could she have escaped it? Would another werewolf come? I refused to even think about that likelihood, since most of the time the things I worried about usually never happened. Still, I couldn't help but wonder: Would we ever be safe?

"How did he find us?" I asked, desperately wanting to know.

"There is only one possible explanation. Your gift of sight opened a realm between you and him and it helped him find you."

"How is that so, Ileana?"

"You somehow tapped into his thoughts. The dream you had of a werewolf chasing you may have been his dream too. From the dream, he discovered your location. He thought you were me. The vampire who had long ago escaped from Transylvania."

"So, it's my fault?"

Ileana came up to me and put her hands on my shoulders. "You can't blame yourself. Your vision helped me. I already had the gun loaded with silver bullets. I'm sorry I didn't come faster."

"Oh, Ileana, I don't know. It's all just so awful."

"Forget your worrying. I need your help. We're not out of this yet. We've got to dispose of the body," Ileana said as she stepped near the body on the floor.

So much for the old days, I never thought in all my life that I would be drinking the blood of animals and burying

a dead body. Here I was. That was the many ironies of my existence as a vampire. It was just one thrill after another.

“Is it wise to do this under the light of the moon?” I asked, showing concern.

“What do you say we wait till tomorrow, in the light of the day?” Ileana answered sarcastically.

“Fine. Let’s do it. We best hurry before someone calls the police about the gunshots.”

“Who would call the police?” she asked, her dark brown eyebrows wrinkling with worry.

I gave her a funny look, wondering if maybe it would jog her memory. In light of the evening’s events, it took her a minute to register what I was suggesting.

“Lorraine Krag,” we both said at the same time.

“Clean the blood stains from the floor and the stairs, and I’ll check the windows to make sure no one is around,” I said and stood up.

“Good plan.”

After looking outside through the windows in the kitchen and the library, I was certain that no one was around. I came back into the foyer and found her wiping the drops of blood off the floor and the stairs. Then she put the rag on top of the blanketed body.

Ileana grabbed the end of the blanket covering the man’s head, lifting him by the shoulders as I grabbed the other end, lifting his feet. We carried the corpse down into the cellar, and there we placed the body down on the floor. Ileana walked to the closet near the door of the room and

pulled out a shovel. Then we carried the body out a wooden door, up a flight of stone steps, and into the darkness.

Deep in a secluded area of the woods of Jesmond Dene, we took turns digging until the hole was about three feet deep. After covering the body with dirt, I scattered leaves over the grave. That was when I noticed that there were streaks of dirt on Ileana's face. Her long-sleeved dusty rose-colored tunic that reached to her knees and matching leggings were covered in soil. I imagined I looked just as bad.

A serious look came on Ileana's face. She was brooding about something and I wanted to know what it was. I suspected that it was more than just the situation here.

"Tell me what's on your mind," I implored earnestly.

After some serious thought, she said, "Come to the study after you clean up. We need to make a decision together."

None of us said anything else as we walked back to the castle.

Chapter 62

SHORTLY AFTER ELEVEN O’CLOCK in the evening Lorraine Krag was at her living room window, carefully peeking out between the curtains. Normally, at this time she should have been preparing to go to bed. Instead she was in her pink chiffon nightgown and matching slippers looking out the window for signs of anything out of place.

“What on earth could be going on in that castle?” she whispered out loud.

Her eyes darted up and down and from side to side. With only the faint moonlight revealing the surroundings, she didn’t see any movement outside the castle. It had been almost forty-five minutes since hearing gunshots echo outside, and it had thrown her into a panic. She had just argued about it with Arthur, who claimed he heard nothing.

“I know it was gunshots,” she said as she closed the curtains.

In the midst of her pacing to and fro, she looked over just as Arthur came into the room in his light blue pajamas. She was still worked up, ignored him, and continued her agitated pacing.

When he dashed a hand through his hair and cleared his throat to get her attention, she turned her haughty gaze on him and stopped her pacing by the window. She shook her head slightly and faced him as if she had been plotting out what to say in her head.

Standing near the sofa, he placed his hands on his hips, and asked, "Well, what did you see?"

They were staring each other down, and, so far neither of them had blinked.

Finally, she spoke, saying, "Nothing! There's nothing out there."

"I knew you were making a fuss about nothing," he said, dropping his arms to his sides.

"I'm sure they were gunshots!" she said with fire in her voice.

"These days it's difficult to tell the difference between gunshots and the sound of a car backfiring. If they were gunshots it was probably some hunter shooting a deer or testing his range."

"Now you are saying you heard it too."

"Don't try to twist my words, Lorraine. When you said you heard gunshots outside the house, I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth with the faucet on. I don't remember hearing anything of the sort."

“So, you say. I beg to differ,” she said, her voice laced with scorn.

Lorraine gave him a hard look that told him she wasn't accepting such an evasive answer. She glared at him, waiting for him to confess. When nothing came from him, her heart fell a little bit. She clenched and unclenched her hands.

All she could say was, “Hear me now and listen well as I tell you once again: I heard three gunshots.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“First I will tell you something else. The gunshots came from Wightwick Hall where that woman and Myrna Ivester are.”

“There you go again with Myrna. I'm going to bed. See you tomorrow,” he said, starting to turn to leave.

“Wait a minute. Aren't you going to call the police?” she asked, and he stopped, looking back at her.

There was a look of shock on his face, and his eyes seemed ready to pop from their sockets. A corner of his mouth twitched.

Arthur's veins exploded red in his eyes as he said, “I will do no such thing!”

“But, Arthur, you must!”

He continued to talk over her protests. “There are no buts about it. There is no reason to call the police. If I call them, they will come here and start asking questions. I will never get any sleep tonight. And for what? For nothing but a hunter in the woods.”

“The police will visit the castle. They will check on Myrna to make sure she is all right.”

“You realize when the police find out Myrna is all right, you’ll look like a meddling old woman, which isn’t far from the truth. The last thing I want to do is cause any trouble, which is the first thing you want to do,” he said as if he was scolding a child.

“Then I’ll call the police myself,” she said carefully, her tone revealing her frustration.

“Aw, come on, Lorraine, you’ll make yourself batty if you go on like that. I know what you are up to. You want to know who that woman is and how Myrna is connected.”

“Arthur, that just isn’t so,” she said, and folded her arms in front of her chest.

“It is so,” he insisted, then asked casually, “You haven’t heard any more gunshots, have you?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“If you hear any more gunshots, and I hear them too, I promise you, I will call the police,” he said, trying to appease her.

Lorraine let out a deep sigh and released her arms and let them fall to her sides. However, fed up she was with debating the whole matter, she was still very upset.

“Whatever you think is best, dear. I’ll go and make some tea to calm my nerves,” she said throwing up her arms and heading toward the kitchen.

“Now that that’s settled, I’m going to sleep now. Good night, dear.”

“Don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

It was her habit of making comments under her breath when she didn't get her way. Arthur didn't react, didn't say another word, and didn't cast another glance in her direction as he retreated toward the bedroom.

"I'll find out one way or another," she said, when he was out of earshot and as she entered the kitchen.

Lorraine Krag could not resist having another last word.

Chapter 63

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON of Monday, October 2, April Fielding dropped a large crate of plants to one side of a metal table in the stockroom of Pike Nurseries. Her head swayed while she mouthed the words to the song “Stressed Out” by Twenty One Pilots playing on an iPod Touch on a docking station on a metal shelf in a corner of the room. The duties were not that difficult, and one of the perks that came with the job was the manager gave her permission to play her tunes at a low level when there were no customers in the store.

She lifted a potted plant from the wooden crate, removed it from its tissue-paper wrapping and placed it on a shelf. Then she grabbed another one and so on. It was something she enjoyed doing and was a happy change from making deliveries with the company truck. She felt at ease handling plants and considered a career in the horticulture

industry after university if she goes to university. Now at the beginning of her upper sixth form level of education, she wasn't making any official plans to attend university.

If people wanted to say she was a little odd, that was fine with April. She lived in a world of her own making, with her tattoo of a vampire on her arm that she loved, and her bleached blonde hair, which she dyed on purpose, and wearing mostly black outfits. Today she wore black jeggings and a satin black buttoned-down, long-sleeved blouse opened to her chest, conspicuously revealing a sterling silver chain with a dagger pendant. It was her style and suited her interests.

Removing the last potted plant from the crate, she hurriedly tore off the wrapper and placed it on the shelf with the others. She put the empty crate on the floor by the waste basket and carried another wooden crate full of potted plants to the table. All the while she had been thinking that she wasn't afraid to wear her weirdness on her sleeve. She was comfortable with herself and didn't mind displaying it for the world to see. After all, she was young, and could get away with it.

From an early age she liked reading dark, scary books. Sometimes they were sort of creepy and turned her on. As she got older, she developed a taste for ghost stories and eventually settled on the subject of the vampire. She couldn't get enough of it. Sometimes she wondered if it was possible for the supernatural existence of a vampire. She hoped so. It was premature to say that she was going through a phase — so at least she believed.

The song “Suedehead” by Morrissey playing on the iPod Touch reminded her of the last date she went on. Sadly, it didn’t go so well.

April had met Tommy Taylor some months after her sixteenth birthday. He had transferred to her school at the beginning of the semester, and he caught her eye. Tommy was particularly sensitive and had a punk style. That was what attracted her to him. When he invited her to a Morrissey concert at Metro Radio Arena, she had to say yes. She felt this kind of music, classic as it might be called, captured her moods.

The arena bounded to the south by the River Tyne and situated on the south-western edge of Newcastle upon Tyne was a perfect place for live music. At the time she had thought the Saturday night concert would give her an opportunity to get to know him better and maybe lead to something more. Little did she know that he had only gone out with her to make a girl he liked jealous.

That Monday in school she knew something was up when she tried to start up a conversation with him and he brushed her off. Eventually she heard through a friend of a friend that he threw her over for some other chick, probably the one he liked, but she didn’t know, for sure. She didn’t bother to find out.

He didn’t try anything on her. Better yet, she thought, she didn’t do anything with him.

“C’est la vie,” April mumbled, ending her mental meandering.

She'd grown tired of listening to the same songs over and over again. Before removing the last potted plant in the crate, she turned off the iPod Touch and returned to her duties.

The sound of the telephone ringing took her out of her thoughts. With no one else around, it was up to her to answer it, another one of her duties.

"I've got it," she called out to no one in particular, jubilant, as she left the stockroom.

She picked up the phone by the counter and asked, "Hello, Pike Nurseries. How can I be of assistance?"

"May I speak with April Fielding?" a woman's voice asked.

"This is April," she answered, not recognizing the voice on the line.

"Good afternoon, this is Ileana Vladislava. I'm calling to invite you to visit my greenhouse here at the castle."

"Sure, I would love to come over."

"There is more to tell you."

Ileana went on to tell her that she was leaving the entire contents of her greenhouse to her. Wightwick Hall had been put up for sale. She was moving from the area. April found a piece of scrap paper on the counter and copied down a phone number Ileana dictated to her.

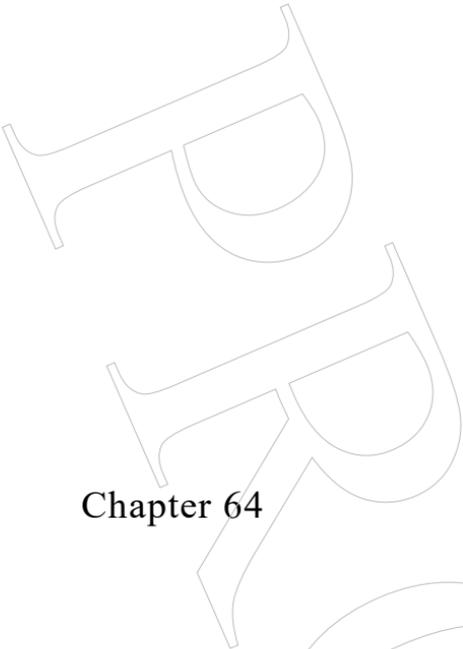
"I'm sorry I didn't get to spend more time with you."

"A key to the castle for you is with the estate agent. Call the number I gave you and arrange to get it."

"Well, I need to go but I will get it after school tomorrow. And thanks again," she said, bewildered by it all.

April hung up the telephone and leaned back against the wall. She was going to see the greenhouse in Wightwick Hall, like she wanted to. Yet, a sense of loss welled inside her. In some strange sort of way, part of her suddenly felt like she was going to miss Ileana Vladislava. The eccentric lady had captured her interest. Another thought or two, and the young girl found herself shrugging her shoulders.

“C’est la vie, once again,” April said aloud as she opened the door leading into the stockroom.



Chapter 64

A LITTLE MORE THAN A WEEK after the shooting incident of the werewolf, I found Ileana in her study. Across the room, white sheets were draped over the furniture. She had just finished a call and picked up the telephone to make another call. I stayed by the door waiting, not meaning to listen in, but it sounded like she was talking to her estate agent.

With all the drama lately, it was reason enough for us to leave Newcastle upon Tyne. It was reasonable for Ileana to assume that werewolves would come seeking vengeance. Though there was no proof that there were any more werewolves. Still, we couldn't take the risk.

Ileana hung up with a satisfied expression on her face. As I came into the room, she told me the good news that she would make a pretty penny from the sale of Wightwick Hall. A potential buyer wanted to convert it to a hotel,

which meant a couple of million pounds minimum. That was how she had earned her wealth: buy, renovate, sell, and repeat. Over a period of so many years, she had managed to accumulate over three million pounds in her savings account at Barclays, which included the earned interest on the deposits. The estate agent would handle all the details of the sale and direct deposit the money into her bank account.

The long flowing sleeves of her maroon knee-length dress made of gossamer fabric, swayed as she walked to the window and pulled aside the burgundy curtain to peek outside. Something caught her eye.

I couldn't help but ask, "See something else you want to take with you besides me?"

On my way toward her, I caught a glimpse of myself in the window. Actually, the only thing I saw was the long-sleeved, emerald-green velvet knee-length dress with sheer sleeves that I was wearing. My body cast no reflection. Only a faint image of my body remained, standing before me like an apparition.

"No, I suppose not, Myrna. It's just Lorraine Krag. She is working in her garden. She's on her knees and clawing at the soil with a hand hoe."

"Strange for her to do that at almost five o'clock on a Monday afternoon. That old busybody's spying on you never ceases. She just can't get enough of you," I said approaching her and stopping to brush her hair with my hand.

“When I see her, it makes me cringe to the root of my nerves.”

“Is everything you need in that suitcase?” I asked and walked over to check it out.

“All that I require.”

“It’s rather light,” I said as I lifted the dark gray suitcase and put it back down.

Turning away from the window, she asked, “You ready to head out?”

I came around to her side. “Yeah, let’s get out of here.”

“I’ll bring the car around to the front door,” she said with satisfaction.

“While you do that, I’ll make a quick call to my aunt,” I said, grabbing my smartphone out of my brown canvas backpack.

The call had lasted only three minutes. As I walked down the spiral staircase, I was feeling guilty about what I’d told Aunt Eowyn. I told her I accepted a job with Nursing Beyond Borders in a clinic in Bangalore, India. That I would be gone for a couple of years and return home to England. The next thing I heard was her crying softly. I asked her to call Siobhan Mulcahy and tell her this. The last thing I told her was that I loved her. I had to tell her something so she wouldn’t worry. Even if it was a fabrication.

The front door was open, so I just stepped outside and closed it behind me. While waiting outside the door, I heard the trunk of Ileana’s Bentley Continental GT slam shut. That was when Lorraine Krag turned her head to the

direction of the noise. She stood up and dusted the soil off her tan pants. When she saw the FOR-SALE sign in front of the castle, she dropped the hand hoe on the ground and put her hands on her hips.

“Well, isn’t that something,” Lorraine said out loud, looking right at me.

Ileana drove the Bentley out of the garage and into the driveway. Before entering the passenger’s side, I shot Mrs. Krag a chilly glance. She glared back with a look of outrage.

Before I sat down, I tossed my backpack into the backseat. After closing the door, Ileana noticed a little smirk across my face.

“What now?” she asked me.

Just then I raised my right hand and made a claw shaped hand and growled then gestured with my head toward Lorraine Krag. She laughed. Then I laughed.

“You didn’t tell me where we are going,” I said rather curiously.

We exchanged a look and without a word I knew. I would like to think we came to a silent agreement, the way vampires could read each other’s minds.

“You know the Black Forest in Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany is a place with hordes of deer. Many castles have been built along its scenic banks,” I said, matter-of-fact.

“And stretches of German autobahns have no speed limit,” Ileana said with a quiver of excitement in her voice.

She picked up my glance and returned it and we both smiled at the same time.

“Wherever we end up is fine with me. I have the utmost faith in you,” I said as the car started to move.

Giving Lorraine Krag a sinister look, I made a claw shaped hand and pointed it in her direction.

“Well, of all the nerve!” Lorraine said in her most indignant tone, rolled her eyes and then bellowed at the top of her lungs, “Arthur honey, you are not going to believe this.”

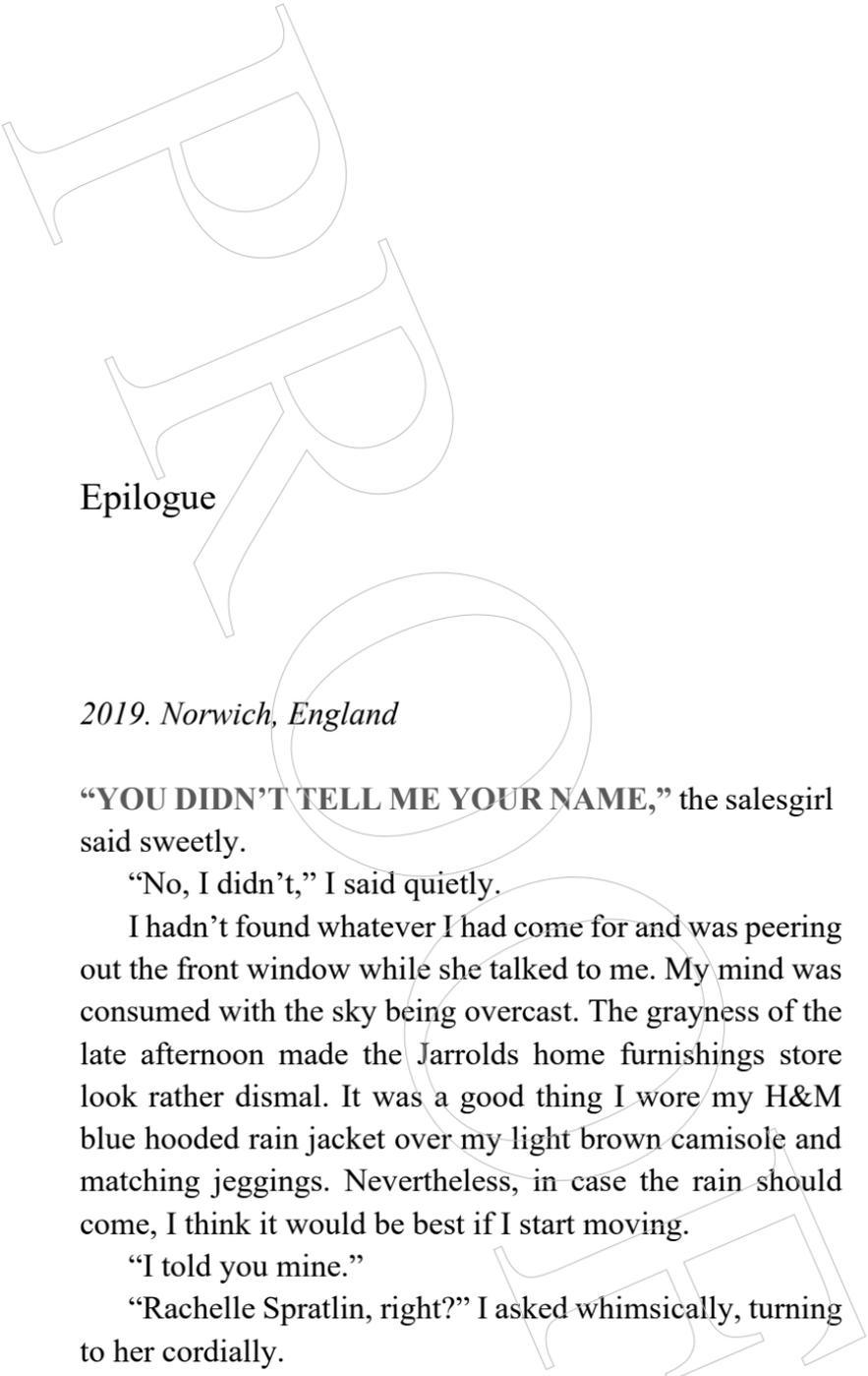
After pulling out of the driveway, Ileana headed northwest on Jesmond Dene Road. Now we were on our way to the Newcastle International Airport. The rays of the sun fell on me. I relaxed into the seat and flipped the sun visor down. Without explaining, I grabbed two pairs of sunglasses from the glove compartment and passed one of them to Ileana.

“Put these on,” I said, suddenly feeling the need to say something.

I started thinking that it was possible that we were the only vampires in the world. That was a lonely feeling. If not, was there a chance we would run into other vampires in our travels? What were the odds of that happening? Still, I didn’t want to get my hopes up. There was the possibility, and that was if Ileana and I worked together, and if the opportunity presented itself, we could create more vampires, easily. It was something to discuss later.

Everything was perfect. For better or worse, the two of us made a surprisingly good team. What we shared as vampires was stronger than anything I had ever felt.

By some strange chain of events, all the planets and stars had lined up perfectly, that day I first saw Ileana Vladislava at the Newcastle City Library. The woman, the vampire, that changed my life forever. When I look back on my life, the parts that matter and sustain me, I remember the most, how I became a vampire.



Epilogue

2019. Norwich, England

“YOU DIDN’T TELL ME YOUR NAME,” the salesgirl said sweetly.

“No, I didn’t,” I said quietly.

I hadn’t found whatever I had come for and was peering out the front window while she talked to me. My mind was consumed with the sky being overcast. The grayness of the late afternoon made the Jarrolds home furnishings store look rather dismal. It was a good thing I wore my H&M blue hooded rain jacket over my light brown camisole and matching jeggings. Nevertheless, in case the rain should come, I think it would be best if I start moving.

“I told you mine.”

“Rachelle Spratlin, right?” I asked whimsically, turning to her cordially.

“That’s right,” she said, staring at me with anticipation.

“Myrna Ivester. I am delighted to make your acquaintance,” I finally told her.

Rachelle stepped out from behind the wooden counter and we laughed at the awkwardness. I kept my eyes to the floor because they were blushing. Being very drawn to her, I could feel the blood running through her veins.

Last week I had come into the store for home decorating ideas. That was when I met Rachelle. With raven-hair, she had a somber beauty and a skin that shone with the same paleness as Ileana. I sensed a darkness in her. On that day, she had on a sleeveless blouse with a floral pattern and a black pleated skirt. The colorful vampire tattoo on her shoulder had caught my attention. I asked her about it, and she told me about her lifelong fascination with vampires, even though she considers it to be fantasy.

After talking with her further, I realized she wasn’t suitable for the life of a vampire. She came from a stable and loving home and was attending the University of East Anglia studying international relations and politics. How odd, I thought. A loner who was longing for a different way of life was the type of person who would want to live as a vampire. If anyone would know, it would be me.

“Rachelle, I’ve enjoyed our talk. But I must be going.”

“There are no other customers around, and the building is eerily quiet,” she said, then asked in a rather enticing tone, “Must you leave now?”

“Yes, I must.”

“Please, come back anytime.”

It was the proper thing to say, but I think she truly meant it.

“I may,” I said as I walked toward the door to leave.

At that moment, a familiar voice came from outside the door. Through the glass door, I could see the back of the head of a woman wearing a plain outfit consisting of a dark brown skirt and matching blouse under a tan cardigan.

“I just have to go inside. I haven’t been there in ages,” said the woman’s voice.

“I’m going to go get the newspaper from the store down the street. I’ll meet you there in five minutes,” came a man’s voice.

The woman’s voice came stronger and clearer now. “Surely, dear.”

The door swung open — and there stood Lorraine Krag. What was she doing in Norwich? She recognized me immediately. It was a shock to both of us.

“Myrna Ivester? Is that you?” she asked, as if she really wasn’t sure.

“Excuse me, madam,” I said, and walked out the door, right past her.

“Arthur! Come here quick. You’re not going to believe who I just saw,” she shouted to him down the street.

That was the last thing I heard her say as I walked off. I hurried down the sidewalk in the opposite direction. There was no looking back. In my memory, Lorraine Krag was clearly a meddling person. I certainly had no intention of talking to her. Furthermore, her attitude was unyielding.

After securing my helmet, I climbed on my black Suzuki Burgman 400 scooter parked at the corner of Bedford Street and Swan Lane. Two weeks ago, Ileana surprised me on my birthday with this latest model released in early 2019. I started it up and headed toward Thorpe Road.

For the past four months Ileana and I had been living in Norwich in the English county of Norfolk. I loved the United Kingdom, not just the memories but there were a lot of good of things that could still happen here.

Ileana purchased a mansion on Holmwood Rise near Woodrow Pilling Park. The woods surrounding the park was filled with wild animals including deer. It was suitable to our needs. There was nothing more enchanting than the French floor-to-ceiling windows, and stone terrace with a walled garden. The cellar was pretty big and was a very important part in Ileana's decision to buy the place. I loved it on sight.

Vampires, living side by side with humans, who would have imagined it?

Our time in Germany had been brief. For almost two-years we lived in a two-bedroom guest house in the middle of the southern part of the Black Forest near St. Margen. What Ileana liked best about Germany was driving on the autobahns. It was such a thrill for her. Anyway, we had trouble with the German language. Perhaps, though, the area was too secluded, I surmised.

I drove the scooter onto Harvey Lane making my way toward Holmwood Rise. Still, I felt Ileana and I were the

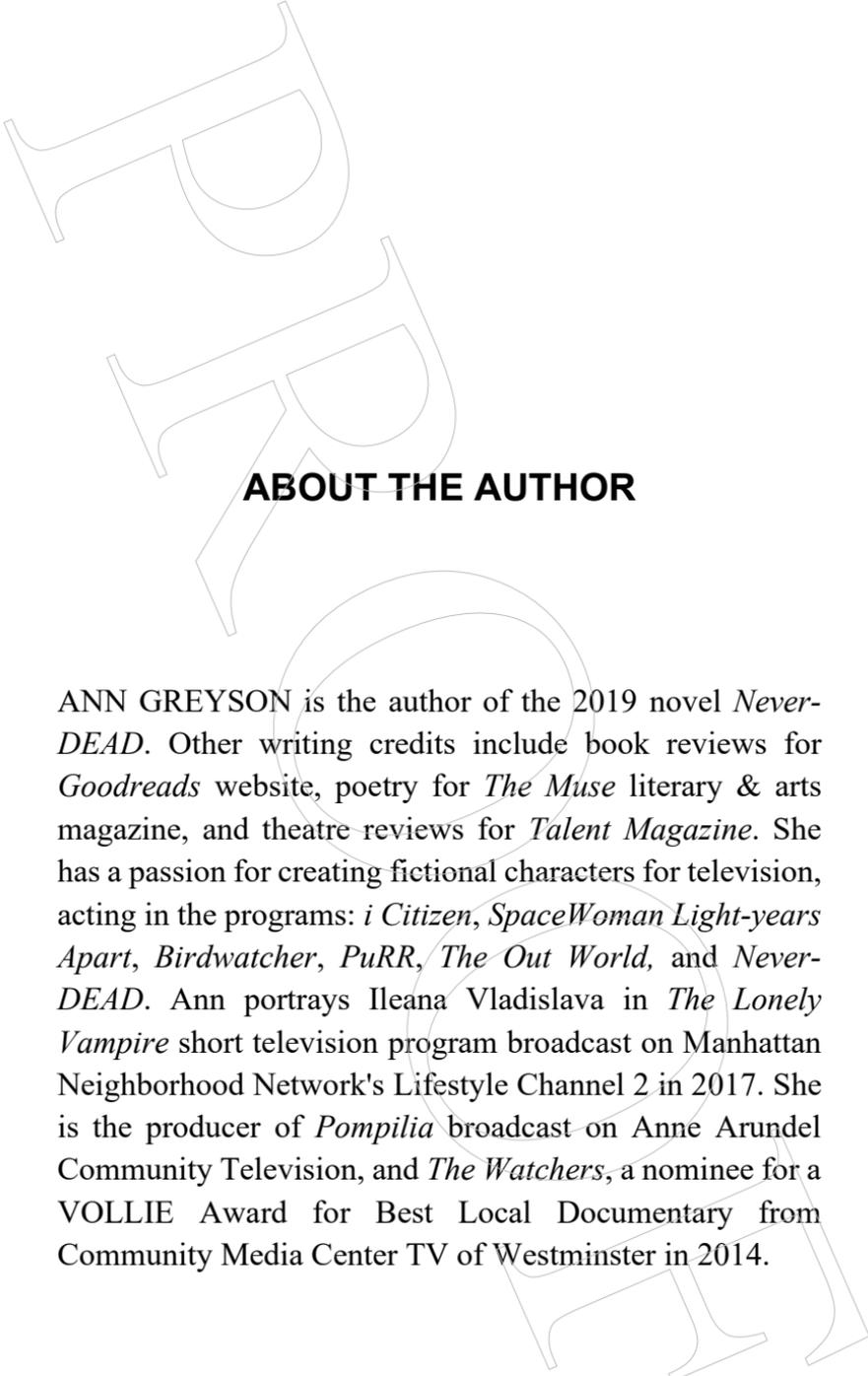
only vampires on earth. Yet I didn't feel lonely. Someday I would like to bring others into our fold. I was often on the lookout, and Ileana was aware of it. She instinctively knew that I wouldn't do anything without her consent. My respect for her was of the utmost importance to me. The bottom truth was that Ileana was the head of this family.

Sometimes I missed my old home in Newcastle upon Tyne. Missed my Aunt Eowyn. And occasionally I missed my old friend Siobhan Mulcahy, who saw the world in a very predictable black and white way. But now I was really missing Ileana.

After parking the scooter in the garage, I went inside the house. I had barely closed the door when the rain began coming down in roaring sheets.

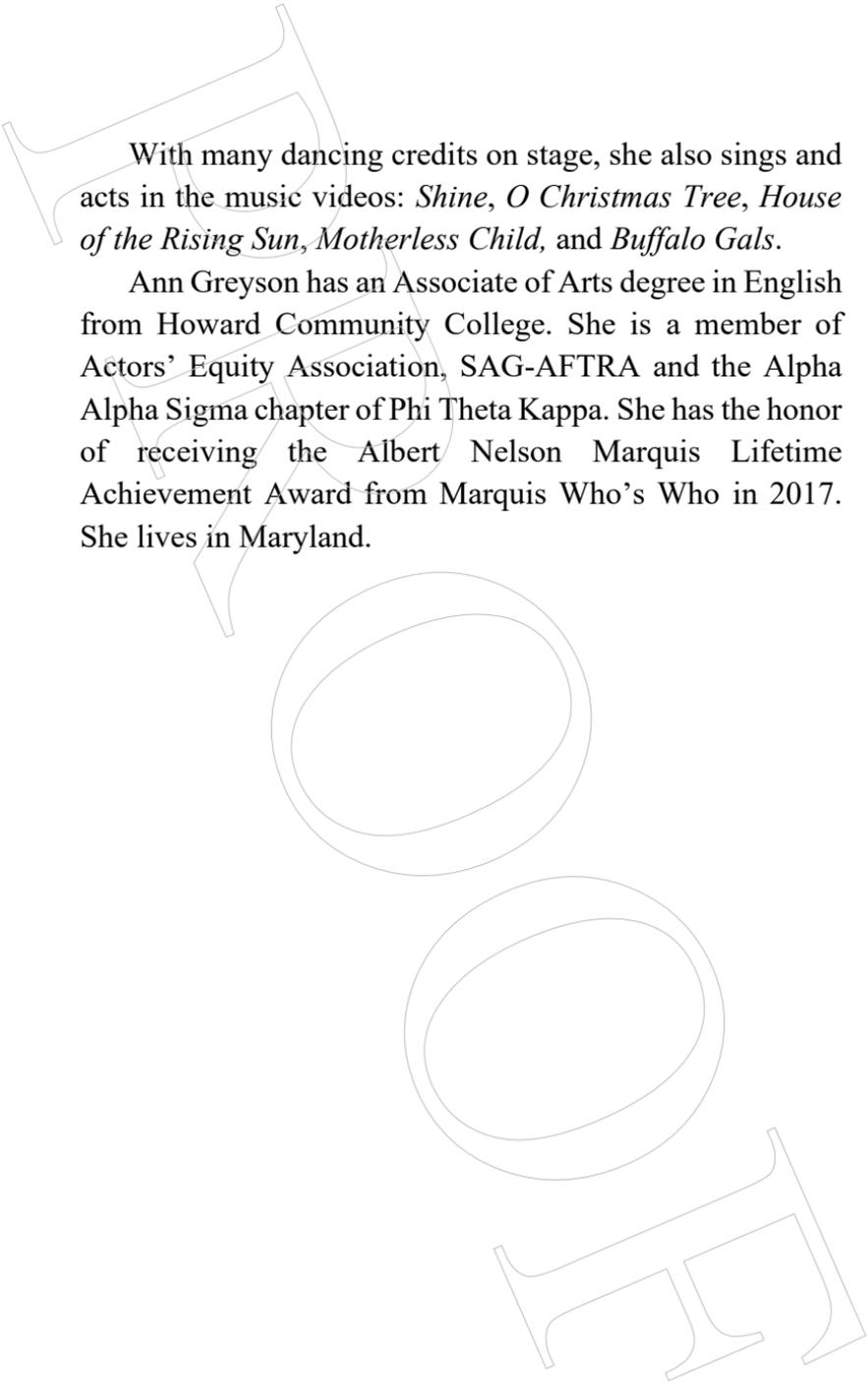
"Ileana! I'm home!" I anxiously called out.

I was very excited to tell her about the day's events.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANN GREYSON is the author of the 2019 novel *Never-DEAD*. Other writing credits include book reviews for *Goodreads* website, poetry for *The Muse* literary & arts magazine, and theatre reviews for *Talent Magazine*. She has a passion for creating fictional characters for television, acting in the programs: *i Citizen*, *SpaceWoman Light-years Apart*, *Birdwatcher*, *PuRR*, *The Out World*, and *Never-DEAD*. Ann portrays Ileana Vladislava in *The Lonely Vampire* short television program broadcast on Manhattan Neighborhood Network's Lifestyle Channel 2 in 2017. She is the producer of *Pompilia* broadcast on Anne Arundel Community Television, and *The Watchers*, a nominee for a VOLLIE Award for Best Local Documentary from Community Media Center TV of Westminster in 2014.



With many dancing credits on stage, she also sings and acts in the music videos: *Shine*, *O Christmas Tree*, *House of the Rising Sun*, *Motherless Child*, and *Buffalo Gals*.

Ann Greyson has an Associate of Arts degree in English from Howard Community College. She is a member of Actors' Equity Association, SAG-AFTRA and the Alpha Alpha Sigma chapter of Phi Theta Kappa. She has the honor of receiving the Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award from Marquis Who's Who in 2017. She lives in Maryland.

BRONZE



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After fleeing from a vampire witch hunt in Transylvania hundreds of years earlier, vampire Ileana Vladislava lives out a lonely existence in Wightwick Hall, a castle in the Jesmond Dene area of Newcastle upon Tyne, a city in Tyne and Wear, England. Still bearing the scars of her past, she avoids relationships with people and feeds on the blood of wild animals. The likelihood of the vengeful werewolf, Claymor, finding her also keeps her in a state of solitary.

Myrna Ivester spends a lot of time questioning her feelings and what she really wants. When Ileana sees Myrna at the Newcastle City Library, she feels her destiny is to be a vampire. Ileana appears at Myrna's home, places her in a deep hypnotic trance, and turns her into a vampire. Subsequently, Myrna reflects on the deepest meaning of life in her transformation into something supernatural as she develops a relationship with Ileana.

Told with wit and sentiment, this story provocatively explores the mysteries and complexities of the vampire world keeping its fangs in you until the very last sentence.

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