

Prologue

March 17, 1998

Unobserved, Meghann O'Neill entered the dark hospital room after the relatives holding vigil over the dying old woman departed. She felt her throat close with pity when she stared at her oldest friend, moaning and writhing in agony on the narrow hospital bed. Bridie Fraser was beyond the reach of the drugs her doctors had prescribed; they could do nothing to ease her pain.

But I can help, Meghann thought, and reached out to take Bridie's skeletal, clammy hand. Meghann closed her eyes and focused all her energy on the old woman's mind, as her mentor had taught her to do. "Be still, Bridie. The pain is gone."

Meghann felt the tension in the hand she grasped ease as a numb lassitude not unlike the effect of Novocain banished her friend's pain. Bridie leaned back against her pillows, whispering, "Who... Who are you?"

Meghann waved her free hand and the harsh fluorescent overhead lights came on, illuminating the small room.

Bridie Fraser gasped; her watery blue eyes were wide with shock. "Maggie!"

Meghann smiled down at her best friend. "Hello, Bridie."

"B-but..." the old woman stuttered. "It's not... you can't... Maggie, you haven't changed at all! Are you a dream?"

"I'm real," Meghann assured her. There was a reason she hadn't aged in the fifty-four years since she'd last seen Bridie, but she couldn't share the truth with her old friend.

Bridie Fraser smiled, and Meghann saw her pretty young friend for a moment in the eyes of the old woman. "Maggie... Maggie, you've finally come back. You... You're an angel now, come to take me home."

Meghann gave her a crooked smile. "Not exactly an angel, Bridie. But if you are ready to die, I can help you."

"Oh, Maggie," Bridie whispered. "I missed you so much. Why did you disappear like that? Was it that man? Did you really run away to marry him?"

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Meghann's hand tightened over Bridie's until the old woman cried out in pain.

"Oh, Bridie—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you... now or then. Will you forgive me?"

"Just tell me you were happy, Maggie."

Meghann blinked rapidly, holding back tears. "Of course I was happy. Were you?"

"I had forty years with my Henry. And—oh, Maggie! I wish you could see Paul—he's such a handsome, smart boy. What about you, Maggie? Did you have children?"

Meghann couldn't take much more of this; hearing about the sweet, happy life Bridie had led made her realize how cursed her own had been since the night Simon Baldevar walked into it. "Bridie, if you want the pain to stop forever, I can help. But this must be your decision."

"There's no decision—what I've been doing since I got this cancer isn't living. Help me, Maggie. Take me home."

Meghann grasped her friend's hand. "Listen to my voice." She began talking to Bridie about their childhood memories: the old days of cheating on a math test in Sister Mary Margaret's sixth-grade class, their first school dance, drinking ice cream sodas and reading movie magazines, waiting on line at Radio City Music Hall to see *Gone With the Wind*.

While she talked, Meghann wrapped her power around Bridie's heart, the stubborn heart that was still beating in the cancer-racked body. The strain of keeping her voice upbeat while she concentrated her entire will on holding Bridie's heart still made her tremble; small beads of perspiration formed on the ivory skin of her forehead, but she did it—she used her skill to help her friend.

Meghann leaned over and closed the sightless, staring eyes. Even after fifty years, she was uneasy around death, particularly when she caused it. "Good-bye, Bridie."

Good-bye as well to the last person who remembered Maggie O'Neill—the bright-eyed, happy undergraduate she'd been before she met Simon Baldevar. Was it thoughts of her dead master that made Meghann feel weak and sick or had she expended too much energy helping her old friend? She collapsed into a chair by the bed, trembling and nauseous. She didn't need a mirror to tell her how awful she must look—she had to have blood right away.

"Thank you."

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Meghann looked up at the white-haired old man who had entered the room. She really was sick if her senses hadn't warned her of the mortal entering the room. How much had he seen?

"I don't know who you are, but thank you for helping my wife."

Before Meghann could shake the gnarled hand in front of her, a team of doctors and nurses stormed into the room, responding to the flat, loud beep on Bridie's heart monitor.

"Flatliner!" one of them barked. "Code Blue!"

"No," Henry protested. "Don't you bring Bridie back—she's at peace now."

An arrogant doctor took control. "This man is hysterical. Get him out of here."

Meghann forced herself out of the chair and walked over to the doctor. She put a restraining hand on him. "Doctor, I believe you should defer to the wishes of the family in this matter." The doctor found himself unable to protest when he looked into the young woman's eyes. Without another word, he left the room, the others trailing in his wake.

Meghann was shaking now. Commanding the doctor had depleted her strength. *She had to get blood.* She found herself walking toward Henry Fraser.

No! She ran out of the room, ignoring Henry, who was yelling, "Wait! Come back..."

Meghann rushed through the hospital corridors. She should have known helping Bridie would leave her weak.

As she hurried through the emergency room, she crashed into a tall, muscular man. He snarled, "Bitch! You say excuse me!"

Meghann whirled around. "Watch who you call a bitch."

The man took a step back in shock. He could not believe what stood in front of him—a young woman with bright red hair that made her pale, colorless skin look even worse. He thought a ghost was glaring at him. The worst part was her light green eyes; they blazed with power and hatred. They made him want to run, but he found he couldn't move.

Meghann felt his fear, and relished it. She felt the darkness rising within her, and didn't even try to stop it. She simply grabbed the man's arm and propelled him toward a nearby empty staircase.

"Please, miss," he whimpered, "don't hurt me. I'm sorry..."

Meghann's grin made his heart stop cold. "It's too late for sorry, friend. Now kneel before me." This was a minor trick she'd learned from Simon—seeing someone's pain and humiliation made their blood taste better.

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Meghann leaned down and sank her blood teeth into the man's jugular vein. He screamed, but Meghann barely heard him. How good the blood was, strong and hot. It filled her mouth and she wanted to drink down every precious drop. Each mouthful pushed her anxiety and hurt further away. Her skin regained color; the shaky, queasy feeling vanished. Still, Meghann went on sucking the man's blood, enjoying the feeling of total control she had over him. She wanted to drink forever...

It wasn't until the man passed out that Meghann returned to her senses; she looked down at the unconscious man. What had she done? She heard Alcuin lecturing her: "You never have to kill or frighten your hosts. A small amount will sustain you..."

She cursed and put her fist through the stairway wall. Didn't it ever get better? Fifty years she'd been a vampire, and she still couldn't control the depraved impulses inside her.

Meghann was appalled. It had been years since she'd given in to blood lust like this. And now she was aware of a slight giddiness she felt. She looked at the man's arm; it was covered in track marks. A heroin addict—no wonder the blood tasted so good. Well, at least the punctures could be explained away. He'd assume he tried to fix through the vein in his neck.

Meghann put her hand to the pulse in the man's neck. It was there... somewhat weak but steady. At least she hadn't killed him. Meghann focused on his blood flow... No, she hadn't infected him either. Meghann decided she would leave him here; he would assume that he had nodded off and forgotten or been attacked. But first she focused her will on his mind, commanding him to forget meeting her and being bitten.

Meghann looked down at herself. The white blouse she was wearing with the black suit was soaked in blood. She took it off and used it to wipe excess blood from her mouth and chin. She put the blazer of her black suit back on; it barely covered her breasts. Her blood teeth had retracted; she could be seen in the mortal world again.

Meghann reached into her purse and withdrew several hundred dollars from her wallet. She placed it in the pocket of the unconscious man's jeans. Leaning over him, she whispered, "I'm sorry."

A pathetic offering, but the only one Meghann could make. She was truly disgusted with herself. All those years of good behavior down the drain with one feeding. If she was going to behave that way, she might as well have remained Simon's consort.

Meghann left the staircase and headed for her car, a 1958 Cadillac convertible. She got behind the wheel and lit a Camel cigarette. She

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started the car, and laughed grimly at the thought that these cigarettes had just killed her good friend Bridie.

Whatever happens, I'll never have to worry about dying of lung cancer, she thought.

Since returning to New York, Meghann had bought a large Victorian house in Rockaway Beach. She loved the ocean, and had good memories of the place. Of course there were horrible memories too, courtesy of Simon Baldevar.

When Meghann crossed the Veterans Memorial Bridge, she felt a change in the air. A nonmortal presence near...

Alcuin! Meghann smiled at the thought that her mentor was here. Of course it was a surprise, but she wanted to see him. She reached out with her senses to pinpoint his location, and found herself driving the car to a secluded area of beach near Breezy Point.

On the boardwalk, Meghann saw a hooded figure by the shore. She hurried toward him. "Alcuin!"

"Meghann!" he said as he picked her up and whirled her around. Then he sobered. "Tell me what happened tonight."

Without a word, Meghann reached into her bag and handed him the bloodsoaked blouse.

Alcuin put it to his face and sniffed. "Why?" he asked simply.

Meghann looked out at the black sea, wishing that just once she could see the sun dance on the water again. "I went to visit Bridie... and I just left there feeling so angry and cheated. Damn it! Why the hell has this happened to me? It should have been me there, ready to die after a long, good life. I don't mean I want to die in that kind of pain—but I'm not supposed to appear at a friend's bedside as the goddamn angel of death. Why the hell do I have to live like this? And then that stupid man got in my way..."

"*Banrion*. "Alcuin soothed her with his special name for her, the Gaelic word for queen. "I wish I had known you were planning to visit a mortal friend; I could have warned you."

"Warned me about what?"

"Exactly what happened tonight. Meghann, you aren't the first vampire to visit someone from your mortal lifetime. It's always a shock and a bitter moment when you realize what could have been. Charles had the same reaction."

"You mean Charles..."

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"Yes, he went to visit a young man with whom he'd fought in the war. When he saw him being tended to by his wife, Charles was wild with fury and grief. Do you remember what I told you? Those two emotions make you most vulnerable to the darkness. Put it behind you, *banrion*. You didn't kill the man, and you did your best to make amends. Now for your penance, don't feed for one fortnight. Spend the time keeping the Perpetual Adoration and meditating upon your sins."

Meghann felt absolved—after all, Alcuin had been a bishop before he'd been transformed.

Alcuin smiled when he saw the relief on Meghann's face. "Now, *banrion*, let's talk of more pleasant matters. You received your doctorate?"

Meghann smiled back, linking her arm through Alcuin's as they walked back toward her car. "Oh, yes—and I see patients now... mostly abused partners referred to me by the university counseling center." Meghann was a psychologist.

"How wonderful—and what a gorgeous car." Alcuin admired the black paint, and patted the rocket fins that had been embossed with flames. "I believe car making became an art form in the fifties and sixties."

Meghann put the top down—the cold wouldn't bother her and Alcuin the way it would mortals. "I don't think you came to America to congratulate me on my degree or my car."

Alcuin nodded. "Would you mind if I drove, Meghann? I have some very unpleasant news."

"I didn't know you knew how to drive."

"It would be a bit ridiculous to live seven hundred years and refuse to keep up with modern innovations."

Meghann handed him the keys, and got in on the passenger side. "What happened? Is it Charles?" Charles Tarleton was one of Alcuin's other apprentices, and the vampire who'd introduced Meghann to Alcuin's circle.

"Charles is fine," Alcuin told her as he started driving. "But, Meghann... I don't know how to tell you this without upsetting you. Just listen calmly and remember... You've become a very strong vampire in the past thirty years and you'll never be without my protection."

Meghann's heart started beating rapidly. "Why would I need your protection?" she demanded.

Alcuin busied himself with watching the traffic, avoiding Meghann's eyes. "I have evidence that Simon Baldevar is alive."

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"No!" Meghann screamed. "He can't be... Alcuin, I killed him over forty years ago!"

When they arrived at Meghann's house, Alcuin shut off the engine and took one of her ice-cold hands. "Meghann, you know you were never completely sure that you killed him."

Meghann simply could not believe this—she could not feel secure in the world if she thought Simon was still alive. He would kill her... No, wait. He would torture her horribly and then he'd kill her.

Meghann racked her brain for any rationalization to refute Alcuin's statement. "But," she said wildly, "forty years have gone by. Why would he suddenly resurface? Why would he go underground for all that time? It's not like him."

"*Banrion*, I never told you this because there was no point upsetting you, but Simon has disappeared before... The last time was for seventy years. He spends the time developing his strength."

Wonderful, she thought grimly.

She looked up at Alcuin. "What proof do you have that he might be alive?"

"Photographs—I'll show them to you inside."

Meghann nodded. "I want Jimmy to see them too." Jimmy Delacroix was a mortal Meghann had trained to hunt renegade vampires who refused to live by Alcuin's dictate that vampires not murder or torture the mortals they drank from.

"Of course."

When they entered the living room, Jimmy's eyes widened in disgust and fear at the sight of Alcuin, whom he had never seen before.

Damn, Meghann thought. She'd been so rattled by Alcuin's news that she completely forgot how shocked poor Jimmy would be when he saw Alcuin. Her mentor might be one of the wisest vampires alive but he'd been hideously deformed by transformation. As a result, Alcuin had no hair or eyebrows and viciously long fangs that curved past his jawbone and were permanent fixtures (unlike Meghann's, which retracted when she wasn't feeding). His skin was translucent, and all his veins stuck out prominently.

Meghann knew Alcuin understood Jimmy's shock and rage when he looked at him. Eight years ago, a vampire suffering Alcuin's deformities had murdered Jimmy's wife and three-year-old son.

"Jimmy," she said softly, "it's all right. This is Alcuin. I told you about him."

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Jimmy pulled himself back from the horrifying memories, plastering a bitter grin on his face. "Sure," he slurred, swigging from a half-empty decanter of bourbon he plucked from the coffee table. "How are you doing, handsome?"

Of all the nights to drink, did Jimmy have to pick the time Alcuin visited? Meghann decided to give him time to pull himself together. "Jimmy, please ask our guest if he would like any refreshments."

Jimmy glared at Meghann, who stared back. With a put-upon air, he asked Alcuin sarcastically, "Would you like any refreshments, my lord?"

"Some water, please."

"And what about you, my vampire queen?"

"Some coffee would be nice. And make enough for yourself," Meghann said pointedly.

Jimmy thought about responding to that and then lurched off to the kitchen.

"Didn't you say Mr. Delacroix had given up drinking?"

"He has... for the most part," Meghann answered, "but we had a disagreement last night."

Alcuin did not ask if the disagreement was part of a lover's quarrel. He knew the vampire-hunter had lived with Meghann for six years, but he had never asked her what their relationship was. You'll face a difficult decision, *banrion*, he thought, love between a mortal and a vampire rarely comes to a good end.

Meghann went to the kitchen to see if Jimmy needed any help. "So I don't have to serve Count Dracula by myself? You're not going to show me off as your pet Renfield?"

Meghann laughed as she got some coffee mugs and a water glass from the cupboard. "Now, Jimmy, you know I don't go around making humans my slaves."

"Yeah, I guess that was more in your old boyfriend's line of country," Jimmy said, referring to Simon Baldevar.

"Funny that you should mention him."

"Why?" Jimmy took a closer look at her.

Meghann bit her lip and wrapped her arms around her body. "Alcuin thinks Simon might still be alive."

"Jesus Christ!" Jimmy exploded, his fear coming out in a furious snarl. Alcuin hurried into the kitchen and Jimmy turned to him. "How the hell can that son of a bitch be alive? Maggie killed him forty years ago!"

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Meghann put the coffee and water on a tray. "Jimmy, let's continue this in the living room. Alcuin said he has some photographs to show us."

Alcuin took the tray while Jimmy went over to Meghann. The jolt of fear he'd received when Meghann told him about Simon had knocked the alcohol out of his system. "Maggie, I thought you said you killed him."

"I thought I did," she told him while they walked back into the living room. "I mean, the last time I saw Simon Baldevar, he was lying on a rooftop with a stake through his heart that I had impaled him with. He couldn't move; I thought daylight would take care of him."

"No doubt he had an ally you weren't aware of come and remove the stake," Alcuin told her.

"Let's not jump the gun," Jimmy said. "We still aren't one hundred percent sure he's alive."

Alcuin reached into his cloak and handed Meghann a flat brown envelope. She sat down on the ottoman and inspected the photos, with Jimmy looking over her shoulder.

The pictures made Meghann feel physically ill. Since becoming a vampire, Meghann had witnessed many terrible things. These photographs, with their shocking and pathetic images, were one of the most devastating things she had ever seen.

The photos appeared to be of some sort of nursery or orphanage. With the exception of five women in nun's habits, an elderly priest, and two women in plain clothes, the victims in the photographs were all children. The youngest corpse looked to be about two years old, and the oldest child was probably twelve. Altogether, the photos showed ten dead children.

Each corpse had been brutally slashed. Some were nearly beheaded from the wounds inflicted. Some were cut on their wrists. It did not escape Meghann's notice that each wound was on a vein or artery.

Meghann's eyes fell on the priest. She first she saw the terror and pain on his face. Then she noticed... Dear God!

Jimmy snatched the picture when it fell out of her hands. "What the hell?"

Alcuin looked as uncomfortable as Meghann. "The priest was found with an ornate Russian Orthodox cross inserted into his anus."

Jimmy was disgusted. "Why the hell would someone do that?"

Meghann answered. "If Simon committed these murders, I can explain the priest. I saw him do the same thing in Cuba. It is my guess that the priest entered the room and saw Simon's blood teeth out. If he grabbed the cross and held it up for protection, screaming that movie

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foolishness about standing back in the name of Christ, then Simon yanked the cross out of his hands, bent him over, and...Well, Simon's sense of humor did run to such things." She could still see the young Cuban priest moaning and crying. It wasn't the physical pain that made him cry; it was the desolate knowledge that his God could not protect him from the evil fiend that had violated the sanctuary of the small island church.

Meghann felt bile in her throat. She went to the small bar in the living room and poured a tumbler full of absinthe—one of the few substances that could intoxicate a vampire. Grain alcohol worked too, but it was even viler tasting than absinthe. Meghann noticed Jimmy eyeing her glass, which would probably kill him if he drank the whole thing.

She took a large mouthful to steady herself and asked Alcuin, "What are these pictures of?"

"St. Paul's Home for Abused Wives and Children in San Diego. The church takes in women and children with no place to go until the women can find a job or family members willing to help them. The cops think the attack took place between eight and nine P.M. They say it could have been far worse. There are usually fifty families and thirty nuns there. The rest were at a bazaar. These children were sick, and they couldn't attend."

Although the children were simply slashed, the cross was mild compared to the atrocities visited on the poor women in the pictures. Some of the dead were forced into a kneeling position. These corpses were facing other standing corpses in a crude simulation of oral sex. The victims were kept in position by wooden stakes that impaled them, and were then ground into the floor.

"The coroner said they died after they were impaled... not before."

Meghann could have guessed that by the pain and horror in their open, staring eyes. She also thought, from the fright on the children's faces, that they had been forced to watch the carnage before they were killed.

"How do you know this is the work of vampires?" Jimmy asked. "It could have been the work of psychopaths. Even the cross could be the inspiration of some crazy kids."

"That's precisely what the cops believe," Alcuin responded. "They think this is the work of some satanic cult. However, what they cannot explain is the fact that there was almost no blood at the crime scene. When the bodies were examined by the coroner, he said they had been bled dry."

"Besides," Meghann told Jimmy, "look at the stab wounds. You'll notice very subtle puncture marks imbedded in the slashes." She looked

up at Alcuin. "This is definitely the work of vampires, but how can you be sure it's Simon? He's not the only vampire to resent the whole crucifix business."

"Yeah," Jimmy echoed.

"Meghann, take another look at that picture of the nun by St Joseph's statue."

Meghann looked, and dropped the photograph. "My God... the pendant!"

The picture was of a nun wearing only her veil, with her legs wrapped tightly around the statue. That was not what had disturbed Meghann. At the foot of the statue was a gold pendant from the fourteenth century—a gift from Simon. Meghann had left it behind on the night she thought he died.

Alcuin reached into his cloak and withdrew the pendant. "Charles was able to bribe one of the cops and get this for you... I thought you might want it back."

Meghann eyed the object with distaste, and then thought she should have it—perhaps it could be used in a binding spell against Simon. She sat silently for a few moments, twirling the pendant in her hands before she spoke. "Simon is neither careless nor stupid. He left that pendant behind as a calling card."

"It's more than that," Alcuin told her. "It's an invitation."

"To what?" Jimmy asked.

"To me," Meghann answered tonelessly. "He knows that I became Alcuin's apprentice... He wants to confront me and Alcuin for taking me in. The priest was a direct taunt to Alcuin. Simon is telling us that he considers us no threat."

Meghann realized something else about those pictures. Her panic-stricken eyes met Alcuin's. "How could I have not seen it before? It was no accident...choosing a home for battered wives and children." Meghann leaped up from the chair, her eyes wild and her face pale. "Alcuin, he knows! He knows I became a psychologist, and I spend my life trying to help people like that! Dear God, he's mocking me twice. He must have been around me or found out enough to know what I do and now he's saying he can spit on that, destroy it... and me completely!"

Meghann collapsed on the couch. She couldn't make herself say the rest out loud. Simon had another reason for killing children. She had killed him (or thought she had) when he threatened the life of a child. Now Simon was telling her that one life meant nothing. She could almost hear his loathsome voice: "Look long and hard at those pictures, my sweet. Could you have stopped the slaughter this time?"

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"Meghann," Alcuin said gently, interrupting her thoughts. "You're right... He will try to destroy you completely. He's always despised me, but what he feels for you is a different matter. That monster thinks he was in love with you. You not only spurned what he considers to be love, you escaped him. In the process, you nearly killed him. Very few vampires have been able to do what you, his protégée, managed. Please be aware that what he did to those poor souls is mild compared to what he must have in mind for you."

Meghann shivered, remembering what Simon had done to her the night before she left him. Jimmy went over to the couch and put his arms around her. She looked up, smiling slightly.

Alcuin looked grave. "Meghann, you don't know how much I wish I could protect you from this threat."

"Why the hell can't you?" Jimmy snapped. "I mean, you're older than he is; Maggie says you're powerful. Why can't you just take care of him?"

"Don't be so rude," Meghann scolded. "And the only way I can see Alcuin protecting me from Simon is to shadow me every minute of the night. Do you think I want to live that way—never able to go anywhere or do anything without looking over my shoulder?"

Stung by the rebuke, Jimmy replied, "All I was saying is maybe he could find Simon..."

Meghann finished the poison in her glass; she poured more. "Jimmy, if we're fortunate, Simon will think the same way you do. He'll expect me to be scared—to hide behind Alcuin's protection. After all, he never gave me credit for being anything but his little concubine." Fear lessened as anger and thoughts of vengeance took its place. She turned to Alcuin. "But he'll be surprised, won't he? With your help, I'm strong enough to confront him. And I want to do this—I owe him for ruining my life, staining my soul with the evil he made me do. I want to see him again—so that I can kill him the way I thought I had forty years ago."

Alcuin smiled at the change in her. She was holding her head high and thrusting her jaw forward in determination. The regal way she held herself, no matter what the situation, was the first thing he'd ever noticed about her; it was why he called her *banrion*. But he could not allow her to be reckless or overconfident. "Meghann, I have lived for seven centuries and the thought of a confrontation with Simon Baldevar worries me. He has tremendous power, and when you add to that his feelings toward you... we must proceed with extreme caution. Now we must start to plan for his attack."

Alcuin glanced at Jimmy, who frowned. "What?"

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Alcuin spoke carefully—not wishing to offend the mortal. "Jimmy, we have a small chance of defeating Simon. You, on the other hand, have none. We will offer you our protection, but you will not be involved in this battle."

Jimmy's mouth dropped open. He leaped off the sofa and would have attacked Alcuin if Meghann had not held him back. "Not be involved?" he yelled. "Who the fuck do you think you are? Some fucking vampire killed my wife and kid and you're telling me I won't be involved? Fuck you! What did you think—while Maggie has to wait for this asshole to come get her, I was just going to sit here and knit?" Outraged, he was trying to break the iron hold Meghann had on him.

Alcuin observed the thrashing vampire-hunter and sighed. Seeing the way Jimmy reacted over the thought of Meghann being hurt left no doubt in his mind that these two were lovers. God help you, young man, he thought to himself, for Simon will have no mercy on any man who receives from Meghann what she denied him—love.

Meghann spoke softly. "Jimmy, calm down." She looked at Alcuin.

"Obviously, we can't send him away for fear that Simon will find him. Who knows how much he's found out about me? Let Jimmy be involved—we might be fortunate enough to find out where Simon sleeps. If we did, Jimmy's aid would be invaluable." Her eyes pleaded with Alcuin to go along.

Alcuin knew what she was truly asking—that he not make her mortal lover feel insignificant. The man needed to feel he was doing all he could to protect her.

At a slight nod from Alcuin, Meghann released Jimmy. Alcuin came over and shook his hand. "We welcome your assistance."

With that settled, Jimmy hit Alcuin with a barrage of questions concerning his plans.

Meghann wandered over to the back window, not really paying attention. She was staring out at the sea, remembering the past—Simon Baldevar and how she became a vampire.