

Prologue

January 30, 1999
Rockaway Beach, New York

Jimmy Delacroix, formerly mortal and now vampire, sat on the back deck of his lover's ramshackle beach house, watching the tail end of a blizzard that had dumped over six feet of snow on the city. When Jimmy woke up shortly after sunset, his neighbors were long gone, fearing floods and power outages. He alone had watched the heaving sea and densely falling blankets of snow that covered the beach. For a while Jimmy thought the storm might continue past dawn, but as midnight approached the winter fury slowly diminished. Now only a few stray flurries danced under the cloudy gray sky.

Idly, Jimmy wondered if anyone else was in Rockaway with him. Most likely, a few hardy citizens braved out the storm but as far as Jimmy could sense, there was no one nearby. Before he transformed, isolation like this might have unnerved him. Now, he felt no need for companionship as he watched the blizzard play out. Jimmy hadn't spoken to anyone in weeks, save for a few supermarket delivery boys and one brief conversation with his twin sister. Not trusting himself around people with bloodlust lurking just below the surface of his consciousness, Jimmy had decided to isolate himself in the house until he was certain he could control his new, unwanted urges. Better to be a vampire recluse than a savage killer.

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Quit moping, Jimmy told himself and swigged from the bottle of thirty-year-old Scotch he'd brought on the deck with him. Even though it would take a carton of Scotch to get a vampire mildly intoxicated, Jimmy savored the taste and warmth coursing through his body.

Not that he had any need of alcohol-induced warmth. As far as Jimmy was concerned, one pleasure of his new existence was that he'd been able to sit on the deck all night in subzero weather wearing nothing more than a wife beater and jeans. Jimmy remembered how he used to envy Maggie, his vampire lover, diving into the ocean when it was ten degrees out.

Jimmy's throat tightened, remembering how very beautiful and pagan she'd looked, with that alabaster skin contrasting against the black sea. Where was Maggie tonight? Still at the South Hampton fortress he'd so recently escaped? Was she all right? Couldn't someone at least tell him whether she was still alive?

Bzzzz. Bzzzz. Bzzzz.

Jimmy's ears perked up, and he leapt off the deck chaise, racing through the living room before he came to an abrupt halt. Duchess, the German shepherd he'd recently acquired, came to a comical stop at his heels. Jimmy leaned down and patted the dog, smiling ruefully. He'd been a vampire long enough to know sound was the opposite of objects in rearview mirrors—it was much further away than it seemed. Even though the rumbling noise that resembled a snowplow sounded like it came from next door, it was probably blocks away.

Jimmy was on the verge of chiding himself for leaping up like the house was on fire when he realized the reason he hurried towards the door was his certainty that *whoever was in that snowplow was coming for him*.

How could he know that? Was this the vampiric intuition Maggie mentioned at times? Jimmy bit his lip,

mulling his reaction to the sound that grew closer. It was nothing as definite as thinking someone was coming for him. It was more like hearing an egg timer in the kitchen and rushing towards it, knowing your meal was done.

Jimmy walked over to the foyer closet and pulled out a red-cheeked flannel shirt, so he'd look presentable for his unexpected company. He was coiling his long, dark hair into a ponytail when a new thought sent icy tendrils down his spine—what if the stranger had bad intentions? What if it were vampires coming to kill him? What if it was Lord Baldevar?

Ease up, Jimmy thought in self-disgust, and opened the front door. If Simon Baldevar wanted to kill him, he'd approach with stealth. Neither Lord Baldevar nor any self-respecting vampire assassin would announce their presence for miles around by driving down the street in a rumbling snowmobile that looked like an angry bumblebee with its yellow and black stripes. The snowmobile spluttered to a stop in front of the house and a bulky figure hopped out, looking around uncertainly.

“Hey!” Jimmy shouted from the front door and started towards the curb, climbing over mounds of snow as easily as he'd walk on hard pavement. His newly acquired senses assured Jimmy that his guest was a female mortal. Her name was...

Stop that! Jimmy castigated himself. Maybe he didn't have anyone to teach him the ropes of vampirism, but he remembered bits and pieces of things Maggie said over the years. Vampires were telepathic, but they never listened to people's thoughts without permission unless it was an emergency. Snooping around mortal minds was the province of lowlifes like Simon Baldevar. Jimmy would behave properly and wait for the stranger to introduce herself.

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“James Delacroix?” the woman called in a voice that reminded Jimmy of Katherine Hepburn with its clipped vowels and patrician accent. At the same time, there was an intriguing earthiness in the timber that contrasted with the WASPY overtones.

Interesting, Jimmy thought and stuck his hand out when he was arms length from the black swathed figure. She was sensibly dressed for the frigid weather in her parka and ski mask, but the clothes made it impossible for Jimmy to have any idea of her looks other than that she was of medium height. Opaque snow goggles covered her eyes. “Yeah, I’m Jimmy Delacroix. Who are you, and what the hell brings you out on a night like this?”

“I’m Harper Lupeni,” the woman said, neatly sidestepping the rest of his inquiry. She grasped Jimmy’s hand firmly, unlike the limp fingered handshake most women offered. “May I come in?”

“Why are you here?” Jimmy asked again, wondering if he should fake a shiver since he was standing on the street with nothing more than a flannel shirt, jeans, and house slippers to protect him from the cold.

Your sister sent me. She believes you need help.” Harper Lupeni rummaged through a leather satchel strapped cross-length across her chest. She came out with a plain white envelope she held out to Jimmy.

Darlene? Dumbfounded, Jimmy tore open the envelope, wondering what his twin sister had to do with this stranger showing up on his doorstep during a blizzard.

January 15, 1999

Dear Jimmy,

Hearing from you was the best Christmas present! I was so relieved to hear your voice, it was days before I could think straight again. Now that I’ve had a chance to

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calm down, there are things I need to tell you that I just can't say over the phone.

To start with, I know that story about you being in some tough love rehab for the past year that wouldn't allow outside contact is bullshit. Don't feel bad, Jimmy. It would be pretty convincing, but I know some things you don't.

Damn, even in a letter this is hard. I feel nuts thinking about this stuff, let alone writing it down. But no matter how crazy it seems, only a fool would ignore what happened right in front of their eyes.

Jimmy, I owe you an apology for letting those doctors lock you up after Amy and Jay were murdered. All I can say is I wanted to help you, and I really believed you'd had a nervous breakdown. Who wouldn't after seeing some psycho murder your wife and son?

Except now I know it wasn't a psycho. You were right when you kept yelling that whatever killed them wasn't human.

Not human? Jimmy narrowed his eyes. What could have happened to make Darlene believe him after all these years? Had someone hurt her? No, that couldn't be. A botched transformation had rendered Jimmy catatonic for close to a year. When he finally recovered, Maggie's best friend, Charles Tarleton, filled him in on what he'd missed. Charles would have told him if anything had happened to Darlene. Jimmy continued reading.

Jimmy, your girlfriend came to see me last May. Well, not Maggie, not really. I think what came to see me was her ghost. I know this sounds crazy, but there's no way Maggie was alive that night. She had a gaping hole in her forehead, like she'd been shot. Jimmy, you could see clear through to her brain and she was standing there like nothing was wrong with her!

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There was some man with her, but he looked fine, even though I've never seen anyone that pale that wasn't about to be buried. I've been reading up on this occult stuff since then, and I think that man was channeling Maggie's ghost. Just in case you think I've gone nuts, Dan saw Maggie too and he agrees there's no way she could be alive with a wound like that.

I guess you're wondering why I saw her ghost, when nothing like that's ever happened to me before. Maggie came to warn me, Jimmy. She told me something awful had happened to you that night, and she was coming to protect us from the thing that hurt you.

Maggie told me the thing that hurt you was the same thing that killed Amy and Jay. That's how I know you were telling the truth all this time. Maggie told me it hadn't killed you, but changed you into something so horrible you might hurt your own family with no idea what you were doing. Maggie got us out of the house, and gave us enough money to start a new life somewhere else.

Maggie told me there was a chance to save you. She said once you were yourself again, I'd hear from you. I don't think a ghost gave you my phone number, so maybe it was that man.

You may be yourself, but baby I could hear in your voice that you're far from okay. I'm your twin, Jimmy. You can't hide pain and loneliness from me no matter how much fake Christmas cheer you load into your voice.

You need help, but I don't know the first thing about any of this supernatural stuff. That's why I asked Miss Lupeni to visit you. Harper's a paranormal investigator; she's helped lots of people plagued by hauntings and poltergeists. Don't worry, she's not some kind of Gypsy fake. Harper wouldn't take any money, just wants to use our experiences in a book she's writing but don't worry

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about that either. She never uses real names in her books without permission.

Please let Harper help you, Jimmy. There's no reason for you to be as alone as you sound.

Love,

Darlene

Darlene hadn't seen a ghost, Jimmy thought—just a badly wounded vampire. Simon Baldevar, in a fit of jealous rage over Maggie's love for Jimmy, nearly killed her and transformed Jimmy to make him a monster Maggie could never love. Maggie, despite her wounds, had escaped Simon and rushed to Darlene. She knew Simon would make Jimmy (blood-starved and out of his mind) feed on his twin sister, so Maggie and Charles did their best to protect Darlene.

Jimmy had no idea what Maggie told Darlene, but he doubted she said anything about vampirism. Alien abduction, demonic possession—anything but that. Someday he'd find out what Darlene had been told, but for now Jimmy had to decide how he was going to deal with Harper Lupeni.

A paranormal investigator—had Darlene tried, she couldn't have sent a more dangerous emissary. Jimmy didn't know much about the race he was now an unwilling member of, but he did know you didn't go around telling humans that vampires exist.

“Shouldn't we go inside so you can read Darlene's letter?”

Shit! Shit! Shit! Of course the storm had knocked out the streetlights—Jimmy ran the heat and lights inside the house on a generator. Thank God Harper didn't realize he'd just read the entire letter in the dark. He'd have to be more careful about concealing his powers—amateur mistake. Dammit!

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“Yeah, definitely. So how do you know Darlene?”

“I’m a paranormal investigator,” Harper said and Jimmy nodded like this was news to him. “One of my cousins met Darlene and thought I could help her.”

“Another paranormal investigator?” How many people did he have to worry about?

“No, a Gypsy,” Harper Lupeni explained. “My family are Romany. Lumi reads tarot cards. Darlene went to her for a reading, and Lumi referred her to me.”

“You’re a Gypsy?” Jimmy said, intrigued. “Is this your caravan?”

Your caravan... Jimmy winced while the woman smiled politely. Vampirism might make you smarter, but apparently it didn’t conquer the habit of making God-awful jokes when you were uncomfortable.

Harper Lupeni shivered. *Poor thing*, Jimmy thought. She’d traveled God knows how far in the snowplow, and Jimmy had her standing around in subzero temperatures. Add atrocious manners to his sterling list of attributes.

“Would you like some coffee or tea, Miss Lupeni?” At the very least, Jimmy had to give her a chance to warm up before sending her away. Somehow, he’d deflect her questions. If worst came to worst, he’d try using a small bit of his new mind control to convince this Gypsy investigator there was nothing unusual going on.

“Please call me Harper.” Even though she was masked, Jimmy heard the smile in her voice.

“After you, Harper.” Jimmy smiled back and gestured toward the house. He had to admit it was nice having company, even if he didn’t dare tell her anything.

Harper walked in front of him and stumbled on one of the snowdrifts. Automatically, Jimmy grabbed her elbow to steady her but drew back in surprise when Harper stiffened and tried to stifle a low, distressed whimper.

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What the hell? Jimmy thought, confused. All he'd done was grab her before she fell.

Doesn't like men touching her; she's scared.

Why? Jimmy probed the sudden telepathy.

She doesn't know why, but it's always been this way. Men frighten her.

Enough, Jimmy told himself and closed off the voice counseling him. Probing further would violate Harper's privacy. He wouldn't do that, but at the same time, he needed to calm her down. Jimmy decided to use the same mind control techniques he'd been employing to get Duchess past her fear of humans.

Jimmy didn't think Harper Lupeni would be soothed by images of large, meaty bones so he sent her an image of Maggie's favorite flowers—lilacs.

Friend, Jimmy said silently and held out his telepathic bouquet. *I won't hurt you.*

The tension drained out of Harper's body and she even grasped Jimmy's hand to steady herself. "Thank you."

"Why don't you wait here and I'll shovel out a decent walkway? Here, Duchess will keep you company." The dog had left her post on the front porch and come over to investigate the stranger. Picking her way through the snow, Duchess gave Harper a thorough sniffing while her busy black and tan tail thumped through the powdery snow.

"What a beautiful dog." Harper patted her head. "How long have you had her?"

"A few weeks." Jimmy started shoveling a crude walkway from the porch steps to the snow dune where he'd left Harper. "Guy who had her before me abused her."

"That's terrible! I hope he went to jail."

"He's not around anymore," Jimmy muttered, remembering how enraged he'd been when he saw what should be a proud shepherd cringing before the monster hitting her with his belt. Sweeping the sonofabitch off his

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bullying feet with one hand had felt good, almost as good sinking his blood-teeth into that defenseless neck and draining him until the man was no more than a husk in Jimmy's hands.

As far as Jimmy was concerned, it was justified homicide but the rush and exhilaration he got from drinking fresh, warm blood frightened him later. Suppose the urge to drink came on him all of a sudden while he was out and Jimmy couldn't control himself? Better to remain alone at home with his blood packs.

"Come on," Jimmy said when the walkway was done. He hadn't dug too quickly for a mortal, had he?

Harper didn't seem to notice any uncanny speed or dexterity. She was staring at the mahogany front door with its stained-glass starbursts. "You have a beautiful home."

"It's not mine. I'm house sitting." Jimmy didn't consider that a lie. Maggie would come home one night, and he would be here waiting for her. He wouldn't allow himself to believe she was dead. It wasn't possible, any more than it was possible she now loved that asshole, Simon Baldevar. Maggie would come back—she had to. *Please, Maggie. Please come home.*

"You want me to take your coat?" Jimmy asked when they entered the foyer.

"Thank you." Harper handed Jimmy the bulky parka and some heavy woolen scarves damp with snow. He hung everything in the near empty hallway closet. There was another mystery—why were Maggie's things gone? Had she been running from Simon Baldevar?

What if she was running to him? A treacherous voice suggested. Ruthlessly, Jimmy shut the voice down and turned back to Harper. She'd removed her galoshes, and stripped down to a black turtleneck and jeans. Then she pulled the ski mask and goggles off.

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Jimmy had a fleeting impression of tumbling, black curls but his focus was on her eyes. He'd never seen anything like them.

Harper Lupeni's eyes were silver, not light gray but a pure silver color Jimmy had never seen before. The pupils were slightly narrowed in a way more suitable to wolves' eyes than a human being's. They were arresting, commanding eyes but Jimmy couldn't call them beautiful. Striking, yes. Beautiful, no.

"Silver bullets," Harper said and laughed lightly.

"Huh?"

"My grandmother told me in the olden days, Lupeni Gypsies commanded a high price to attend funerals. Nobles from as far away as Hungary craved our services. Because our eyes resemble silver bullets, people believed we had magic power to keep incubi away from the recently departed. If you worried that your loved one's soul was at risk, you hired a Lupeni to sit up all night with the body and stand guard in the cemetery for three nights after the funeral. Some people insisted our eyes glowed in the dark, and that would scare vampires away."

"Good luck with that," Jimmy muttered under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. Living room's over there. Make yourself comfortable—I'm going to brew a pot of coffee." He could pretend he'd read Darlene's letter while he was in the kitchen.

Jimmy was ladling coffee into the filter when he remembered the living room table was littered with open blood packs. Idiot! Jimmy cursed himself and rushed into the living room. If Harper saw the packs, he'd have to reach into her mind and make her forget the damning evidence of vampirism.

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Fortunately, when Jimmy got to the living room, Harper was standing by the bar with her back to the living room table. He started to ask how she'd like her coffee when he saw Harper's attention was riveted by an oil painting hanging over the fireplace.

"You like it?" Jimmy asked, wondering why she was so focused on a portrait of a red-haired woman wearing an Elizabethan gown.

Harper turned to him, her silver eyes looking even more alien with the urgency and shock blazing in them. "Who is she?!"

"Uh, her name was Isabelle," Jimmy said, nonplussed by Harper's intensity. Why was she so affected by a four-hundred-year old painting? "Are you okay? You're really pale."

"I know her," Harper said, her voice as shaky as the tremors racking her body. "I've dreamed of her all my life."

Jimmy wanted to hold her, comfort her, but he remembered the awful way she reacted when he'd touched her before. "Easy," he said gently. "Why don't you sit down?"

Jimmy patted one of the leather seats surrounding the mahogany bar, and Harper sank into it. Her back was still turned away from the living room table, so Jimmy used telekinesis to scatter the open blood packs and send them under the couch.

"Would you like something a little stronger than coffee?" Jimmy pointed at the crystal decanters lining the wall behind the bar.

"Brandy," Harper murmured, her eyes glued to the portrait.

"Sure." Jimmy picked up a decanter of cherry brandy, pouring a generous amount into the snifter glass he placed in front of Harper.

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Harper drank half the glass in one gulp, her voice raspy with liquor and need when she spoke again. “Please, tell me who she is. I always knew she was real, even if I wanted her to only be a terrible dream.”

“What did you dream?” Jimmy asked curiously. Was this real or some hastily concocted hoax to make him trust her? How could Harper Lupeni dream of a woman that died four hundred years ago?

Harper kept her eyes on the painting when she answered. “I’ve dreamed of her since I was a little girl. She...she always cries in the dreams. Sometimes she’s cradling a small child, weeping over him. In the dream...I think the child is dead. Maybe she was his mother.”

“Jesus,” Jimmy muttered, shaken. No way was this a hoax. “She had a son. He was murdered. How could you know that?”

“I don’t know. Please.” Harper turned to him, silver eyes wide with entreaty. “Tell me who she is. How do you have this portrait? It’s quite old, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy said. “It’s over four hundred years old.”

“It must be very valuable.”

“It is.” Jimmy should know—he was the one that had ferried it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to be carefully cleaned and retouched. “It was done by Nicholas Hilliard—the curator at MOMA estimated its worth near half a million dollars.”

“Nicholas Hilliard? Didn’t he paint Queen Elizabeth I?” At Jimmy’s nod, Harper said, “How does a portrait of this rarity come to a house on Rockaway Beach?”

Jimmy decided to tell Harper the same fiction Maggie gave him long ago. “Isabelle—the lady in the painting—she’s a distant ancestor to the woman that owns this house.”

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“Who was Isabelle?” Harper repeated, looking at the painting with a mix of wonder and fear. “Do you know anything about what her life was like? How old she is in this painting? Why it was done in the first place?”

Before responding, Jimmy looked at the portrait. Funny; he’d been living in this house so long he hardly noticed the painting anymore. Now he looked long and hard at another victim of Simon Baldevar’s cruelty.

The woman in the portrait had fiery red hair that rested in neat coils on the back of the Elizabethan neck whisk she wore. The red hair and dainty features reminded Jimmy so much of Maggie that it hurt to look at the painting. Maggie didn’t discuss the past much, but she had told Jimmy that Simon transformed her because of her resemblance to his mortal wife.

“The painting was done in 1589, on Isabelle’s wedding day.” What could Jimmy tell Harper without giving everything away? He certainly wasn’t going to tell her that Isabelle’s bridegroom had later been transformed into a deadly, predatory vampire.

Harper frowned and drank more brandy. “She doesn’t look like a happy bride.”

“No,” Jimmy agreed, looking at the tightly compressed lips that betrayed some inner turmoil. In keeping with the traditions of the time, it was a formal portrait but you could still sense tears glistening in the woman’s violet eyes. Something in her expression hinted at strength as well, but to Jimmy it seemed like a grim strength. It was the sort of strength you found in someone suffering from a terminal illness, fighting on despite great pain and a rapidly weakening body.

“What else do you know about her?” Harper asked.

Trust her, Jimmy.

Jimmy felt something like a cool breeze sweep through the living room, and then he saw the see-through silhouette

of a man standing on the back deck, smiling sadly through the glass doors.

“Alcuin,” Jimmy whispered, smiling back at the ghost. Father Alcuin, the vampire priest who lost his life trying to save Maggie from Simon Baldevar. Alcuin looked just as he had in life, a slight man wearing a black cowl that obscured his face.

Harper turned around, stared hard at the apparition and murmured, “My God.”

“He won’t hurt you,” Jimmy said under his breath, but Harper didn’t seem frightened. If anything, the ghost didn’t seem to bother her nearly as much as Isabelle’s portrait.

“Jimmy, I’ve tried so hard to reach you, but you wouldn’t hear me,” the ghost told him with mild reproof.

“Maggie,” Jimmy blurted out. “Please, tell me. Is she alive?”

The ghost flinched, and sounded like he was on the verge of tears when he spoke. “Meghann sleeps, Jimmy. There’s a chance she’ll never wake up.”

Oh, God. Jimmy saw Maggie lying on the floor again, green eyes bright with pain and that damned bloodstain slowly spreading over her nightgown. “Can’t you help her?”

“She rejected me, Jimmy. My sweet *banrion* wants nothing of me. I cannot reach her.” Jimmy never heard Alcuin sound like this before, so desolate and hopeless.

“That’s impossible,” Jimmy said. “Maggie loves you; she told me.”

“He twisted her mind, warped her spirit so Meghann believes I’m her enemy.” Now the ghost sounded bitter.

“Baldevar?” Jimmy said, unable to believe it. Alcuin must mean Simon Baldevar, but how could he turn Maggie against Alcuin? Jimmy knew Maggie had gone to Alcuin when she was a young vampire, unable to bear anymore of

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Lord Baldevar's brutal treatment. Alcuin helped her escape Baldevar, gave her a refuge and taught her all the strength of a vampire. What the hell could have happened to make Maggie turn away from Alcuin?

"Jimmy, there isn't time to tell you all that's happened. Meghann needs you. You suffered greatly at Lord Baldevar's hands, but I need to know if you have the courage to face him again?"

Jimmy wondered what had happened to the vampire followers that Alcuin amassed over the years. Were they all dead like their master, slain by Simon Baldevar? They must be, if the only vampire Alcuin could turn to was the newest, weakest one.

"Tell me what I need to do," Jimmy said. It had never occurred to him that he wouldn't face Simon Baldevar again. Jimmy had scores to settle with that asshole—the torture he'd endured, a transformation that nearly cost him his sanity, and most of all what Simon had done to Maggie.

"Learn," Alcuin told him. "You must learn to have any hope of victory."

"Learn?" Jimmy said. "What do I need to learn?"

Alcuin turned to Harper, his specter's expression strangely prideful and a bit wistful looking. "How very strong you've become."

Harper cocked her head. When she spoke, her voice was calm and measured. "Spirit, you seem to know me but I know nothing of you. What is your name?"

The ghost smiled. "I am Alcuin, formerly Bishop of Kent. There is much for you to learn as well. After you learn, decide whether you wish to remain. If you do, make certain you stay for justice rather than vengeance."

"No," Jimmy spoke up. "She's not staying. It's too dangerous."

Harper turned, indignation flaming her eyes, but before she could say anything, Alcuin addressed them both.

“Respect her, Jimmy. Trust her. This woman is much more than she seems. Please learn now. Learn your enemy. Both of you.”

“Learn what?” Jimmy asked.

Alcuin’s image flickered, and when he spoke again his voice sounded like he was straining to be heard over a great distance. “Seven, three, twenty-five.”

Then he disappeared, and Harper tugged Jimmy’s shirtsleeve. “Do those numbers mean anything to you?”

Jimmy eyed her speculatively. “You always this calm when ghosts show up?”

“It’s my work,” Harper replied. “I aid spirits and those plagued by them as best I can. I’ve always seen spirits. Alcuin revealed himself because he believes I can help you.”

What the hell was that about, anyway? Jimmy was dumbfounded as to why Alcuin, usually so solicitous of mortal safety, would push him to work on something as dangerous as Simon Baldevar with a Gypsy ghost hunter.

“Who was he to you?” Harper asked, breaking Jimmy’s thoughts. “A friend? Teacher?”

“He, uh, tried to help someone I love.” Trust her, Alcuin had said. Trust her enough to tell a woman he barely knew that she’d just seen the ghost of a vampire priest transformed more than six hundred years ago? Tell her this vampire priest had spent centuries teaching other vampires to respect human kind, never kill anyone they fed from? How was Jimmy supposed to tell this stranger that Alcuin had trained his vampire followers to kill those sadistic, evil vampires that reveled in human suffering?

Harper nodded sympathetically. “Was the person that Alcuin tried to help Maggie? The one that Darlene told me about?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy said over the lump in his throat.

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Harper frowned. “But Alcuin said Maggie sleeps. She’s alive? I don’t see how. Darlene said the woman she saw was mortally wounded, but able to speak. If that wasn’t Maggie’s ghost, what did your sister see that night?”

Shit. “I can’t tell you,” Jimmy said. “It would put your life in danger if I did.”

Harper put her hand over Jimmy’s and squeezed briefly. Knowing how she had to conquer her fears to make that gesture of empathy increased Jimmy’s respect for her, but he still wasn’t going to endanger an innocent mortal by confiding the dangerous knowledge he possessed.

“Jimmy,” she said softly. “I feel darkness in you. It’s nothing that makes me fear you, but a terrible pain tearing you apart. I can see why your sister wants to help you, why Alcuin wants to help you. Jimmy, I won’t push you to tell me your secrets, but why not do as Alcuin advised and trust me? Maybe you could tell me what the numbers mean.”

“Huh?”

“The numbers,” Harper repeated patiently. “Seven, three, twenty-five—the last thing he told us. Do those numbers mean anything to you?”

Sure they did—it was Maggie O’Neill’s birthday. July 3, 1925—a good forty years before Jimmy Delacroix was even thought of. But why would Alcuin bring that up?

“The safe!” Jimmy exclaimed when the meaning dawned on him. “It’s the combination to the safe. Here, help me pull that painting down.” Silently, Jimmy congratulated himself for not thoughtlessly using telepathy to move the painting.

When they had Isabelle’s portrait safely stored by the left side of the fireplace, Jimmy rapidly undid the combination. Inside there was a blue silk pouch.

Jimmy picked the pouch up. When he did so, a strong psychic impression assaulted his consciousness. He saw

Maggie standing by the safe, the image so strong he swore she was standing next to him.

A silent witness, Jimmy watched Maggie open the safe. He saw her grab some documents and jewelry, shoving them into a black leather tote bag. Jimmy saw Maggie pick up the same pouch he was holding now. When she held it, Maggie scowled and thrust it from her as though it was contaminated. Then she slammed the safe shut and stalked out of the living room.

Jimmy was chilled by fury in her eyes, but what truly made his mouth go dry was watching Maggie walk into the foyer, where Simon Baldevar stood. The cold anger left Maggie's eyes, replaced by a sweet smile and lust darkening her eyes.

"No!" How could Maggie smile at that monster, tilt her head up and part her lips when Baldevar bent down to kiss her? How could she bring him into the home she'd shared with Jimmy? What had happened to Maggie? Did the woman he loved even exist anymore?

"You can perform psychometry?"

"What?" Jimmy had been so immersed in his vision that he almost forgot about Harper Lupeni. Jimmy blinked to clear his vision, but the image had started to fade when he shouted out.

"Psychometry," Harper repeated. "The ability to receive psychic impressions from inanimate objects."

"I guess I can," Jimmy said, bemused. He looked at the pouch, wondering why it brought on those visions. He'd touched plenty of things in the house, and received no psychic impressions.

Harper looked at him quizzically. "You have gifts that you don't understand. When did you acquire them? Darlene was certain no occult ability runs in your family."

"I can't tell you."

Harper nodded. "Can you tell me what you saw?"

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Jimmy shook his head. No, he couldn't tell her, but he'd damn sure spend the rest of the night thinking about it. Alcuin was right. For some reason, Maggie had turned against him and gone back to Simon Baldevar. What the hell had happened? Had the fiend brainwashed Maggie?

"Will you tell me what's in the pouch?" Harper said. "If you can't confide any other secrets, will you let me see what's in the pouch?"

Jimmy shrugged and reached inside. He doubted it was anything overly incriminating. It turned out to be a black leather journal.

"May I?" Harper reached for it, but Jimmy pulled it back and started flipping through the pages. It occurred to him that this could be a grimoire, contain some spells Alcuin thought he could use against Simon Baldevar. Jimmy knew vampires could cast spells with ease, even though he'd never attempted it.

"Holy shit," Jimmy breathed softly after he read a few pages.

"What is it?"

"It's her diary," Jimmy said and pointed to the oil painting. "This is Isabelle's diary."

"Are you sure?" Harper frowned. "That leather isn't nearly aged enough looking to be four hundred years old."

"It's a copy," Jimmy said, reading the note clipped to the first page.

My Dear Banrion,

Perhaps I should have given you this long ago, but I wanted you to grow strong without the specter of Simon Baldevar hanging over you. As long as he appeared to be dead, I saw no reason to remind you of what you suffered through at his hands.

Now that Lord Baldevar's returned, I have no choice. You must know the terrible adversary you face, and all he's

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capable of. I can think of no better way to teach than allowing you to read Lady Isabelle Baldevar's diary. The night I found her, so badly wounded by Simon and about to die, she told me she had a diary and begged me to preserve it. I've taken the loose sheaf of papers I discovered, and translated them into this journal.

You know Lord Baldevar forced Isabelle into marriage, and eventually killed her. What you do not know is the troubled relationship that lay between them. I know you believe yourself past any emotion for your former master except hate, but learn from the turmoil Isabelle suffered. Lord Baldevar is a master at manipulation, and I fear what might happen if you find yourself alone with him.

Jimmy frowned. The letter stopped abruptly with no signature. Then it hit him! Alcuin must have been writing this letter the night Simon Baldevar trapped Maggie on the beach. He'd raced out of the house to rescue her, and wound up beheaded. Before Alcuin left, he must have sealed the pouch inside the safe.

"Jimmy?"

"Yeah?" He looked at Harper.

"Will you let me read the diary?" she asked. "I've seen Isabelle all my life. Maybe if I read her diary, I'll know why Isabelle comes to me."

Trust her, Jimmy. "Okay."

Harper seemed surprised by his easy acquiescence, but Jimmy thought she was right. She had dreamed of Isabelle Baldevar. Obviously something besides his sister had brought Harper Lupeni here. Besides, Alcuin advised him to trust her and Jimmy had few people left he could trust.

"Just the diary," Jimmy said firmly. "We're not discussing anything else."

Harper nodded and put her hand out. "Deal."

Trisha Baker

Jimmy shook her hand and smiled. “You ever had absinthe?”

Harper smiled back. “I did when I visited Prague. You have some?”

“Yep.” Grain alcohol and absinthe were the only substances that could intoxicate a vampire and Jimmy thought he deserved a real drink tonight, what with his earthly and unearthly visitors. “Why don’t you read and I’ll mix us some drinks?”

Harper smiled, and took the proffered book. While Jimmy melted sugar cubes on liquor spoons balanced over two baccarat glasses, Harper opened Isabelle’s diary and her husky voice filled the room with the words of that long-dead woman.