

Prologue

December 17, 1957

New York City

The vampire lay flat on his back, impaled by an ornate, steel fireplace poker sticking out of his chest. It wasn't a mortal blow; the poker had missed the center of his heart but the wound was still enough to render him immobile. He could not move, couldn't even squirm as the nearly forgotten sensation of pain coursed through him.

His assailant's aim might have been off, but she'd been clever enough to drag him to the rooftop. The improvised stake might not destroy him but the sun certainly would if he couldn't get indoors before sunrise.

The vampire inhaled one breath through gritted teeth, hissing at the new agony that slammed through his body.

For long minutes, he forced more air into himself. Concentrate on inhaling, he told himself, mustn't think about the pain. If he couldn't block the pain, he would die here.

Through deep breaths, the vampire was able to put himself in a trance. Gradually, welcome darkness descended on his consciousness, taking away his pain and fear.

First, he focused on the void, allowed in no thoughts. When his concentration was total, he pushed his soul out of his body. In astral form, he stood on the rooftop and stared down at his helpless body.

The strength needed for astral projection pushed the vampire closer to death, but it was his only chance. He grasped the poker with his soul's hands, deeply thankful for the magic that gave his astral form the ability to move objects in the physical world.

The temptation was to try and yank the poker from his heart but that would be fatal. Everything must be done by slow

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degrees, allow his body to adapt to the change, not break his concentration.

Patient and beyond pain, the vampire pulled the poker out inch by inch. Finally, he was able to dislodge the poker and throw it off the rooftop. The thing had not even landed when the vampire was thrust back into his body, moaning at the intense pain and ferocious need for blood.

The gaping wound in his chest and blood pouring from his body horrified him. If he did not feed soon, he would bleed to death.

Blood was his only thought... everything else, even thoughts of hate and revenge, were shoved to the side. He must have blood to heal his body. The vampire forced himself to sit up.

He glanced at the body of Trevor, the mortal servant who'd been with him for nearly thirty years. He felt no grief at the man's passing, just frustration because the body had already been bled dry by the vampire who'd left him here to die.

The vampire tried to stand, but was overcome by dizziness and nausea. He had to crawl to the rooftop door, despising his weakened condition. How many would rejoice to see him this way, helpless and sick? At the thought of his enemies gloating, the vampire recovered some of his strength and managed to fling open the door, lurching down the steep stairs.

A quick glance at the sky told him dawn was only thirty minutes away. The vampire stood on the front steps of his town house, scanning the dark city street for prey. Damnation! Wasn't New York supposed to be the city that never slept? How could the street be so devoid of humans?

Central Park, he thought desperately. Surely there'll be some lovers there or maybe a degenerate sleeping on a park bench. Unable to walk upright, the vampire limped down the block to the great park.

He concentrated on nothing but his need for blood. Dimly he heard some vulgar driver curse him when he crossed the street against the light and the car nearly ran him over. A bitter laugh escaped him... what an anticlimax that would be for him, run down in the street like a mangy dog.

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The vampire collapsed by a park bench, overcome by nausea. He vomited profusely, more precious blood leaving his body.

"Too much to drink, then?" a masculine voice with a strong New York accent inquired. "We can't have you dirtying the city, fella... into the paddy wagon with you."

Deo Gratias, the vampire thought in relief. *A cop!*

"What's wrong, can't get up?" The vampire pulled himself into the fetal position in an attempt to look more pathetic for his prey. He heard concern replace contempt in the cop's voice. "What in the hell happened to you?"

Gingerly, the cop turned the severely wounded man over and gasped at the bright gold eyes and vicious fangs protruding from his mouth.

"No," the cop whimpered, shock immobilizing him. Easily, the vampire stretched one arm up and dragged his prey down to the sidewalk with him. He attacked the jugular vein, greedily sucking down the blood.

He could not have asked for better sustenance than this strong, young man in the prime of his life. The vampire lapped up his prey's blood and strength, feeling them heal him. The monstrous wound in his heart closed, his clammy skin became warm. Pain vanished and power began to course through him once more.

Eyes blazing with triumph, the vampire raised his mouth and glanced dispassionately at the corpse. He'd bled the man dry. That was his custom, even when he was not ill. Why take a meager bit of blood when mortals offered so much more?

Had anyone seen him? It was dangerous to feed on an open street, but the vampire had had no choice. In full command of his senses again, he glanced at the park benches and up into the windows of the high-rises surrounding him. The devil had smiled on him... no witnesses.

With no effort, the vampire plucked up the dead weight of the brawny cop and slung him across his shoulder. He threw a cloak over his presence, rendering himself invisible to any mortals he might pass. Walking at his usual rapid speed, he was back in his town house within one minute. Three minutes later, he threw the

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cop's body, along with that of his unfortunate servant, into the furnace.

His prey already forgotten, the vampire stalked up the stairs to the dressing rooms he'd given his consort—the ungrateful shrew that'd tried to kill him tonight. He observed that she'd taken no jewels or furs when she fled his home. As far as he could see, she'd packed only a few essentials and her deceased father's mementos.

The vampire knew the significance behind the barely touched room. His consort wanted no reminder of him in her new life—she rejected his wealth and all the luxuries he'd bestowed upon her the same way she rejected him and all he stood for.

Their final argument flashed through the vampire's mind. He still couldn't reconcile the sunny-natured, vivacious beauty he'd spent the past thirteen years with to the screaming harpy that called him an evil monster and said he'd ruined her life when he transformed her and she was leaving him so she could learn a better way of life.

The vampire's face contorted into a twisted mask as he considered that last phrase—a better way of life. And why had the girl had such an abrupt change of heart? Who had put this notion of right and wrong in her head? It could only be Alcuin, the vampire's wretched uncle... the nemesis that had plagued him all his immortal life.

The vampire controlled an urge to spit as he thought of Alcuin, the medieval bishop turned sanctimonious ruler of vampires, and his pious decree that any who refused to live by his code that vampires not slaughter their mortal prey must be destroyed. But there was one vampire he hadn't been able to stop in four hundred years.

So Alcuin's new tactic lay in appealing to the vampire's consort and her unfortunately active conscience. The vampire had to admit it was a masterstroke... convincing his young consort that her only chance at salvation lay in slaughtering her master. For who expects to be betrayed by their lover?

Suddenly, the vampire's icy calm shattered and he turned his fury on the vanity table beside him, tearing it apart with his bare hands and wishing the inanimate furniture were the woman who'd

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betrayed him. How dare she, full of his uncle's piety, look down her nose and pronounce herself too good for him. How dare she leave him to die without so much as a backward glance!

But he hadn't died... the vampire stood up, his lips curving into a sinister grin that would have frightened anyone who witnessed it. Thanks to his consort, everybody was going to think he'd died when the sunlight hit his wounded body and turned him to dust. He'd disappear, the vampire decided. Go underground for a while and rebuild his strength until he was ready to have his revenge against the woman who'd betrayed him and the vile priest that convinced her to leave him.

I'll make you pay, the vampire vowed to his absent consort. Maybe not tonight, maybe not a decade from tonight. But I promise you the night will come where you beg for death before I'm finished, Meghann O'Neill.

Forty-one years later
May 3, 1998, sunset

"Meghann!"

Lord Simon Baldevar came out of the miserable dream with his consort's name on his lips, his eyes wide and the Egyptian cotton sheets on his bed clutched tightly between clenched fists.

He sat up and leaned against the headboard of the immense tester bed, brushing his thick hair back from his face as he tried to banish the nightmare from his thoughts—no good would come of dwelling on that dark, bitter night when Meghann had left him to die. Instead, he reflected on the events of the past three nights.

Finally, he'd had the revenge he promised himself decades before. He'd found Meghann, and naturally Alcuin came to her rescue. But the smarmy prelate discovered he was no match for Lord Baldevar's new power. Even now, Simon was a bit surprised by the ease with which he'd slaughtered Alcuin.

Of course, with Alcuin dead, it would have been a simple matter to destroy Meghann. Simon smiled, remembering how shocked the girl had been when he threw his ax to the side and told her he had no intention of killing her. Murder had been the

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furthest thing from his mind when he looked at the beautiful creature lying battle-weary and helpless at his feet.

He felt himself harden slightly as he remembered how she had looked that one night they were together, emerald eyes awash with tears of shame even as she had returned his kisses and begged for his touch, begged him to take her and make her his. And he had... taking her body as well as her blood when he pierced her ivory neck with his blood teeth and allowed the fresh, sweet blood to pour down his throat while Meghann threw her arms around him and writhed in ecstasy.

Unfortunately, their reunion had merely been temporary. Simon had allowed the girl to escape him. A few nights' separation was unimportant. Meghann would, despite all her protests and foolish attempts to avenge Alcuin with the help of her boy-lover friend Charles Tarleton, be back at his side soon enough. If everything had gone to plan, he and Meghann (though he doubted she knew it yet) now had an unbreakable link between them, something that would keep her by his side forever.

In the meanwhile, Simon thought while he dressed quickly in a pair of ancient black trousers and a tan riding shirt, he would take advantage of Meghann's absence and deal with the last obstacle blocking the path to his consort's stubborn heart.

The trapdoor opened and Jimmy Delacroix felt a rough hand grab his hair and yank him out of the pit where he'd been imprisoned all day.

Dizzy as he was from the lack of oxygen in the small, almost airless hole, Jimmy's only consideration was drawing air into his starved lungs, gulping greedily at the blessed air. Thank God he was out of that miserable space where he couldn't sit or stand but had to squat and was wedged in so tight he couldn't even move his fingers without scraping the walls of his narrow prison.

Then Jimmy heard the malignant voice order him to wake up, and his relief changed to horror as he remembered who'd flung him into the pit right before dawn. His terror did more to bring him to full consciousness than the amyl nitrate popper snapped under his nose.

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"Bastard," Jimmy gasped, trying without success to pull himself up off the polished wood floor—damned if he would lie at the vampire's feet like a dead fish. He glared, keeping his eyes fierce and hard. He knew better than to let this thing that thrived on pain see how sick he was, how his bones ached from being stretched on a rack the night before, how the burning pain from having his fingernails ripped out with a hot pincer made him want to lean over and vomit. If the vampire sensed his misery, it would lean down to drink his blood like it had done the night before, growing strong not just from his blood but his agony.

Damn you, Jimmy thought, glowering at Lord Baldevar—the vampire Maggie had run from forty years ago, the rotten son of a bitch who'd snatched her from her family, transformed her against her will, and forced her to live with him until the night she managed to escape him.

Jimmy shivered as he remembered Maggie's reaction when she found out the thing was still alive. It was the first time in the six years they'd been together that he'd seen Maggie show fear. Not that she'd behaved scared around Jimmy... she always put on a brave face for him, so he wouldn't be frightened. But Jimmy had heard her whimper and scream during the day while she slept; heard her piteous cries when she screamed out, "Don't! Don't! Simon, please don't hurt me!"

But Lord Baldevar had hurt her and that was Jimmy's fault. What a fool he'd been to storm out of the house because he and Maggie had some stupid fight. The vampire had been waiting for him and it used Jimmy as bait to trap Maggie. It tortured Jimmy because it knew Maggie would come to his rescue.

Why hadn't it killed him last night, after it snatched him out of Maggie's grasp? Did it want to torture him some more? Jimmy shivered, remembering all the sadistic punishments he'd suffered before Maggie found him and the thing stopped hurting him in favor of toying with her.

Lord Baldevar gave him an icy smile and sprawled in the only chair in the room. "Mr. Delacroix, I'm glad to see you've regained your faculties. You'll need them for our discussion."

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"I'm not discussing shit with you," Jimmy snarled. "Where's Maggie? What the hell did you do to her?" More than for his own fate, Jimmy was scared to death for Maggie—his vampire lover, the woman who'd rescued him from an alcoholic abyss after a vampire slaughtered his son. It had been Maggie who helped him pick up the pieces of his life, telling him he could have revenge for his little boy if she'd let him teach her the weaknesses of her kind. During the day, while vampires lay insensate and vulnerable, Jimmy could attack those sick creatures that murdered their mortal hosts.

He owed Maggie so much but instead of helping her fight Lord Baldevar, Jimmy had only managed to make himself the vampire's prisoner. Maggie, along with her best friend Charles, had tried to free him but they hadn't been able to stop Lord Baldevar. Jimmy's last memory of the night before was the monster telling Maggie that if she wanted to fight with the angels, it was time for her to learn what happened to those who stood against him. What had it done to her after that?

Lord Baldevar raised an eyebrow and his lip curled down in mocking derision. "Maggie? Is my consort still such a child that she clings to her mortality by having you address her with the insipid nickname of her youth?"

Jimmy's right hand curled into a fist that was immediately kicked. The steel tip of the vampire's boot caught the ruined tips of Jimmy's fingers and he howled in pain while his torturer spoke in a calm, almost bored manner.

"Perhaps you'd like another session on my rack—no? Then try and behave in a civilized manner while we converse. To answer your question, I have done nothing to Meghann except give her the freedom she claims to desire."

"Then where the hell is she?"

Lord Baldevar shrugged. "Her whereabouts are not my concern at the moment. No doubt wherever she is, Meghann is fretting over you—weeping over what I've done to her precious mortal lover."

As Jimmy struggled to bring himself into a sitting position, the vampire stood abruptly, knocking over his chair. He spread his hands in a wide arc, encompassing the spacious but empty

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room. "Look around, Mr. Delacroix. This is the room where I transformed Meghann. It was a thing of beauty before I had it destroyed because I could not bear to look upon any object that reminded of the woman who betrayed me. For many years, I dreamed of how I would destroy Meghann once our paths crossed again."

"You'll never hurt Maggie—I won't let you!"

"I know Meghann indulges your ego, but permit me to point out you cannot even tie your shoes in your present state—a condition I have reduced you to. But you are quite right... I will never hurt Meghann. Not because I fear reprisal from a mortal wretch like you but because I love her."

Jimmy watched uneasily while the vampire paced the long length of the room. Why was it speaking to him like this, almost as if he were its confessor? Then the answer came to Jimmy and he nearly soiled himself in terror. The vampire was confessing its secret thoughts because it had no intention of leaving Jimmy alive long enough to repeat what he'd said to anyone.

Lord Baldevar whirled around and his lips stretched into a bitter grin. "For decades, I dreamed of slaughtering that wench—of breaking her heart as she broke mine by killing her loved ones before I allowed her to die. Then I realized rage was clouding my ability to reason. Was I really going to destroy the only woman I'd ever loved because of a trifling accident?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jimmy demanded. If he was going to die, he'd face this thing down bravely and not crouch in fear on the floor. "What accident?"

Again the raised eyebrow gesture that indicated condescension. "Meghann does not confide in you, boy? There was no intent in her actions the night she put that poker in my heart—it was an accident, no more."

"It was no fucking accident! Maggie wanted you dead!"

At that, Lord Baldevar laughed—a cutting, bleak sound that made Jimmy's skin break out in goose bumps.

"I am quite sure that is what she told you. It is the same lie she tells herself but the truth of the matter is that I'd made a very foolish mistake that night. My uncle had approached Meghann—may that wretched prelate's soul agonize for all eternity. He

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dangled certain promises under her nose... chief among them the chance to be independent of me. Instead of realizing her enthusiasm was nothing more than my child bride growing up and chaffing at my rule, I became enraged and punished her rather severely for even contemplating leaving me. I only meant to chastise her but unfortunately Meghann did not realize that... she became afraid for her life. In terror, she grabbed that poker and I managed to slip right onto it.

"It only took a few years to realize how foolish it was to hate Meghann when my quarrel should be with Alcuin for putting idiotic notions in her head. Without his interference, it would never have occurred to her to leave me. So I simply built up my strength and when I was ready, I slaughtered him and reclaimed my consort."

"No!" Jimmy shouted. "She's not yours... she hates you! Maggie loves me!"

Lord Baldevar lifted him off the floor and shoved Jimmy against the wall, amber eyes glittering with malevolence and derision. "Idiot, Meghann does not love you. She loves what you represent... redemption and her lost humanity. You are nothing more than her hair shirt... in some twisted way, the girl assuages her conscience by devoting herself to a mortal lover."

"Fuck you!" Jimmy howled. "If she doesn't love me, why did she rescue me?" Lord Baldevar's eyes narrowed and Jimmy felt a small rush of triumph. "Why did she put on that show last night? I remember her sidling up to you and acting all sweet and hot so Charles could sneak up on you and could kill you. She did it for me—me! Maggie damn sure wouldn't lift a finger to help you if you were hurt. Didn't she leave you to die?"

"Mr. Delacroix," the vampire purred in a silky tone, "perhaps your injuries blunted your perceptions last night. Do you know why I stand before you, whole and unharmed? Meghann may have attempted to harm me but in the penultimate moment, when her sodomite friend could have separated my head from my shoulders, the girl wanted more than anything to help me—she could not stand the thought of my death. It was her brief hesitation that allowed me to regain my strength. It is also the reason I allowed her to live in spite of her treachery—the

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realization that underneath the spite and fear, Meghann is still in love with me."

"No! No! No! I'm the one she loves!"

"Meghann does delude herself into believing that," Lord Baldevar agreed. "Poor child—still Catholic enough to fear damnation for giving in to her heart and embracing me. But there is no way I'll step aside and allow Meghann to reject me because she is too fearful to toss aside that pious morality that makes her willing to settle for a mundane existence with you."

"So what are you gonna do?" Jimmy sneered, and the hand grasping his throat tightened, forcing him to gasp out his next words. "Killing me won't make Maggie stop loving me."

"Why, Mr. Delacroix," Lord Baldevar said in a level tone, "that is nearly intelligent. Could you actually know something of Meghann's nature, after all? If I slaughter you, you'll live on in her mind... she'll never see beyond her romanticized view of your life together. It is quite difficult to overcome the memories of a ghost when wooing a lover. So killing you would serve no purpose."

Lord Baldevar pulled Jimmy closer to him, smiling when Jimmy couldn't stop himself from flinching.

"Don't fear me," he said with such malice Jimmy could feel nothing but fear. "I will not harm you. Instead, I am going to grant you your heart's desire."

Lord Baldevar's blood teeth shot out of his mouth, making his prisoner gasp. Slowly, seeming to enjoy Jimmy's panic-stricken gaze, the vampire dropped him to the ground and raised his left hand to his mouth, biting down savagely on his own wrist.

"No!" Jimmy screamed when he saw the purple-red blood mar the surface of Lord Baldevar's parchment-white skin and realized the vampire's purpose.

Lord Baldevar hunched down next to him and brought his bleeding wrist to Jimmy's tightly clamped, resisting mouth. Easily, the vampire used his other hand to clamp down on Jimmy's jaw, prying it apart and making his teeth unclench so that his mouth opened and he tasted the foul blood on his tongue.

"Come now," Lord Baldevar chided as Jimmy made a futile effort to spit the poison out of his mouth. "Isn't this what you

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crave? Didn't you plead with Meghann to transform you? Since she is not here, it shall be my pleasure to welcome you to immortality. What did you used to say to your little boy before that vampire murdered him? Open wide," he said in the singsong lilt parents used on fussy children.

Jimmy shook his head as furiously as a rabid dog, thrashing about with a strength that belied his broken, feverish body. All his struggles were no match for Lord Baldevar and soon more blood poured down his throat, sealing his fate.

Jimmy thought he heard himself scream but soon all thoughts were drowned in the vortex of pain and chaos that overtook him. What was happening to him? Every part of his body ached with an unbearable throb that made his torture the previous night seem a pale shadow compared to the torment he underwent now. Worse, he could actually feel his mind slipping away from him, unable to stand the suffering and hurtling toward a hazy world where nothing—not the agony, not Lord Baldevar—could touch him.

No, he thought. Can't go there ... never come back if I do. But he couldn't seem to stop the process... it was like falling off a cliff into a bottomless pit. Gotta hold on, he thought hazily. Gotta hold the ledge... find something to keep me here.

"Maggie!" he managed to shout, his last sane thought of his lover. Jimmy never knew it, but he spent all the hours between his transformation and dawn screaming her name.