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Rebecca Goings

THE VAMPIRE ORACLE

Tomb

In The Cards

The Vampire Oracle: Tomb
by Rebecca Goings

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Tomb

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Dedication

For Misty Wright, who first told me about the Vampire Oracle submissions at Cobblestone Press. If it hadn't been for her, you'd probably be reading someone else's book right now.

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Chapter One

"If, in your mortal prison, you wish not to be alone, then in the cellar you shall find him, behind a wall of stone."

Holly Cartwright read the poem a third time, frowning her brow in confusion. Who'd sent her these pink roses? And why in God's name had they sent a macabre poem along with them?

The flowers made a beautiful centerpiece on her second-hand dining table, but she hadn't given anyone her new address just yet. So who'd set the flowers? The card was signed with only one name—Aidan. She didn't know anyone by that name. But that didn't seem to matter, as she'd also received mail early that afternoon. One envelope stood out against the junk. Plain and white, postmarked El Dorado Springs, Colorado, 80025, but clearly addressed to *her*. She heaved a deep sigh. Did the entire world know she'd moved here? *So much for trying to be discreet.*

Moving in to the Whispering Pines Plantation had probably not been the smartest move she'd ever made, but when Holly had been diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer, rational thought flew out the window. Buying the plantation just south of Atlanta, Georgia had taken every last red cent of her savings, but she'd been drawn to the old, run-down structure ever since she was a little girl. It had been on the market for months, and she knew the reason why. The old plantation was rumored to be haunted, but Holly didn't care. She had six

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months to live. If there *was* a ghost in the house, she'd soon be joining them.

Without another thought, Holly ripped open the envelope. Inside was some kind of tarot card. Turning it in her hand, she chewed the inside of her lip. A picture of the plantation's front gates greeted her, along with a man's golden-brown eye, staring intensely. Shivers raced up her spine. At the bottom of the card was one word in white lettering. *Tomb*. Was someone playing a joke on her? Did they know of her fatal condition? How quaint. How fitting. How unimaginably cruel. Tears burned her eyes and she sniffled, determined not to cry. What kind of person would do such a thing?

Weaving around boxes she hadn't yet unpacked, Holly tossed the card into the open box she'd been using as her trash can. She would have chucked the flowers too, but they looked so nice on her table. A morbid reminder that she was soon going to die.

Her head began to pound, a throbbing that started behind her eyes, then spread to every inch of her brain. Stumbling to the sofa, which was still devoid of its cushions, Holly sat down clumsily, holding her head in her hands. She futilely rubbed her temples, trying to get the pain to stop, but she knew it wouldn't go away for hours. At any sign of stress, her headaches overwhelmed her. She wouldn't get any more unpacking done today.

She hadn't wanted to spend her last days in a hospital, and she barely had any family to stay with. Her mother had skipped town when she was a baby, leaving her with her grandparents, who'd been entirely too old to raise a child on

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their own. Her grandmother had died when Holly was seventeen, and her grandfather now lived in a home for the elderly. She had nowhere else to go, but she didn't mind. Holly needed to be alone to face her fear of death. It was still surreal to her, knowing she wouldn't live to see Christmas or the New Year.

Curling into a ball on the couch, she shut her eyes tight and tried to make the throbbing go away. If she could just shut out the world, she'd be all right. At least, that's what she kept telling herself.

* * * *

Someone was in the house—a woman—he could feel it. He knew her pain, her uncertainty. In the darkness, he moaned, wishing he could see what she looked like, smell her sweet scent, taste her warm blood...

But that was never to be.

His hand rested on the cool stone that separated him from the world. He'd chosen his prison, never wanting to kill again. The thirst for blood overwhelmed him at times, and his gnawing hunger wouldn't leave him alone. But all he'd had for sustenance in the last hundred years were the mice that lived with him behind these walls.

Douglas McCarthy had been a vampire for almost as long as he could remember, ever since he'd walked down that alley in London to meet his sire. The man had promised him eternal life, and at the time, Douglas would have done anything to obtain it. After he'd been turned, Douglas had lived with his guilt for a hundred years before entombing

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himself within the walls of his cellar. The deaths of the people he'd feasted on in those early years burned in his heart, especially the death of Penelope Randall.

She'd been a woman who'd fancied him, and he'd found his pleasure within her more than once. But he'd taken too much from her one evening, and her life ebbed from her veins. The only way to save her had been to turn her, but Douglas had decided long ago never to turn anyone into the monster he was. Living eternally as a vampire wasn't truly living at all. If all his life had to offer was killing people for food, then he would never turn a soul. How could he live with himself, condemning someone to the hell in which he now existed?

Douglas' thoughts once again turned to the woman in the house. Her pain became more intense, and he could feel the pounding in her head. He always knew the pains and pleasures of the ones who'd lived in his house over the years, and sometimes he couldn't help himself. He'd wailed and pounded on the walls in an effort to break free, but the stones wouldn't budge. Thank God. There would be no leaving this cell of his own making.

Silent, weary tears slipped down his cheeks. All he wanted was death, blessed death. But by walling himself up within his cellar, he'd succeeded in prolonging his hellish existence.

Dear God, the woman was sobbing now.

Douglas caressed the stones, crying with her. He understood her agony and found solace in her weeping. He longed to comfort her, despite what he was, if only to comfort himself. How long had it been since he'd been with a woman?

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Douglas couldn't remember, but his body tightened regardless.

Calling out to her with his powers of suggestion, he soothed her headache and sent her warmth. Perhaps she'd find him—perhaps she'd release him.

Perhaps ... it was too much to hope for.

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Chapter Two

Holly awoke a few hours later, unsure how she'd fallen asleep in the first place. The sun had gone down a while ago, and the entire house was pitch-black. The last thing she could remember was her pounding headache a moment before a wave of peace swept over her. She'd never felt anything like it. The pain had seeped away, and she must have drifted off.

Taking a deep breath, Holly stood and fumbled for a light switch in the dark. Once she found it, she squinted when the crystal chandelier above her dining table flared to life, illuminating the room with its bright, golden glow. Her ratty furniture seemed so out of place in this gaudy old mansion, but Holly didn't care. She came here to die, not to redecorate.

It had been hours since she'd eaten, but amazingly, she wasn't hungry. She was usually ravenous after a migraine like the one she'd had that afternoon. Strange.

It was deathly quiet. Holly's ears rang as she strained to hear something, anything. She reminded herself to find her fan to create some white noise. The silence only served to remind her that she was all alone.

A low-pitched moan echoed throughout the room, making every hair on Holly's body stand on end. *What the hell was that?* She glanced around, but saw nothing. Perhaps she wasn't alone, after all. Holly's thoughts immediately flew to the stories of ghosts within the plantation house, and she chuckled to herself. There was no such thing as ghosts. And

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even if there were, it would be pointless for her to be scared of them.

"Hello?"

The moaning drifted off, as if a woodland creature was in some kind of pain. Perhaps that's what it was. A deer in labor, perhaps. A sick, creepy, Franken-deer...

Holly crossed the living room to the front door and grabbed her aluminum Louisville Slugger propped against the wall. Ghost or no, she wasn't taking any chances. Her grandfather had given her the baseball bat for her sixteenth birthday. If he couldn't beat the boys off himself, the Slugger was the next best thing.

Another moan pierced the night, louder this time, seeming to emanate from the cellar door down the hall. Instantly, her thoughts jumped back to the poem and the flowers she'd received earlier. "*In the cellar you shall find him ...*" Christ, was there someone *in* there? Swallowing hard, Holly tip-toed toward the sound, determined to find out what it was. Her mind screamed at her to let it go. It was probably the wind. Nosey people who investigated strange noises were always the first to die in the movies.

Holly grinned. *Bring it on*, she thought to herself. She didn't have a damn thing to lose.

* * * *

The woman was sick, he could feel it. Douglas moaned once again in his tomb, trying to stretch, endlessly attempting to bend and change his position. It was pointless. Only the mice were big enough to maneuver in the small cove behind

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the cellar wall. When they were unfortunate to investigate near his feet, Douglas caught them and drank their blood.

But it wasn't enough.

He craved warm *human* blood. It seemed an eternity since he'd eaten a decent meal, and he wondered if he'd finally gone mad.

Concentrating again on the woman, his insight told him she drew nearer. Douglas moaned again, if only to bring her to the cellar and have her close by. Secretly, he hoped she would open the wall and release him, but he shuddered at the thought. Confronted with her warm, musky scent, Douglas didn't know if he'd be able to contain himself. It had been a long time since he'd been properly fed. A long time indeed...

The woman's footsteps were on the cellar stairs now, creaking down them one at a time. Douglas' heart leapt, and his excitement could barely be contained. He wanted to pound on the wall, cry out to her to set him free, but he dared not. He was afraid of himself, afraid of what he might do. Even now, his tongue caressed the tips of his incisors, which elongated with anticipation of the feast to come.

Douglas took a deep breath and smelled her perfume, light and flowery, drifting to him through the cracks in the stone. Lovely. He licked his lips and swallowed hard, moaning once again.

"Hello?"

Her sweet voice washed over him, and for the first time in decades, his erection rose to the fore. Along with the lust to feed came his lust for sex, as it always had. But if this woman

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set him free, he couldn't merely pounce and take her. Not without her consent.

"Is there someone down here?"

Douglas contemplated not answering, but he could practically hear her heart beating. Knowing her warm blood was so close made him touch the stone and whisper, "Yes."

The woman wasn't fleeing. If anything, her footsteps brought her closer to the wall, closer to where he'd entombed himself so long ago.

"Where are you?"

Her voice sent shivers down Douglas' spine. He willed the woman to run away, to leave and never return, but instead, she idled closer. Her scent assaulted him, making him groan with the pain of his own need.

"I am here," he whispered, hoping against hope that she hadn't heard him. But her next words confirmed his worst fear.

"Behind this wall?"

He heard her palm running across the stone on the outside of his prison, and his skin leapt at the sound. His entire body cried out for her touch, and he didn't even know what she looked like. At this point, he didn't care. Dear Lord, he wanted to sink himself into her, not only his teeth, but his cock as well, if only to ease his throbbing ache.

"Leave me," he managed to growl. "Leave and never return."

The woman gasped at his words. Perhaps she hadn't truly believed there was someone in the cellar. Perhaps she thought she'd made up his voice inside her head. But she'd

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clearly heard him now. If she didn't go, he feared he might try to convince her to tear down the wall. He hoped he wouldn't become that desperate to have her.

"Are you all right?"

Douglas bit his lip and winced when his teeth sank into the soft flesh. "No," he fairly shouted. "Leave me!"

The sudden sound of metal on stone reverberated around him, and Douglas jumped in spite of himself. The woman meant to free him! She couldn't! She needed to leave, if she knew what was good for her. But try as he might, he couldn't bring himself to speak the words to make her go away.

Again and again the loud noise rang in his ears until a piece of stone crumbled away. Light pierced the darkness for the first time in years, making him realize she must have some kind of lamp with her. He didn't care. In his heart of hearts, Douglas wanted to be set free, but he also feared it with every fiber of his being. Excitement pumped through his veins at the thought of feeding once again on warm, gushing blood.

"Please," he breathed. "Do not save me."

The woman continued to beat on the wall. More and more of the stone fell away. It wouldn't be long now before Douglas could push his own way through, as if somehow reborn. Closing his eyes, he refused to think on it and willed himself to stay still. However, he knew he was fighting a losing battle. It wouldn't be long now before the vampire would be set free.

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Chapter Three

There *was* a man behind the wall. Holly couldn't believe it when she'd called out and heard someone call right back. *What the hell?* Was she hearing things? Or was there actually someone behind these stones?

She wasn't taking any chances. She'd lifted her baseball bat and began pounding, watching the old wall crumble with little effort. The hollow thud that followed each whack told her there was indeed some kind of chamber behind it.

Pounding on the stones would bring her headache back with a vengeance. Even now, she was exhausted at the exertion, but she kept at it until a few stones crumbled away.

Wiping the damp hair from her face, Holly stepped forward and tried pulling on the stones with her bare hands. It took effort, but two of them dropped away. When she took hold of a third stone, a warm hand suddenly grasped hers from the opening, making her cry out in fright.

Pain splintered in her head, swift and unyielding, making her see stars. Holly groaned. The headaches were getting worse. Squinting in the light of the small, overhead cellar lamp, she tried to pull her hand away, but to no avail. Her skin crackled where she made contact with the phantom hand, and warmth raced up her arm, through her neck, and into her skull. It spread throughout her brain, soothing the agony like a balm.

"Why have you come?"

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It took a moment for Holly to realize the voice behind the wall had spoken again. She blinked a few times to regain her bearings, in awe at the way her pain had ebbed so thoroughly.

"I ... I'm here to save you. Did someone wall you up down here?" Holly still couldn't free her hand from the grip of the one holding her, but her fright seemed to fade along with her headache. She wanted to know more about the man in her cellar.

"I did." His voice echoed all around her. The low pitch vibrated through her, and her nipples stood at attention. Holly took a deep breath, confused at her body's reaction.

"Stand back if you can." She licked her lips. "I'm going to try and—"

"No!" The man behind the wall squeezed her fingers, making her gasp, but not in pain. A sudden bolt of sexual desire raced through her veins, and she had absolutely no idea where it had come from.

"Do not save me," he moaned.

The fabric of Holly's lacy bra suddenly chaffed against her. "Why?" she asked breathlessly. "If someone walled you up, we need to call the cops." Good. Her voice didn't waver.

"I walled myself in decades ago," the man said. "It is not safe for you should you succeed in releasing me."

Decades? The man must be delirious.

"Hang on," she exclaimed, yanking her hand free and grasping the handle of her bat once more.

The man growled, and every inch of Holly's skin prickled with excitement. What was wrong with her?

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Before she brought the bat down once more, the words of that damned poem echoed through her head once more. Good Lord, had the person who'd sent the flowers put this man behind the wall?

Desperate to free him now, Holly hit the wall again and again until more stones fell away. But as she worked, she realized the wall itself was bulging.

She dropped her bat and stepped away just as the wall cracked and exploded outward, sending a cloud of dust into the air. Holly coughed and tried to find the staircase railing behind her, but it wasn't where she thought it had been, and she stumbled.

Once the dust settled, an ungodly silence descended upon the cellar. The light bulb still illuminated the room through a haze, but where the stone wall had once stood, nothing but a gaping hole greeted her now—and a man, who stared intently into her eyes.

He was handsome, with tan-colored slacks and a yellowed shirt, which looked as if it had been white at one time or another. He wore dust-covered boots. Holly had no idea what color they were. From where she stood, the man's eyes glowed golden beneath a mass of dark curls that fell over his forehead. His gaze was magnetic. No matter how badly Holly wanted to look away and gauge her distance to the stairs, she couldn't; she was mesmerized by him.

The man took a shaky step forward, then another and another until he stood before her. He was tall; her head barely reached his chin. He looked her up and down before lifting his hands to touch her face.

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Holly knew she should be shocked, frightened or even terrified of the virile, sexy man who'd somehow burst forth from behind the wall. But she wasn't scared. No. She was turned on, and she had no doubt her short, hot gasps told him so.

He did nothing more than touch her face with the pads of his fingers, exploring the planes and valleys of her skin. When his thumb raked across her bottom lip, she was instantly wet between her thighs. She needed to get away from him. Now.

However, her feet weren't listening to her head. She was rooted to the spot, unable to move.

"Holly," the man whispered. The sound of her name on his lips made her close her eyes and groan. She didn't know how he knew her name, but she didn't care. Opening her eyes once more, she found his face mere inches from hers. She sucked in her breath but did not move away, willing him to kiss her. "You should not have opened that wall."

With lightning speed, he grabbed her and pulled her flush against his body. He fisted his hand in her hair and tilted her head a moment before latching his mouth onto her neck. A sharp, stinging pain made her cry out, but she couldn't escape his embrace.

The man had bitten her. Holly moaned at the sensation as desire raced through her blood. In that one, glorious moment, she wished he would touch her, plunge inside her, make her scream in sweet ecstasy. Dear God, what was wrong with her?

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He stroked her breast, and thoughts about what was right and wrong fell away. There was only him, filling her senses completely.

"*Douglas ...* " she breathed.

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Chapter Four

Douglas compelled her to touch him, to respond vehemently to his advances. She gasped in his ear, arching into his body, and he couldn't help himself—he caressed her nipple to a fine point. Her blood was thick and warm, filling his mouth with its sweet tang. His belly growled, but Douglas didn't know which hunger was stronger.

He'd read her name on her thoughts. *Holly*. She was a thin slip of a woman, with short-cropped blonde hair. Her eyes had stunned him, being a peculiar shade of green. Douglas had hardly given any thought to the odd trousers and button-up shirt she wore, his hunger had been so great. But he'd been behind the wall for a long time. Fashions would have changed, no doubt, as they always had.

He'd told her to leave him be, but his power of compulsion was too great. Holly hadn't listened to him because his body had been calling hers. Once he'd concentrated on connecting his mind with hers, he'd soothed her agony away, and he'd known there would have been nothing to stop the woman from saving him from his own prison.

But as he drank of her, he tasted she wasn't well. Her blood wasn't pure, regardless of the desire racing through her. Her passion gave her blood a sweetness, just as Douglas liked, but there was something more, something ominous under the surface, a dark, foreboding flavor that made his skin crawl. That realization made him raise his head from his feast.

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Holly shuddered, and his erection strained within the confines of his trousers. He wanted to take her with everything inside of him, but not like before, not like Penelope. He'd taken far too much from Penelope on the night they'd made love, and her heart couldn't take it. When the morning light chased him away, Douglas understood what he'd done. He'd killed the poor girl who'd been in love with him so long ago.

But he couldn't turn her. No, he would never give another soul the hell he'd had to endure thus far, and so Penelope had died on her bed with the rays of the morning sun cascading around her like a veil.

Douglas hadn't even been able to hold her as she passed, and that's what haunted him most of all. She never knew he was sorry, never heard his apologies. Walling himself within his cellar had been the only way to ensure he wouldn't kill anyone ever again.

But now, he was free.

Douglas licked Holly's wounds, and they disappeared as if they were never there. What little she'd given him would sustain him for now. He'd find nourishment elsewhere.

"Douglas," she whispered again, apparently hearing his name in his thoughts as he had heard hers. It wasn't uncommon for two connected minds to share somewhat limited thoughts and feelings. "Make love to me."

Her words burned his heart, and his mouth hovered over hers. He didn't know this woman, and she didn't know him. Taking her now would prove once and for all what kind of

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animal he truly was. No. He would not take from her what she wouldn't have given to him of her own free will.

Douglas pulled back on his mental link, and Holly's eyes snapped open. She stared into his face without saying a word. She didn't even try to run. Confusion twisted her features, and Douglas knew what he had to do.

He pressed his lips to hers ever-so-gently, sending her suggestions of sleep, rest, and relaxation. It only took a moment before she sagged against him. He hooked his arms behind her knees and made his way toward the staircase with Holly in his arms. He hoped he'd find the room she slept in, but he believed he already knew—the large suite on the second story at the end of the hall, the room with the enormous stone fireplace. The room that had once been his.

Holly was light as a feather. Douglas made his way to the second floor two steps at a time. It was torture, touching her, smelling her ... knowing what she tasted like. But he would ignore his goddamned lust if it *killed* him. Douglas chuckled at his thoughts.

He was *already* dead.

* * * *

Sunlight poured into the room, blinding Holly with its intensity. She threw an arm over her eyes and sighed deeply, trying hard to remember how she'd managed to drag herself up the staircase to bed. The last thing she could remember was...

Holly's brow furrowed. Everything was hazy. Try as she might, she couldn't recall a single damn thing that happened

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last night. No, that wasn't altogether true. She remembered holding her Louisville Slugger and making her way down the hall. After that, it was anyone's guess.

Christ. She'd been forgetful in the past, not remembering where she'd put her coffee mug or her car keys, but she'd never lost track of an entire evening before. Perhaps her cancer was getting worse, progressing faster than even the doctors anticipated.

Holly shivered and brought the covers under her chin. They did nothing to ward her against her chills. She'd all but convinced herself she wasn't afraid of dying. But that wasn't true. She was terrified. A few silent tears slipped from her eyes into her hair. Holly wiped them away furiously. Why did this have to happen to her? She had so much left to do. She was only twenty-eight, still young, with her life ahead of her. Plans of a white picket fence and 1.5 kids had flown out the window after the doctor's diagnosis a few weeks prior.

Holly sat up and glared at the sunlight. How dare it be a beautiful day when she felt like shit? With a deep sigh, she swung her legs over the side of the mattress only to discover she was still in the clothes she'd been wearing the day before. Great. Along with not being able to remember a damn thing, she'd forgotten to put on her nightshirt.

Holly ambled into the master bathroom and turned on the shower. Maybe the hot spray would help clear her mind. Glancing at the mirror, she touched the cool glass as if shocked to see her own reflection gazing back at her. She'd somehow expected to see ... a man, with curling dark hair.

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Holly continued to stare at herself while one name echoed through her head.

"Douglas," she said aloud, snapping out of her reverie.

"What the hell?"

Steam swirled about her, and she quickly undressed.

"I'm going insane," she whispered, stepping into the tiled shower. As she washed her hair, she had to wonder if there were ghosts in the house after all.

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Chapter Five

Douglas couldn't stay away. He'd meant to, but he hadn't found any cave or lodging in which to hide on the land that had once belonged to him. Nothing that would shelter him from the sun's harsh rays. Luckily during the night, he happened upon a small brook that flowed onto the property and washed up as best he could. The cool water felt heavenly against his skin, and even drinking the liquid satisfied him.

It would do nothing to nourish his body, but the mere feel of it pooling in his belly brought a contented grin to Douglas' face.

He'd succeeded in putting Holly to sleep, but memories of her headaches tormented him. She was dying. He'd tasted her illness for himself, could practically smell it on her skin. The malady rested in her brain, he was sure of it. The poor woman. So young to have to deal with that kind of burden.

Perhaps Douglas found himself trudging back to the manor due to the fact he felt a sort of kinship with Holly. He had been in a similar situation, after all. Thinking back to his youth was almost painful, as he'd wandered the streets of London searching for the man who could save him from the shadows of death.

Now, however, Douglas wished his sire had left him for dead in that dark alleyway. Douglas had wanted to be turned instead of succumbing to his own illness. But if he'd known then what he knew now, he would have faced death rather than stare down eternal life with no hope of redemption.

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Once he entered the house, Douglas wandered through the halls, recalling old memories of Christmases past, celebrations, and even sorrows. So much of his life was here. He'd moved to America not long after he'd been turned, wanting a fresh start.

The twilight of dawn lit the sky, and Douglas made his way back to the cellar before the sun peeked over the horizon. Ironic, he thought, to wish and hope to be set free from his prison, only to return to it once day broke.

He wanted to be near Holly, to learn more about her, and perhaps help soothe her pain as he had before. He was half-tempted to join her in her room, but knew he couldn't. Damn. If he wasn't careful, he'd become obsessed with the woman. Truth was, she fascinated him, almost beyond reason, and Douglas had to wonder if he'd finally cracked.

* * * *

Holly spent most of the day unpacking. Her kitchen was almost put together, along with a few items in the fridge. She'd done some shopping before the movers had arrived two days before, despite the headache and nausea that had plagued her. She knew she was taking things too hard, that she should rest more often, but resting meant she'd have to admit the cancer was winning.

She wasn't ready to give up just yet.

Her eyesight swam after a few hours, and Holly had to take a break whether she wanted to or not. Wandering down the hall, she was intent on passing out on the couch in the living room. She stopped, however, in front of the door to the

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cellar. It seemed familiar somehow, and she tried once again to remember what had happened the night before. Had she gone in there?

A man's face flashed through her head, and a sudden compulsion overcame her to step forward and turn the knob. Goose bumps raced up her arms. It was the same face she'd expected to see in the bathroom mirror that morning. Despite her fatigue, Holly was fascinated by her own thoughts. She'd never been one to believe in ghosts, but perhaps it was time to start.

"Don't be silly," she chastised herself. "There's nothing behind this door."

Holly didn't think about what she was doing before she took that step and yanked the cellar door wide open. There, in the darkness, was a man right on the other side, the same man who'd plagued her thoughts most of the day. Holly yelped and leapt back, only to slam into the wall behind her.

"Do not be afraid," he said. She had the urge to listen to him. "My name is—"

"Douglas," she whispered. The man merely nodded. Despite her odd feelings of familiarity, Holly's heart pounded, and a powerful wave of nausea overcame her. With a cry, she dropped to one knee, only to find herself scooped within the mysterious man's arms. She hadn't even seen him move. He stroked her hair from her forehead and brought her to the couch in the other room. He sat, making sure Holly was situated on his lap. Within moments, her pain melted away, leaving behind exhaustion.

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"You are the one I keep thinking about," she said, curling her arms around his neck. "I've dreamt of you."

"I suppose I am out of form when it comes to memory suppression."

"What does that mean?" Holly furrowed her brow in confusion as she laid her head on his shoulder. It was so good to be held and comforted, even if it was by some unknown specter.

"You ... met me last night. I tried to erase your memories, but it appears as if I have failed in that regard."

Holly was entirely too tired to be frightened. She blinked a few times. "We've met?"

"Yes." His voice rippled through her, and Holly snuggled closer, wanting more contact. "You freed me from my prison."

His words made her recall the mysterious poem she'd read the day before. *"If, in your mortal prison, you wish not to be alone, then in the cellar you shall find him, behind a wall of stone."* Holly tilted her head back to look into his eyes.

Douglas gazed at her, his intensity bringing forth a yearning so strong, tears stung the back of her eyes.

"Where did you hear that?" he asked.

"It came on a card with some flowers I received yesterday, from someone named Aidan."

He stilled. "Aidan, you say?" His voice was quiet, as if eagerly awaiting her next words.

She nodded. "It's so strange. I don't know anyone named Aidan. But the rhyme is about you, isn't it?"

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Douglas was silent for long moments as he stroked her hair, and it was all Holly could do not to moan out loud in pleasure. What was wrong with her?

"I suppose it is."

His answer made her heart leap for joy for some reason. Without thinking, Holly stroked his cheek with the palm of her hand. "Are you a ghost?"

He shook his head. "What I am would frighten you beyond reason."

"Try me." A chill suddenly raced up her spine. Douglas pulled her closer, as if sensing her unease.

"You must know I will never hurt you, Holly."

Hearing him speak her name made her suck in her breath. It sounded so right coming from him, as if he'd always known who she was. His golden eyes pierced her, and her nipples tightened. She'd never felt such a strong draw toward a man. The urge to kiss him made her squirm. Memories from last night came back to her in a rush, memories of Douglas biting her neck, then kissing her gently a moment before she fell asleep.

"What are you?" Holly somehow knew his answer before he spoke it.

He stared at her for long moments before answering, "I am a vampire."

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Chapter Six

"A vampire?" Her tone was skeptical, however in her eyes, he saw the fright she hid well. The woman shuddered in his arms but like the night before, made no move to run. He would have let her go, but she continued to sit on his lap, her mouth slightly open in shock. It was all Douglas could do not to lean down and taste her once again.

Damn Aidan Tremaine. How dare his "old friend" send this woman a bouquet of flowers, scaring the hell out of her, and telling her all about his hiding place in the cellar? Douglas had thought he'd seen the last of the vampire he used to spend his evenings with. Apparently, Aidan had foreseen a chance to resurrect him when the Whispering Pines finally procured a new, single, *beautiful* owner. Had Aidan been watching out for him all these years? Douglas didn't know whether he wanted to kill him with his bare hands or hug him for releasing him, albeit in a roundabout way.

He nodded and stroked her neck, right where he'd bitten her hours ago.

"There are no such thing as vampires."

"You are wrong."

Holly's gaze searched his. Her small hand threaded through his hair. "How ... why ... do I feel drawn to you?"

Douglas swallowed before answering her. "I have certain powers. Your body craves mine because I make it so."

Holly gasped and raised her brows in shock. "Really?"

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He had to smile at her child-like wonder. So like Penelope ... "Indeed."

"That can't be it. People don't have powers."

"I am no longer a person. Do you wish a demonstration?"

Holly's mouth pursed into a determined scowl. "Yes, *Mr. Vampire*. Show me this *power* you have over my body."

"Mmm, my pleasure."

Douglas caught the back of her head with his hand, ensuring his strength would keep her on his lap. Reaching out to Holly mentally, Douglas' power of suggestion pulled her closer, urging her to kiss him. He didn't move, he allowed her to come to him. It didn't take long, mere seconds, before Holly's lips met his, tentative at first, then demanding, surrendering.

She wriggled on his lap, straddling his thighs with her own. Her hands cupped his face, and that one gentle gesture stirred something within him he'd thought long-dead. It had been an eternity since he'd known the warmth of a woman. He couldn't resist yanking Holly closer, bringing her center in contact with his stiff erection. They both moaned, and Douglas opened his lips to allow her delicious tongue to sweep into his mouth.

In and out she plunged while pressing against him, straining for more. Holly's shirt wasn't tucked in and Douglas took advantage. His hands slipped under the soft fabric, caressing her back. She shivered, and his cock leapt in response. His palms burned as he brought them to her breasts, stroking her nipples to fine points.

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His mouth watered at the thought of tasting her there, of raking his fangs over those peaks and sipping her blood, thick with desire...

Douglas pulled back, reigning in his power over her. He watched as her eyes cleared. Holly's breath came in sharp pants, her passion still very evident. She arched her back when Douglas' fingers lightly pinched her nipples.

"You see?" he said, his own voice rough. "You cannot resist me."

"Dear God," Holly answered, lifting her own hands to keep his upon her. "That feels so good."

A sudden dizziness overcame him, and Douglas closed his eyes with a groan. Using his powers had drained his strength. He hadn't fed properly in a century, and what little sustenance Holly had given him the night before hadn't been enough to maintain his power.

His stomach growled. He needed blood.

"What's wrong?"

Douglas' incisors elongated, revealing his fangs. "Holly, I am weak. You must get away from me."

"Why?" Her hands still trapped his upon her breasts.

"I must feed. I will not partake of you. I have done that once. You are sick. You need your blood more than I."

Holly's eyes widened as she watched his teeth grow. She licked her lips, and Douglas growled, thrusting his hips in an involuntary action. His body wanted to bury itself within her, despite his hunger.

"You really *are* a vampire." Her amazed voice washed over him like cool water.

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"Yes, a *hungry* vampire." His stomach growled again.

Holly blinked and swallowed hard, exposing her neck. "I'm going to die anyway, Douglas. I am not afraid."

"No," he said, pulling his hands from under her shirt. "I have killed before due to my own negligence. I will not risk it again."

"How ... how much do you need?" Holly's voice trembled.

"In truth, not much. Barely enough for you to notice. But when I feed, I will arouse you mentally, as I prefer to drink blood laced with desire. However, I will not compel you to give yourself to me. Unless..."

"What? Unless what?"

Douglas held her chin in his hand as he whispered, "Unless you want my advances."

Holly sucked in her breath and stared into his eyes. "Are you serious?"

Douglas nodded. "I do not expect it of you, and I will not force you." He saw her unease and slowly lifted her from his lap. "I am sorry, Holly. I should not have told you that."

"I ... I..."

He placed his finger on her lips. "I apologize for frightening you. You will not see me again."

As he stood, she grabbed his hand. "Wait!"

Douglas glanced down at her curiously.

"Please, don't erase my memory of you."

Closing his eyes, Douglas sighed, touched by her request. He couldn't deny her plea. In his own selfish way, he wanted her to remember him as well. With one finger, he stroked her cheek. He gave her a half-grin and turned away, disappearing

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within the shadows cast through the window by the setting sun.

* * * *

Holly trembled long into the night. She sat on the couch, her knees to her chest, her eyes wide in the darkness. What in God's name had she done? She'd offered herself as a vampire's dinner.

Anger coursed through her veins, and it was all she could do not to tear out her own hair. She obviously hadn't been thinking clearly at all. And she'd challenged him. Challenged a *vampire* to demonstrate his powers. Boy did he ever. Her body still tingled from his touch. The memory of his erection pressing into her jeans made her groan and place her head on her knees.

She was still aroused.

The smell of him surrounded her, and every now and again, she'd lean into the couch cushions and take a deep breath. Woodsy, spicy, and completely male.

Holly hadn't had a lover for years. Her college sweetheart had eloped with the woman he'd been sleeping with on the side, and every other man she'd met hadn't wanted to start a relationship with a bald woman in chemo. Her cancer had started in her lungs, despite the fact she'd never smoked a day in her life. The chemo had seemed to work—until a giant, malignant tumor was found in her brain. They'd called it Glioblastoma Multiforme, and the cancer was too big and too aggressive to operate. Instead of continuing with chemo treatments, Holly had opted to stop them and die in peace,

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which allowed her hair to grow back somewhat. It was still shorter than she'd worn it in years past.

Holly wiped the moisture from her eyes, remembering how she'd collapsed in the hallway earlier, and how Douglas had swept her into his arms. Her pain and nausea went away almost immediately, and she had no doubt he'd taken them from her with his powers.

Every story she could remember involved vampires as "bad guys", villains, killing scores of people without a thought of remorse. But Douglas was different. He'd shown restraint, even when Holly had offered herself on the altar. She gritted her teeth once again. He'd aroused her, compelled her; that was the only reason she'd proposed he feed from her. Wasn't it?

With a deep sigh, Holly knew she was fooling herself. He'd pulled back. She remembered clearly when he'd lifted his power, and yet, she had still wanted him to continue. Perhaps it was the thrill of the unknown, the excitement of actually meeting a real vampire. The danger, the intrigue...

Or perhaps Holly merely wished to feel alive again. What would it hurt to give Douglas what he both wanted and needed from her? He'd fill his belly, and she'd have mind-blowing sex. She knew it would be mind-blowing. *Please, with the way that man kissed?*

Holly grinned, despite her dark thoughts. Douglas had said she wouldn't see him again. Her heart skipped a beat. Perhaps she was going crazy, but dying alone no longer appealed to her. If she only had months to live, she was determined to live it to the fullest. There was nothing wrong

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with casual sex. However Douglas had mentioned he'd killed someone by feeding off them once before. The thought scared her, but only for a moment. If she were to die during sex, at least she'd die a happy woman. The prospect appealed to her more than wasting away in bed.

The house was silent. Holly had no idea where Douglas had gone off to. He'd simply disappeared, perhaps using his power to slip away unnoticed. But he'd allowed her to keep her memories of him, and hope lit within her.

She'd freed him from his prison. Perhaps he could free her from her own.

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Chapter Seven

Holly searched the entire manor for her gentleman vampire, but could not find him. Both fear and sadness coursed through her. What if she never *did* see him again? Despite the fact she hadn't spent much time with him, she felt a certain kinship with him. Maybe it was the way he connected with her on a mental level. She had known his name without being told. What else did she know about him?

She'd finally collapsed in her bed a little after midnight, staring at the eerie shadows on the ceiling cast by the light of the moon. Douglas was probably outside hunting, if she had to guess. He'd said he was hungry. Better the blood of some woodland creature than starve, she supposed. Holly sighed, her body still charged from their encounter hours earlier on the couch. Whatever he'd done to arouse her, he'd succeeded. Probably more than he'd meant to.

The sheets rasped against her naked skin, and her nipples tightened at the sensation. Holly didn't often sleep nude, but she thought it might help to seduce a vampire. Of course, if he was prowling the countryside, her effort would be for nothing. She knew he could hide in the shadows; she'd seen him disappear within them herself. It was altogether possible that while she couldn't see him, he was watching her. A sudden thrill raced through her veins.

If that was the case, she decided to give him a show.

* * * *

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Douglas stood still in the corner of the bedroom, not making a sound. The shadows hid his body from view. He'd become an expert at using his power of suggestion to hide in years past. He couldn't help but smile, knowing he hadn't lost his skill after being imprisoned for so long.

Holly lay on the bed, gloriously naked. He'd watched her undress, anxiously awaiting the sight of her creamy skin glowing in the moonlight. Her breasts were perfect, just big enough for either his hands or his mouth. Her nest of curls invited him to taste its nectar, and he smelled her arousal, even from where he stood. Apparently his powers had been a little too effective, as Holly's body continued to beckon him. If he didn't know better, he'd think she had powers of her own.

When she finally sprawled on the bed, she'd tossed the covers aside, opening her legs wide enough for him to see the pink skin of her folds. With one hand, she fondled her breast, teasing her nipple, pinching, stroking. With the other, she dipped into her own wetness, circling her clit again and again. Holly's soft pants drove him to the brink. His stomach growled once more. If he didn't leave, right now, he'd risk his sanity.

But no matter how hard he tried to turn away, his eyes were glued to the woman pleasuring herself before him.

"Douglas," she breathed, as if praying. "If you're here, join me. Please."

She couldn't possibly know he watched her, but his mouth watered, regardless. Fangs grew where there had been none before, and his cock demanded to be set free. Harsh desire swept through him, almost causing him physical pain. He had to leave. If he didn't, he'd pounce within a matter of seconds.

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Holly gasped from the bed, plunging her fingers within herself faster and faster. "Oh God, Douglas," she cried again. "Make me feel alive again."

Her heartfelt plea undid him. Without conscious thought, he shed his shirt and trousers, along with his boots and undergarments, until he stood in the shadows as naked as Holly. His erection throbbed, and Douglas had no idea how he'd taken those last few steps to the bed.

Once he was there, however, he knelt on the mattress between Holly's legs and swept her hand away. Her breath caught as her eyes burned into his.

"Thank God you came back." She reached out as if to stroke his hair, but he grabbed her wrist and forced it down into the blankets.

"God had nothing to do with it," he said, his voice sounding like a harsh growl, even to his ears. "You have tempted me beyond reason, Holly. I am too ravenous to resist."

Placing both hands on her thighs, he spread her even wider, rejoicing in her cry of surprise.

"What you are about to feel, dear lady, will be more intense than anything you've ever experienced," he said as he bit her lightly in an upward path along her leg. He left tiny bite marks behind, but they were not enough to bleed. He would heal them later. Right now, she wanted him—he couldn't stop himself from claiming her.

"*Oh...*" Holly's small voice spurned him on.

"I will not stop. I want to taste your arousal—your blood will be thick with it."

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"I'm not afraid."

Holly lifted her hips to him, and her sweet, exotic smell shot another burst of violent need through his veins.

Douglas opened her folds and marveled as they glistened with moisture. "I want to feed here," he said, outlining her sex with the tip of a finger before plunging inside of her with two more.

Holly gasped, but said nothing.

"You are engorged with blood; the sweetest concentration of it is right here. You will feel pain, my pet, but I promise, not for long."

Douglas lowered his head.

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Chapter Eight

The silken glide of Douglas' tongue on her swollen flesh made Holly cry out and arch her back, wanting as much contact as possible. He licked her up and down, plunging his tongue inside as if he wanted to lap up every last drop of her juices. His mouth widened and latched on to her, suckling her in a most erotic way. No one had ever sucked her clit before, and the sensation was powerful, shooting fiery bolts of electricity to every corner of her body. In an effort to keep from screaming, Holly grabbed the pillow near her head and held on tight.

A sharp pain rippled through her, burning where his mouth worked. She squirmed, trying to get away from it, but wherever her hips went, he followed, and he groaned out loud in what sounded like ecstasy. His hands soothed her by stroking her belly, only to wander higher and tease the peaks of her hardened nipples with searching fingers. The pain soon ebbed, and Holly couldn't stop herself from rolling her hips with his rhythm. He continued to suckle her while greedily licking her sensitive skin until Holly was almost mad with passion.

She knew he was drinking of her, and the thought only excited her more until she lifted her feet from the bed and placed them on his thighs. Glancing down, Holly could see his dark head bobbing as he knelt there, holding her still for his plundering mouth. Watching him eat her in more ways than one sent the first wave of orgasm through her. She

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screamed—she knew she had to have screamed as she ground her pussy into his face.

Despite the fact she had found her pleasure, he didn't stop. He'd said this would be intense, more so than anything she'd ever experienced, and as her body climaxed a second time, she was bound to believe him. Sweet Jesus, she saw stars before her as she threw her head back, unable to do much more than lie spread at his mercy.

Douglas took his fingers and entered her slowly, pumping again and again, pressing hard into her. He touched a place so deep, she writhed in pleasure, unsure if she was coming again or still reeling from her previous orgasm. Her breath came in short pants and tears squeezed from her eyes as the entire room spun around her head. His tongue stilled, but she hardly noticed.

Black spots swirled in her vision and her heart pounded mercilessly. The world tilted a moment before she fell into a black void of nothingness.

* * * *

"*Holly.*"

As if wading through a fog, Holly opened her eyes dreamily. What just happened? As snippets of her memory returned, she moaned out loud, surprised her pussy didn't ache to high heaven. Holy hell, she'd let a vampire feed off her—down *there*. Her cheeks burned, and she bit her lip. She'd gone mad. No friggin' doubt about it.

"Do you ache?"

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Douglas' voice rolled over her like water, raising every hair on her body. He was still with her. She didn't realize she'd turned into his warmth until she was locked in the circle of his arms. He shared her pillow and smiled gently, his handsome eyes peering into hers. "Do you ache?" he repeated.

"No," she said, moving her legs back and forth just to make sure.

His smile widened. "Good. I have healed your wounds, pet."

Holly gazed at him in wonder. "You can do that?"

Douglas nodded as he ran his fingers through her hair. "You came for me more times than even I expected. You are very sweet, Holly."

His soft words should have embarrassed her, but all she could think about was fainting on him. "Did you ... Well, did *you* ... come?"

Douglas leaned up on one elbow and propped his head on his hand. Holly perused the skin of his chest, lightly covered in masculine hair. She wanted to touch him, but resisted the urge. Despite what they'd just shared, she didn't feel it was her place to touch him.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, he took her hand and placed it over his heart. Leaning close, he whispered in her ear. "Touch me at your leisure."

Holly's heart beat double-time at the fire in his eyes. Glancing lower, she clearly saw his stiff erection between them. "You can hear my thoughts?"

"Somewhat," he answered. "But mostly I can understand your feelings. Our minds are linked, pet."

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Returning her gaze to his, she licked her lips and trembled. He hadn't answered her about finding his own pleasure. Judging by the hard-on practically staring her in the face, she doubted he had. "Did you...?"

"No," Douglas said. "I will not seek release within you while you are out cold. I am a selfish vampire. I wish you to remember our joining." He smiled as he spoke, clearly amused by his own words.

Holly grinned as well. "With a body like yours, I'd want to remember it too."

His smile was magnificent to behold. It softened the harsh lines of his face and made his golden eyes sparkle with what looked like mischief.

"Well then, my dear," he said, rolling his body on top of hers. "Let's make sure you *do* remember, shall we?"

Holly gasped when he nudged her legs apart with his knees.

"I have had my fill of your blood," he breathed in her ear. "Now I must slate my lust. Do not fear me, Holly; I will be gentle."

Holly ran her fingers through his soft curls and nodded. Just as he lowered himself to kiss her, she yelped, "Wait!"

"What is it? Am I hurting you?"

"No," she said, her cheeks blazing once more. "Do you have ... are you clean?"

"I do not understand."

"I don't have any condoms, Douglas. You don't have any diseases, do you?" He arched his brow and cocked his head. Once Holly said the words and saw the look on his face, she

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burst out laughing. What if he did? It wasn't like it mattered. She'd be dead soon anyhow.

"I have no diseases, save for my nature, pet," he said, lifting the side of his mouth. "I cannot even get you pregnant. You have nothing to fear."

"I am not afraid of you," she said, sobering. Stroking his cheek, Holly committed his features to her memory. Douglas slicked himself in her folds at that moment, and she moaned at the feeling. Her clit was still engorged, and her desire once again flared to life.

"It pleases me to hear you say that," he said, lowering his head for a chaste kiss. "You are a beautiful woman, Holly."

Ever since her chemo, Holly's self-esteem had flown out the window. She scoffed at his words. "No, I'm not."

Hooking his fingers under her chin, he forced her gaze back to his. "You do not believe me?"

"I haven't been beautiful in a long time, Douglas."

"You, dear girl, are mistaken. I shall prove it to you."

His lips swooped down and captured her mouth, kissing her tenderly. His gentle tongue asked for entry by moistening her lips, but he didn't compel her with his power. Knowing he wanted her natural response, Holly threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back with wild abandon.

Their tongues danced back and forth, mating with each other in a most delicious way. Holly explored every corner of his mouth and sucked in her breath when he fully settled within the cradle of her hips.

She was still wet and ready, and his entry was an easy one. He slid into her as if he had all the time in the world. If

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Douglas was immortal as a vampire, she supposed he probably *did*. He was thick and long, and Holly couldn't help but toss her head back in rapture once he was fully sheathed.

He moved against her, stoking her passionate fire by degrees until she almost begged him to finish what he'd started. In and out, he languidly pushed forward, until Holly bent her knees and rocked with him.

"You are sweet—in every way," he murmured. Kissing her once more, Douglas thrust forward harder than before, branding her with the heat of his palms on her thighs. Holly couldn't hold back her small, shuddering cries as he plunged deeper. Fantastic, that's what this man was, and he knew how to make her body sing.

"Make me come," he demanded hotly, his eyes piercing hers. His thrusts became more urgent, as he grabbed hold of her face, forcing her eye contact. "*Make me come!*"

Holly's orgasm ripped through her like a freight train. Her entire body convulsed as she wrapped her legs around his waist. Douglas drove into her, grunting as her muscles pulsed around his cock, milking his pleasure from him. Nothing existed in the universe but him, on top of her, kissing her into oblivion. Holly had no idea where his body ended and hers began. It was as if they were one being, entwined within each other.

As his rhythm slowed, she caressed the skin of his arms and shoulders.

"You see, Holly. You *are* beautiful," he whispered. At the tender look on his face, tears of joy burned behind her eyes.

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Chapter Nine

"How did you become a vampire?"

Holly's soft voice snapped Douglas out of his reverie. His hand caressed hers, stroking the skin of her palms, then twining their fingers together. Holly cuddled next to him, her body heat warming him. He'd been so cold behind the cellar wall; her warmth was like a balm, somehow melting away years of torment.

After long moments of silence, he answered her. "Many years ago, I was ill. Perhaps as many as two hundred years, I have lost count. I'd heard stories of a man who could cure you, give you everlasting life, and I was young and stupid enough to believe it."

"You were sick?"

"Yes." Douglas sighed when she stopped playing with his hand and held it tightly in her own. Her feelings revealed themselves to him through their mental bond—confusion along with a certain wonder.

"Go on," she urged.

"I met that man in an alley in a seedy part of London. I didn't know what the hell I was doing, but I didn't care. He ... asked me if I was sure becoming a vampire was what I wanted, if this was the life I wanted to lead. He told me what must be done to survive, living off the blood of others. He told me I would burn in the sunlight, until I became older and could tolerate it in limited exposure. But that seemed a small price to pay when confronted with my own death."

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Holly shuddered and scooted closer, prompting Douglas to squeeze her to him. He glanced at the ceiling and took a deep breath before continuing.

"He bit me and drank until I was delirious, almost drained of every drop of blood within my veins. I thought surely I was going to die right then and there. But soon afterwards, moments before I collapsed, he cut his own arm and held it out to me. '*Drink*' he said. His blood would give me the answers I sought. The only hesitation I had was the weakness in my limbs as I reached for his arm.

"My first taste of blood made my stomach revolt, but I continued, realizing the more I drank, the more I wanted. The blood became sweet in my mouth, and soon, I couldn't find the strength to pull away. He had to take his arm away from me. I did indeed die within that alley, pet. What I didn't know was that his blood was tainted, tainted with a curse. It took many months before I regretted what I'd done. My new-found powers were overwhelming, and it seemed I could conquer the world. So I left my sire, determined to explore my powers on my own. He protested, said I wasn't ready, but I was a young, naive vampire, and I thought I could live on my own, without him. In those years, I drained my victims. Not all of them, mind, but enough of them to nag my conscience, enough for me to realize what I was doing was wrong. They died because of my hunger, my need."

Douglas turned his head and looked at Holly. She shivered, but her leg stroked his underneath the blanket.

"Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this."

"No, it's fascinating."

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"You will get ideas."

Holly leaned up to look in his eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Douglas knew where her thoughts must be headed. He wasn't about to let her harbor them. There was no way in hell he'd turn her to spare her death. "I will not turn you."

"I wasn't thinking—"

"Yes, you were, pet," he said, stroking her cheek. "You cannot hide your thoughts and feelings from me. You are ill, just as I was, but I will not bestow this curse upon you. You will never live as a vampire."

* * * *

Holly stared at Douglas, speechless. He'd known her innermost thought, the one she'd tried to keep hidden deep down inside. She should have known it would be useless. She hadn't even seriously considered turning into a vampire herself, it had been more of a passing fancy. However Douglas was determined to keep his curse his own. Perhaps it was just as well.

"I am scared of death," Holly whispered, smoothing a dark lock from his brow. "I didn't think I was, but I was wrong."

"I was scared as well, pet." His deep voice resonated within her, and she knew she'd found a kindred spirit. Someone who understood what she was going through, someone who'd gone through it himself. But Douglas had cheated death.

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"And yet you're terrified of living," she said. "You told me you walled yourself in the cellar because you were frightened of killing again."

"Yes." His voice was so soft; Holly had to strain to hear it.

"So you saved yourself from dying, only to deny yourself from living?"

"I am alone," Douglas whispered in the darkness. "No one understands the hell I live in. There is no going back, Holly, no redemption for me. I am a monster, a demon, forced to wander the earth at night and drink blood for sustenance. I hate myself."

Holly's heart broke for him. His was a tortured existence. Douglas was merely a man who had made the wrong decision and decided to punish himself for it. Now that she'd released him from behind the wall, she was surprised he didn't resent her for it.

"Why don't you hate *me*?" she asked.

Douglas sucked in his breath. "Why would I possibly hate you, pet?"

"I released you. Set you free from your prison. How can you not?"

Pulling her on top of him, his arms wrapped around her in a vice-like grip. Holly gazed down into his eyes. "You saved me, gave me another chance at life. I cannot hate you because when I am around you, I feel more alive than I have these past two centuries. I know we have not known each other long. But you, Holly, have given me a great deal. There is nothing to hate, but much to admire."

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Holly blushed and tucked her head under his chin. Her fingers traced lazy circles on his chest. Pain and dizziness attacked her all of sudden, and she had to squeeze her eyes shut to keep the world on its axis. Her hand clutched the back of his neck for stability. "Oh *God*."

The warmth of his hand in her scalp soothed her, and within seconds, the pain was gone, eased away by his power.

Holly said nothing for what seemed an eternity. When she finally did speak, her voice seemed loud in the silence.

"There is much to admire within you as well, Douglas," she said, giving him a small squeeze. "My gentleman vampire."

He kissed the top of her forehead, and she knew he was smiling. Somehow, she felt it. Perhaps their mental link made it possible. Whatever the reason, Holly didn't care as she snuggled close and sighed contentedly.

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Chapter Ten

Holly stretched and rolled over, intent on cuddling with the warm body next to hers. But as she reached out, her hand felt nothing but air and empty sheets. Cracking open her eyes, Holly glanced around the room, only to find she was alone. Douglas had left her sometime in the night.

She tried hard to tamp down the pang of disappointment that seeped into her bones. With the light of dawn streaming through the far window, Holly couldn't fault him for leaving when he had. Her room wasn't exactly "vampire friendly", especially since the window faced east, toward the rising sun.

With a sigh, Holly clutched the blankets and wondered why she was so weak. It was an effort to lift her head from the pillow. She often had good days and bad days, and she feared today was going to be a bad day. Usually, she would be plagued by a pounding headache, dizziness, or confusion about this or that, but today, a weakness had settled in her heart. She swallowed hard and tried not to think about her impending mortality.

Her body was dying, and she couldn't do a thing to stop it. Well, there *was* something, but the man who could give her everlasting life had said he'd never turn her into the monster he was. But Douglas was a far cry from a monster. He *thought* he was, and perhaps he'd made a few mistakes, but he hadn't had a mentor, from the sound of it. If he'd been taught the proper way to feed, the proper way to use his

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abilities, perhaps he never would have walled himself within his own plantation.

Holly shuddered when her thoughts turned ominous. It would have been very easy for Douglas to become an evil vampire, one who killed and fed for pleasure rather than need.

He was lonely, that much was obvious. Perhaps if he had a companion, someone who could make him happy, he wouldn't hate himself, wouldn't hate what he was.

Holly envied his powers. As much as she loved the sun, she had to wonder if becoming a vampire with Douglas would be worth giving up her days. She would no longer be in pain, and no longer would she fear her own death. She could use her power of suggestion for good, and instead of feeding from people, perhaps they could raise animals and truly live off the land.

But her thoughts were nothing more than a passing fancy. Douglas had been adamant in his decision to keep her from turning into what he was. There would be no happily ever after for her.

Holly's eyes drooped closed. She was exhausted. Maybe because she hadn't gotten much sleep last night, after all. The memories of her lovemaking with Douglas made her grin, but it didn't take long before sleep beckoned once more. Before she fell back into her dreams, she wondered if, when the time came, God would be merciful enough to let her die peacefully in her sleep.

* * * *

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Douglas sat in the gloom with his hands clasped in front of his face. He couldn't think of a single thing beyond the woman sleeping upstairs. He'd returned to his cellar once the sun had lightened the sky, but he'd been reluctant to do so. Holly had been so peaceful, so breathtaking in sleep. Douglas had stared at her gloriously naked form for long moments before he'd risen from the bed. The memory of it was burned in his brain.

The woman had been so passionate, so tender. He couldn't remember an experience quite like the one he'd shared with Holly the night before. Even Penelope hadn't been that desperate to have him. She'd proclaimed her love so long ago, but perhaps it was due in part to his power of suggestion. Could it be that Penelope had only desired him because he *wanted* her to desire him?

Douglas sighed. He would never know. But Holly was different. She'd responded to his touch without his compulsion, and that fascinated him. She was a woman who knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to seek it out. Clearly, she'd been intent on seducing him last night. It had worked.

Douglas' body tightened when he thought about bringing her to orgasm again and again ... and again. Passionate didn't even begin to describe Holly. She was everything he wasn't—kind, loving, and pure. But for whatever reason, she had feelings for him. She'd told him she admired him. For what, he didn't know.

Telling her about his history had probably been a mistake. He'd known she'd wonder about her own death, and whether

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or not he would save her from it. No doubt he *could* save her, but he wouldn't on mere principle. What kind of life would she lead? Lonely, bitter, heart-wrenching. Unless...

Shaking his head, Douglas couldn't believe the thought had crossed his mind. Seeing her smiling face every day, holding her close, experiencing her sweet body every night ... Maybe she'd want to stay with him. Forever.

Douglas scoffed at himself. *Don't be a fool. The woman would soon hate you for turning her. She wouldn't stay. And you'd be stuck by yourself once again with even more guilt that you'd created another vampire who hated herself.*

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, resting it against the stone wall behind him. Debris was still scattered about the room, but he'd be damned if he was going to crouch in the spot where he'd stood for the last hundred years. Concentrating on Holly, he soon became concerned. She'd been in bed for half the day. Was something wrong?

"*Douglas...*" Her voice whispered in his mind, and every hair on his body stood on end. She wasn't feeling well. In fact, she could barely lift her limbs.

He rose from the floor and made his way to the stairs. The sun was still high in the sky, but he'd be all right if he avoided direct sunlight. He had to see Holly and soothe her body. The dear girl didn't deserve the hand life dealt her. If he could ease her suffering before she passed, he'd damn well do it.

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Chapter Eleven

Holly's belly growled as a scent drifted to her, a familiar aroma of spices and herbs. Opening her eyes, she spied Douglas grinning at her from the doorway of her room, holding two steaming plates of ... spaghetti.

Spaghetti?

She struggled to sit up as she stared at Douglas, confused by his look of accomplishment. "What are you—"

"I made us food, pet," he answered, interrupting her. "Found the ingredients in your kitchen, I hope you do not mind."

"No, I don't. You cook?"

Douglas lifted his mouth in a half-grin. "Of course, dear girl. How do you think I survived before I was turned?"

Holly blushed when his gaze pierced hers. He sat on the edge of the mattress and handed her a plate and a fork. "Where ... where did you learn to make spaghetti?" Would this man never cease to amaze her?

"Italy."

"*Italy?*" Her mouth dropped open.

He nodded. "I have been many places over the years. You would love Italy, if only for the food."

Holly watched in wonder as Douglas winked and twirled the pasta on his fork. He took a bite and groaned, his face twisting in ecstasy.

"You can eat?" Her question must have amused him. He chuckled.

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"Of course I can eat. It does not nourish me, yet I enjoy it just the same."

Lifting her fork, Holly took a bite. "Thank goodness for that," she said around a mouthful of noodles.

He grinned, and Holly's heart did flip-flops. "It took me awhile to figure out your stove, but I eventually conquered it."

She giggled at his jest. Douglas was too handsome for his own good. He was concerned for her, concerned enough to make her dinner. The warmth that spread throughout her body had nothing to do with his power of suggestion. If she wasn't careful, she'd fall hard for Douglas McCarthy.

But who the hell cared about being careful? She wasn't too much longer for this world. Why *not* allow herself to fall in love with the man?

"Thank you for dinner," she said, barely recognizing her own voice. "I was hungrier than I thought."

"You are more than welcome." Douglas' beautiful golden eyes caught hers. "Seems only fair I feed you after you've fed me."

Holly blushed and dropped her gaze. "This is very good. You must have learned a lot on your jaunt to Italy."

He cocked a brow. "Indeed. I did."

Goose bumps raced up her arms at the suggestive lilt to his voice. Just like that she was ready to feel the pleasure she knew he could give her, so much more powerful than any other lover she'd ever had.

But her body was still exhausted, and she stifled a yawn.

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"How do you feel?" His unexpected question left her vulnerable. She didn't want to talk about her cancer, but it was impossible to ignore.

"I'm so tired. I've never been this tired before. Whenever I try to stand, the entire room spins, and I fall back onto the pillows." Dropping her fork, Holly pushed her plate away. "I can't even finish my dinner," she moaned regretfully. "My stomach can't take more than a few bites."

Douglas took her plate and set it on the nightstand next to his. "I am sorry you are not feeling well. Perhaps I can help you?"

He grasped her hands. Before she knew his intent, his mind was within hers. Holly closed her eyes and sighed at the balm of his thoughts, sweeping over her in a wave of peace.

"Damn."

His voice brought her back to earth. "What?"

With a sigh, he ran his fingers through her short hair. "Your tumor is getting worse."

She'd known it would grow eventually, but hearing him confirm her worst fears had her shaking where she sat. "It won't be long, then," she said with a desperate chuckle.

"Don't talk like that."

"Why not?" she asked flippantly. "I'm dying, Douglas. We don't have much time together."

"I do not want to hear about when you will leave me," he told her.

"Perhaps I could be buried on the property. You could still visit me then."

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Douglas growled. "*Holly*." His voice was forceful, and it took every ounce of her willpower to look him in the eye. When she did, she flinched at the sparks seeming to shoot from them. "Do not speak of your death."

"Why not?" Tears overflowed onto her cheeks and fell unguarded. She realized at that moment she didn't want to leave him. But she would. If her tumor was growing, she probably had a few weeks at best. However it was likely her body would slowly wither away, and she wouldn't be able to enjoy her last days with Douglas.

Was it her imagination, or did he have moisture in his eyes?

"Because I have just found you, pet."

Holly's heart melted within her. "Are you so terrified of being alone?"

His slow nod prompted her to sit up and place her hands on his cheeks. "I am here, now. This moment. We can do nothing more than enjoy what little time we have."

His hands reached for hers and held them on his face. "I can't stop it, despite my power. I have been watching your tumor, *Holly*. Every time I soothe you, every time I take away your pain, it gets bigger. In trying to keep you from harm, I'm afraid I'm making you worse."

His words shocked her, but she scooted closer regardless. "If your power takes away my discomfort, I'll welcome it," she whispered. "Better a short, happy life than one drawn out in pain and suffering."

"I want to die with you."

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She sucked in her breath and stared at him. "You cannot possibly mean that."

"Yes, I do. What will I have to live for when you are gone? I walled myself in my cellar because I had no hope left within me. You have given me renewed hope for my life, even though we have only been together a short time. I do not wish to lose you."

"There is only one way for me to stay with you."

Douglas stared at her long and hard. "No."

Holly sniffled, knowing what his answer would be, yet hoping he'd have reconsidered. "Then this is all you get."

He hugged her, nearly squeezing the breath out of her lungs. "Do you need to feed?" she whispered in his ear.

"No," he answered, his voice cracking. "What you gave me yesterday will sustain me for awhile."

"Then stay with me, Douglas," Holly pleaded, stroking his neck. "Make my last days amazing. Give me that at least."

His lips touched hers almost reverently, and Holly couldn't help but cling to him. Douglas might be a vampire, but he was also one of the most considerate men she'd ever known. She was determined to live the rest of her life with him—however long that may be—to the fullest.

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Chapter Twelve

Douglas was lost. This little woman tested his sanity to the breaking point. He was half-tempted to turn her for his own selfish desires, despite knowing she'd hate him for it. She might *think* she wanted to live forever, but the reality was she wouldn't want to. Holly just didn't know it yet. She'd figure it out after a few decades.

He didn't know if he could live without her. She'd entered his life only days before, but he could hardly recall what life had been like without her sweet scent surrounding him. Even horrid memories of his cove within the wall were subsiding. He wanted nothing more than to sink deeply into her, body and soul. He wanted to touch her where no one else had, reach inside her and claim her heart as his own.

His feelings were powerful, going far beyond anything he'd ever imagined with Penelope. Perhaps it was because Holly was dying, just as he had once been. He connected with her on a level he'd never reached with any other woman, and he was desperate to keep her with him.

Leaning her into the pillows, Douglas continued to kiss her and pulled the blanket from her still-naked body.

She tugged at his shirt. "You are overdressed."

"Are you sure you are up for this, my pet?"

"If you don't continue, Mr. McCarthy," she said, trailing soft kisses along his jaw line. "I'll have to find my stash of wooden stakes."

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Her comment stopped him for a moment. He stared at her in disbelief before breaking out in peals of laughter. She grinned, and he lowered his forehead to hers.

"Witty as well as wonderful?" he teased. "I like that in a woman."

Holly caressed his belly after she finally pulled his shirt free from his trousers. Douglas gasped and closed his eyes.

"You're so beautiful." Her voice surrounded him, making him tremble. "Don't hate yourself, Douglas," she purred. "You were gifted with eternal life."

"Gifted? Not quite the word I would choose..."

"I would. It seems God couldn't bear to part with one of His most glorious creations. You were gifted to live forever." Her words stopped his heart.

"Such fancy daydreams. God does not care about me."

Holly's soft kiss made him doubt his own words. "If God did not care, He wouldn't have sent *me* to heal your heart."

Douglas groaned and ripped out of his clothing faster than he had in his entire long life. His mouth was instantly on hers, stealing her breath, demanding her response. She did not disappoint him.

Her tiny hands flew all over his body, urging him closer. She opened her legs and welcomed him with her slick heat, already wet without his touching her. "Do you know what you do to me?" he asked, barely aware that he'd spoken his thoughts aloud.

"If it's what you do to me, then I have a good idea."

He rubbed her nipple to a fine point before lowering his head to feast. Her soft mewls made his cock even harder, but

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he willed himself to go slow. Douglas wanted to savor this moment of rapture with her. It would be one of the few he'd ever get.

Suddenly, a sharp pain ripped through his head, and he brought his gaze up to Holly's. Her eyes barely focused on him as her entire body shuddered.

"Douglas!" she exclaimed, holding onto him with an iron grip. Her head throbbed; he could feel it through their bond.

Bringing himself flush with her body, he held her face in his hands and kissed her gently. Along with his chaste kiss, he sent her calming peace, and she gulped in deep breaths of air. Just as it had in times past, his power only served to make her tumor a little larger, and he cursed himself. The one thing that soothed her was also killing her, albeit indirectly.

"I'm so scared," she breathed, wrapping both arms and legs around him. He held her tight, entering her slowly.

"I am with you, Holly," he said. "I will not leave you."

"No, *I'll* leave *you*."

"Shh, my pet," he whispered, caressing the skin of her thighs. "Let me take care of you."

Douglas shivered with pleasure once he was fully seated within her depths. It was as if he'd come home. She fit him perfectly, complimenting him in every way. He wanted to show her Italy, Spain, France ... the world. He wanted to share the rest of his life—his eternal life—with her. Holly rose to meet his every stroke. She tilted his head up, and he gazed into her eyes.

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"I love you," she whispered. "Dear God, I love you, Douglas. I know it's insanity. I know it's..."

Whatever she was going to say was broken off by his torrid kiss. Again and again his tongue plunged, mimicking their frantic lovemaking. Holly groaned as her pleasure released moments later, and he wasn't too far behind. Her splendid body wrapped around him, welcoming him, wanting him ... loving him. Christ, he loved her as well.

"Holly, sweetheart," he breathed hotly into her ear, "I love you, too. Never doubt it."

She hid her face into his shoulder and breathed deeply. "I want to curl up inside you. I never want to let you go."

"Then don't."

He rolled off her only to hold her close. Within moments, he'd pulled on the blankets to cover them. It was early yet, barely twilight as the sun had trekked across the sky. Holly had slept all day, but she seemed content to lay with him. It wasn't until she began placing feather-soft kisses along his chest that Douglas finally understood the depth of his love for her.

Holly was his. She'd given herself to him fully, every single part of her. Life without her would be like walling himself back up within the cellar—lifeless and cold. He tried not to think about that, but it was impossible when her touch branded his skin.

"Are you all right?" she asked when he brought her closer against him.

He nodded, but knew she could see fear behind his eyes. He was terrified of losing her, of losing the one person who

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understood him, who loved him. Was he doing the right thing by denying her immortality? Perhaps she was right after all; perhaps becoming a vampire was indeed a gift.

One thing was for certain. If he didn't turn her, he just might regret it for the rest of his long, lonely life.

* * * *

"Take a bath with me." Holly wagged her eyebrows at Douglas and chuckled at his yawn.

"You mean to say you aren't through with me?" he asked, his tone teasing.

"Not even remotely. Come on, it's a large Jacuzzi tub. I haven't been out of bed all day, and I'd love to get wet with you."

"Haven't you already gotten ... ow!" Douglas rubbed his shoulder in mock indignation. "That hurt."

Holly pulled the blanket back and said, "Wuss."

"What is a *wuss*?" His face twisted with confusion, and Holly laughed out loud. For long moments, she couldn't catch her breath, and she had to wipe tears of mirth from her eyes.

"Out of bed with you," she finally said, pushing on his shoulders, ignoring his question. He obeyed, albeit begrudgingly.

Douglas bounded off the mattress and held out his hand. Holly was grateful. Even though he'd soothed away her pain earlier, she was still weak, and she leaned heavily on him for support. Once they were in the bathroom, she began filling the tub with warm water.

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Thankfully, she'd already unpacked her toilette from the move, and small, rose-scented votive candles framed the edge of the tub. Grabbing the pack of matches from the sink, she took her time lighting each one. Once that task was finished, she turned off the overhead light.

"Much better," she said with a grin.

"Ah, so it's romance you want?" Douglas' seductive smile made her heart flutter. He pounced on her, making her cry out in surprise, then erupt in giggles when he began nibbling on the sensitive skin where her neck and shoulder met.

"Follow me," she breathed, stepping out of his embrace and leading him into the water. He sat down first, and she nestled in front of him.

The warmth was divine. Holly hadn't realized just how cold she'd been in the bed, despite the blankets that had covered her. She sank deep into the water with her back against his chest. His strong, masculine legs wrapped around her, and she couldn't imagine Heaven being much better.

"Mmm," Douglas moaned in her ear, reaching around her to fondle her breasts. "I couldn't agree more, my love."

Holly's breath caught. He'd somehow known what she was thinking. But not only that, he'd called her his "love". She couldn't help the goofy grin that spread upon her face.

Leaning her head back, she waited until he lowered his mouth to hers, then kissed him thoroughly.

I love you. She sent him her thoughts without breaking the kiss, and threaded one wet hand through his hair, leaving behind a trail of water droplets. He'd heard her. He had to have as his kiss turned more urgent. His hands disappeared

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from her breasts only to stroke her clit, opening her folds for his plundering fingers.

Holly gasped, feeling his erection in the small of her back, knowing he was ready to make love to her once again. The tub was just big enough for the both of them, and she rejoiced at that fact, wondering if she could manage turning to face him.

"Wanna know what this Jacuzzi does?" she asked, caressing his face. Douglas arched a brow and simply nodded. Holly reached for the knob that would turn on the bubbles, and once they churned the water, Douglas' eyes widened.

"This is—"

"Amazing?" Holly finished for him.

"Strange," he said, chuckling.

The water splashed as she sat up, pulling his legs together so she could turn and straddle his thighs.

"What are you doing?" he asked, the fire of passion clearly evident in his eyes.

"Making love to you, my good vampire."

His smile turned wicked. "Then by all means, continue."

Holly kissed him, trying her best to make sure every one of her emotions were evident in her embrace—happiness, passion. Love.

It was a long time indeed before Douglas came up for air, clutching her hips, guiding her closer to him. Holly lifted herself onto her knees and took him inside her, hissing through her teeth at the exquisite feeling of him filling her so completely.

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"Dear God, woman, how did I ever live without you?" he exclaimed, thrusting forward as much as he could, guiding Holly in her rhythm. She answered him with another kiss, uncaring that the water now splashed onto the bathroom floor.

Douglas groaned. He sounded desperate, as if his emotions were getting the better of him. "How will I ever live without you when you're gone?"

Holly covered his heart with her hand. "I will be here," she whispered.

"That's not enough." A few moments later, he grunted his climax, his voice magnified by the tiled walls. Holly bobbed a few more times in the water before she too came apart, shuddering against him as wave after wave of pleasure shook her body.

"It will never be enough." His warm breath tickled her ear but she embraced him nonetheless.

"It will have to be," she answered. Her grief for the life he would lead after her death pierced her heart to the quick. "I'm so sorry, Douglas."

His large frame trembled, but Holly held him fast. Neither one of them mentioned his tears.

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Chapter Thirteen

Douglas lay on top of the sheets, absently stroking Holly's arm as he watched the sky through the far window lighten with the twilight of dawn. She'd collapsed on his chest sometime after they'd returned to the bed. Despite the fact she'd slept all day, Holly was still exhausted. Her breath tickled his skin, but he wouldn't move her for the world.

After they'd made love, they'd talked for what seemed an eternity in the bath. She'd told him of her grandparents, who'd become like her own parents after her mother had skipped town. Holly couldn't even remember what her mother looked like. His heart had broken for her as she recounted when her grandmother had passed away. Her grandfather hadn't been able to care for himself after a few years and had to be taken to a home, where he was now barely clinging to life.

Age had crept up on the old man, and dementia had robbed him of his memories. The times Holly visited him, he hadn't remembered her, and that hurt Douglas almost as much as knowing she'd be dead in a few months' time.

What few friends she had were ladies from the office she'd worked for, who'd taken to visiting with her less and less after she'd been forced to quit her job.

Douglas heaved a sigh, wondering if anyone would attend Holly's funeral when the time came. He'd damn well be there, sunlight or no. She was a beautiful, passionate woman who deserved someone to remember her.

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And Douglas would remember, for the rest of time.

The sky lightened from pink to gold. The sun would rise in a few minutes, shining its morning beams throughout the room. He'd have to leave or risk burning in its rays.

Douglas kissed Holly's forehead and noticed her skin was cold and clammy. Pushing a stray hair from her face, he stared at her, taking in her pallid skin.

"Holly, are you all right?"

Nothing.

"Holly?" he said a little louder, rolling her onto the pillows. She still didn't respond. Douglas' heart leapt into his throat. He shook her shoulder, but that only served to make her head roll back and forth, her eyes remaining closed.

"Oh *God*."

Chancing a quick glance at the sky, he could barely make out the shining golden disk of the sun peeking over the horizon. He'd be damned if he'd sit back and watch another woman die in the sun's rays where he was helpless, unable to touch her.

Hooking his arm under her knees, Douglas stood with Holly in his arms and strode from the room. The cellar. He had to go to the cellar where sunlight couldn't enter. He could survive in the shadows, but he preferred not to. He wanted to go to a place where he could hold Holly for as long as he wanted.

Her body was limp against him. Damn it, he wasn't ready to let her go yet.

As he descended the steps into the cellar, he tentatively reached out to Holly with his power. He didn't want to risk

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making her tumor any larger than it already was, but he had to know how much time he had left with her.

He was shocked to find it had grown a third of its size almost overnight. "No, no, no..." he groaned, sitting against the last step of the staircase. "Please don't take her. Not now. Not yet!"

With a snuffle, he tucked her head under his chin and wondered how her tumor had grown so much. With horror, he realized he'd reached out to her more than once during their lovemaking. He wanted her to enjoy it, to feel no pain; therefore he'd compelled her to enjoy it.

"God *damn* it!" With a sob, Douglas realized he'd just taken the last months of Holly's life from her. Just like Penelope, when he'd taken too much blood, he'd now taken too much mentally.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, kissing her slack lips. "I love you, Holly. I'm so sorry!" Rocking back and forth, he wept pathetically.

After a few moments of emotion, Douglas steeled himself, setting his jaw. Taking a few deep breaths, he studied Holly's face, memorizing every line. The woman was stunning, outside and in. It wasn't long ago that he'd refused to turn her, but now, he wasn't so confident. The woman barely had any family to speak of. Her friends had merely been co-workers. In essence, *he* was the only person in her life, just as she was the only one in his. True, they'd known each other for just a few days, but a few days were all it took for Douglas to lose his common sense. He'd been mentally linked with

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her, knowing her thoughts, her feelings, and understanding her heartache to the depths of his soul.

She'd once told him his eternal life had been a gift. If he could share his life with Holly, he'd be inclined to agree with her.

Amazingly, Holly moaned and tilted her head back, barely cracking her eyes open.

"Holly?" His breath caught.

"Doug ... las..."

"Are you in pain?"

"I ... I think I'm ... dying..."

"Shh," he soothed. "Don't tax yourself."

A look of scared hopelessness came over her beautiful face. "Goodbye ... my love."

"No." Douglas' vehement denial shocked even him. "Stay with me."

"I—"

"Tell me right now, Holly. Tell me you wish to be with me always. I cannot lose you. Please tell me."

Her breaths came in short gasps and the tears in her eyes didn't go unnoticed.

Douglas licked his lips and murmured, "If you want me, I'm yours forever."

A few agonizing seconds of silence followed his words before she took a shuddering breath and nodded.

Relief such as he'd never known flowed through his veins like wildfire. He'd told her he'd never turn her, but he didn't expect to feel such overwhelming emotions, such consuming need. He couldn't live without Holly by his side.

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"This might hurt, my love, but do not be frightened. I will not leave you."

Holly merely closed her eyes and offered him her neck. Douglas' fangs grew and his mouth watered. He hadn't realized just how hungry he was until that very moment. But now, he'd take much more from her than a few sips. He was going to drain her and prompt her to drink of him before she passed beyond the veil of death.

Douglas leaned down to her soft skin and kissed her weakly-beating pulse. "I love you," he whispered before opening his mouth and piercing her with his incisors. Warm, sweet blood gushed into his mouth and he drank voraciously, savoring every little drop.

Holly would *never* die. Not if he had anything to do about it.

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Chapter Fourteen

Holly was in a fog. Her eyes refused to focus, and she smelled a strange odor, but both were effects from her tumor, she knew. Oddly enough, she wasn't as afraid of death as she had once been. Now she was staring death in the face, and it didn't seem quite so intimidating.

But Douglas was there, with his hot mouth clamped to the side of her neck, drinking deeply. Despite her body's lack of energy, her nipples hardened for him.

As if he'd felt her response, Douglas groaned and pressed harder against her. She sat in his lap, stark naked. Where had he taken her? She didn't know. Perhaps the cellar.

Douglas' mouth moved a bit, and Holly sucked in her breath at the sharp, piercing pain. However, the pain was suddenly gone as he soothed her mentally. She could hear him swallowing her blood, one drink after another. It was more than merely feeding—he was turning her. Her heart leapt in both joy and apprehension, not knowing for sure if Douglas had been right about living in a never-ending hell.

She was confident, though, that it couldn't possibly be as horrific as he'd made it out to be. She'd be with him, after all. He'd never had anyone to lean on through the years past, and in that respect, they'd become each other's balm in the years to come.

A coldness entered her heart, and her arms and legs slowly became numb. Her eyelids suddenly weighed two tons each. Holding them open became a Herculean effort. She

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would have shivered, but that would have required the strength to move. Her low moan came out more like a sigh. The black void of unconsciousness hovered somewhere close, drawing nearer with every gulp Douglas took. Holly's breathing shallowed, and her heart slowed. It wouldn't be long before death claimed her.

Douglas finally lifted his head, but she barely felt him do so. Within a few seconds, he'd brought her head to his own neck. He spread her lips with his fingers, tracing a warm liquid onto her gums.

"You must drink, Holly," he whispered. "Drink of me."

He opened her mouth and held her to him, forcing her latch onto him the same way he had done to her. Wading through the fog in her brain, she finally understood what he wished her to do.

An unfamiliar hunger growled in her belly at her first taste of blood, and she tentatively licked the wound he'd apparently given himself. Douglas had somehow cut his own jugular, and the warm liquid spilled down his neck.

Holly was so cold, so hungry, so desperate to become like him that she placed her mouth fully over the gash in his skin and suckled. His blood, mixed with hers, was not as disgusting as she'd once thought it would be. Instead, it pooled in her belly, giving her warmth, strength, and a renewed hope of her life to come.

She had to suck a bit to make the blood flow faster, as her hunger became primal, something that needed to be quenched, lest she scream in madness. Unbelievably, her pussy ached with an unfulfilled desire for sex. With each

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passing moment, she throbbed more and more, wanting relief, yet unwilling to release his neck and forfeit the thick, delicious ambrosia of his blood.

Somehow, he knew what she both wanted and needed from him. He helped her straddle him while keeping her mouth steadily on his neck. His hand tangled in her hair to keep her against him while his other spread her folds with his fingers.

Holly came at that one touch, her body arching into his, aching, asking for more. He did not stop his erotic caress, but plunged into her with two fingers, in and out, harder and faster. She ground her clit into the palm of his hand, straining and bucking for release. Holly screamed when it came, but still did not let go of his neck to do so.

The blood oozed down her throat, and she couldn't get enough. Even the orgasms he'd just given her were not enough to satisfy.

I want your cock.

She sent her thoughts to Douglas without even thinking about it first. There was no doubt in her mind he'd heard her. Opening her wide, he seated her onto his erection, impaling her with every sharp thrust. Skin on skin slapped within the stillness of the room, but Holly was far beyond caring. She had to release. *She had to.* A thousand times if necessary. Douglas held her hips, making sure she bounced violently on top of him.

When she came, she threw back her head and screamed at the top of her lungs, grinding against him—but her pleasure didn't subside. The more she pounded, the more she came,

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swift and unyielding. Douglas took full advantage of her breasts she'd thrust in her face and suckled them hard, as if he meant to swallow them whole. Holly's desire rippled through her like water, bombarding her again and again with each new sensation.

Flashes of white light exploded behind her eyelids, and her heart seemed to burst within her. She couldn't even draw a breath, her orgasms were so great. As if she hadn't come enough, Douglas pressed his thumb against her clit, and it started all over again, the endless pursuit of the pleasure that seemed to rip her to pieces.

She vaguely heard Douglas crying out right along with her, but he continued to thrust inside her, pressing on her G-spot, driving her wild. Holly leaned in close and bit the other side of his neck, still undulating against him like a wild animal, amazed at her own primitive responses to her body's sexual gratification. She'd never fucked anyone so hard in her entire life.

One last time, she came powerfully, tasting for herself the sweet desire in Douglas' blood. It was glorious. He held her fast against him, stopping her mating no matter how hard she strained against him.

"More," she panted.

"No." Douglas' curt response brought her to her senses as she gazed into his eyes. They were almost completely dilated, with his pupils impossibly large. His teeth were still elongated, and it excited her beyond reason. "No," he said again.

Holly tried to break free of his grip, but it was pointless. They were both covered in a sheen of sweat, and once she

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glanced around, she recognized the dark cellar, and the steps where she had just banged Douglas' brains out.

"You will hurt yourself if I let you continue," he said, licking his sharp teeth as they began to recede. "A vampire's sexual energy is a powerful force, and if you don't learn to control it, you will succumb to its madness. You must know when to stop."

Holly collapsed against him, breathing in his masculine scent. Her body shuddered. "I want more."

"I know you do, my pet. But now, you must rest. You are not fully turned. The process takes many hours to complete. When you awaken, you will hunger and I will feed you. Along with your hunger, you will wish to mate again, and I will oblige, but not a moment before then."

Holly groaned with disappointment, but somewhere within her befuddled brain, she understood the words he spoke. He hadn't had a mentor when he'd been turned. He'd probably learned all of this on his own. She was inclined to listen to him.

"Douglas?"

"Yes?" he answered, stroking her damp hair.

"*Thank you* for saving me."

A long silence followed her words before he spoke again.

"You are more than welcome, Holly *McCarthy*."

She raised a brow at the name he'd called her. "McCarthy" was *his* last name, not hers, but he knew that. She supposed now that he'd turned her, he'd claimed her in a way. She didn't mind wearing his name one bit.

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Lying her head on his shoulder, she collapsed in his embrace, content to let sleep overtake her once more. But before she drifted off, she smiled. His cock was still deeply rooted inside her.

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Chapter Fifteen

Holly awoke to the cool kiss of a breeze and realized she lay on a patch of soft, fragrant grass. The sky was dark, and stars twinkled down upon her. How long had she slept? And where was Douglas?

"I'm here, my love."

His voice washed over her like a caress, and every inch of Holly's skin pebbled. She was still naked, and she groaned as Douglas began crawling over her. Once his body was above hers, he lowered himself, warming her skin.

"How do you feel?" he asked, stroking the sides of her face with his thumbs.

Holly thought for a moment. She could hear everything, from the rustling of trees in the gentle wind, to the sound of his heartbeat. Her skin seemed extremely sensitive, as if she were feeling everything again for the first time. A deep, gnawing hunger growled within her, but Holly couldn't understand if it was for blood—or for sex. She raised her hips to him involuntarily.

"I hunger."

Douglas smiled, and her heart leapt. "I have gorged myself on a few creatures living on our land, pet. Your transformation is now complete. You may feed off me at your leisure."

Holly's mouth watered as she stared at his neck, pulsating with every beat of his heart. She heard his blood rushing through his veins, and her teeth itched. Running her tongue

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along them, she found a pair of sharp incisors, not too unlike Douglas' own.

"I am a vampire." Her words sounded silly to her own ears, but Douglas didn't taunt her.

"You are indeed. Welcome to my world."

"I will not die?"

He shook his head. "You will not die."

Tears burned her eyes as she cried out and embraced him, holding him close by burying her hands in his thick, dark curls. As if he'd heard her thoughts, he whispered, "I will never leave you, Holly. Never."

Happiness such as she'd never known washed over her, and without thinking, Holly bit the side of his neck and suckled with fervor. His blood tasted amazing, a sweet combination of desire and ... love. She had no idea how she could taste his love, but she did nonetheless, thick, warm and decadent.

Just as before, her hunger for food was fueled by her hunger for sex, and her gentleman vampire knew it. Spreading her legs wide, he thrust forcefully into her, giving her every last piece of himself. His thoughts revealed themselves to her in a way they never had before. He was hers and hers alone; she knew that beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Holly couldn't help but wonder about the "tomb" card she'd received not too long ago, as well as the flowers. Had someone known just how much she'd needed this man? Or how much Douglas had needed her? She didn't know, and she didn't care. She only knew she was in love, with a most

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wonderful man, who would take care of her throughout eternity—no question.

Long after her lust for sex and sustenance had subsided, Holly snuggled close to Douglas on the grass and studied the lines of his face. He gazed back in silence, as if unwilling to break the magic between them.

"This is a gift," Holly breathed. "Our new life. Together."

He nodded, his slow grin raising the hair on her arms. She'd never get tired of gazing at him and taking in his beauty. "You have given me back my life," he said.

"*You* saved me from death."

"It seems we both have much to be thankful for."

Holly smiled, caressing his handsome face. "And much to look forward too."

"Indeed, my love," he said, rolling on top of her. "That we do." Lowering his head, Douglas kissed her slowly and thoroughly. Holly may have given up the sun until she was old enough to endure it, but what she'd gained in return was much, much brighter.

An eternal future with the man she adored.

The End

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Author Bio

Rebecca Goings has been an author for most of her life. As a child, she'd frequently write stories for her classmates' enjoyment, while also writing private poems for herself. Escaping into her imagination helped ease her lonely childhood and solidified in her mind that being an author was what she was called to do. After a few rejections, Rebecca's work was finally accepted into the electronic publishing world. She is now an established eBook author, with many novels to her name.

Rebecca lives in Hillsboro, Oregon with her handsome husband Jim, four beautiful kids, two lover cats, and one annoying, stubborn muttley.

To learn more about Ms. Goings, you can visit her website at www.rebeccagoings.com, read her blog at beckasbabble.blogspot.com, or chat with her at groups.google.com/group/themagicofromance.

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