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Even Vampires Get The Blues

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Paranormal Romances

Fire Me Up

You Slay Me

Contemporary Romances

Blow Me Down

Hard Day's Knight

The Corset Diaries

Men in Kilts

This book was written because so many very kind people sent me notes asking for another vampire book. The hero is Scottish because the ladies on my message forum got together and presented me with a tear-jerking plea for a Scottish vampire (and threw in the demand that he make an appearance in a kilt). It is to all those wonderful readers that this book is dedicated.

Many, many thanks also go to Vicki L. Ankrapp, Michelle L. Graham, and Linda Morrison for all (separately) coming up with the title of this book. I can't thank you ladies enough for all the support and warm fuzzies you send my way!

Prologue

“Hi.” A woman stood in the doorway, American if her breathy voice was anything to go by. “Are you Paen, by any chance?”

Paen looked up from a tattered manuscript, wincing slightly at the mispronunciation of his name. The woman had to be from the southern US. No one else drawled his name into two syllables. “I’m Paen, yes. Can I help?”

“Hi,” the woman said again, slipping in through the barely opened door, a big Cheshire cat smile on her face. “I’m Clarice Miller.”

Paen was on his guard the second the smile hit her lips. Whose was she? he idly wondered as she smoothed down her sexy, nearly see-through gauzy dress before starting across the room in what he assumed was meant to be a seductive slink. Daniel’s? No, Danny preferred redheads, and this woman had a mane of golden brown curls that spilled over her shoulders. Finn’s? Clarice turned her smile up a notch as she stopped before the chair opposite him. She might possibly be Finn’s, but his middle brother tended to prefer earthier women, Pagans and Wiccans. Clarice looked fresh out of an expensive salon or day spa. Which meant she had to belong to—

“Avery said you’re the laird of Castle Death?” She tilted her head slightly, so she was peering up at him through her lashes in a pose he mentally dubbed the Princess Di look. It was charming on the late princess . . . less so on the American in front of him.

Regardless of the irritating interruption, he kept his voice pleasant. “I’m the acting laird of the castle—which is named de Ath, incidentally, not Death—but my father is the true owner. He and my mother have moved to Bolivia, however, so if you have a question about the estate, I will do my best to answer it.”

The scarlet-tipped fingers of her left hand trailed along the edge of his rosewood desk as she sidled around it toward where he sat. “Your daddy’s in Bolivia? How fascinating. But you’re left here to handle everything yourself since you’re the oldest son? That must be a lot of work. Avery says your land runs for miles and miles all around the castle.”

Paen heaved a small, inaudible sigh, and mentally wrote the words gold digger next to the woman’s face. Lately, Avery had taken to bringing home women who seemed to be more attracted to the family’s home and supposed wealth than the men who lived there. “Yes, we have a bit of land. And yes, it takes some doing to manage the estate, but as I enjoy the work, it’s not really that much of a chore. Is there something in particular I can help you with? Some question you have, perhaps?” He glanced at the ancient manuscript before him, wishing nothing more than to be left in peace so he could finish translating it.

“Well now, that’s mighty kind of you, but I’m here to help you,” she answered, scooting aside the manuscript so she could ease herself onto the desk. Her smile changed into one of blatant invitation.

was thinking I might give you a hand”—she paused as her eyes flickered briefly to his crotch—“with whatever you might need. I’m told that I’m very good at what I do.”

Paen sat back as she crossed her legs. He gave her full marks for the casual way her dress seemed to slide back on her thighs as if by accident. Did she know what he and his brothers really were? Or was she just looking for a fling with a bona fide Scotsman, as he’d heard female American tourists were wont to do? “What exactly did you think to turn your hand to?”

“Oh . . . this and that,” she answered, her little pink tongue running quickly across her bottom lip. Paen watched her attempts at seduction with mild amusement. “Anything you like, really. I’m open to all suggestions.”

She dropped one shoulder and leaned forward, allowing him an unobstructed view of two plump breasts.

Being a man, he felt obliged to admire them for a moment. That done, he gave Clarice a tight, dismissive smile. “Indeed. I’m afraid that I already employ a steward, and she’s quite competent, if a bit on the trying side sometimes. Although I appreciate your offer, there really isn’t much that I need help with.”

She licked her lips again, more slowly this time. “I bet I could think of something.”

Paen looked down in surprise. Clarice, evidently emboldened by his brief admiration of her breasts, uncrossed her legs, kicking off a sandal and sliding her bare foot along the inside of his thigh until it rested on his crotch. “You wouldn’t by any chance be indicating that you’d like to have sex with me?”

“Why, sugar, I thought you’d never ask,” she purred, caressing him with her toes.

Enough was enough. Lord knew he was no stranger to casual sex—quite the contrary, in fact—but he had work to do, and it didn’t involve banging a lusty American. He carefully pried her foot off his groin and pushed it away. Before she could protest, he stood and marched over to the door, holding it open for her. “Thank you for the offer, but there are two reasons why I am unable to take you up on it.”

“Two reasons?” she asked, not moving from his desk. Her brows pulled together as she made a little pout at him. “What two reasons?”

Paen sighed again. He was used to women fawning over his three brothers, but seldom did one ever cast her eyes on him. Normally he was the pursuer. He always supposed women sensed something of his tormented, soulless nature, and left him alone because of that.

“One, I don’t screw my brothers’ women.” He walked back, stuffed her sandal on her foot, and gently pushed her off the top, returning to the open door. Rude, yes, but he didn’t have the time or inclination to play with this woman. “And two, you have no idea who I really am. It would be best if you left now.”

“Oh, I know who you are,” Clarice said, her voice thick as she undulated toward him. Rather than feeling any attraction toward her, her blatant attempts at seduction left him cold. Perhaps if she had truly been attracted to *him* rather than what he represented, he might have been interested, but he was not so deluded as to imagine she cared for anything other than herself. “Or more to the point, I know *what you are*.”

Paen stood silent as she leaned into him, her breasts rubbing against his chest. She gave him a knowing smile, and then tipped her head back and to the side, baring her neck. “Avery told me all about you. Go ahead, sugar. You know you want to.”

The hunger rose as the scent of a warm, willing woman curled around him. His mind warred with the need—why shouldn’t he take what he wanted from her? She was offering it, after all. Once Avery knew she had tried to seduce him, he would want nothing more to do with her, so where was the harm

in taking what was being offered?

Deep within him, the hunger growled and demanded satisfaction. She leaned closer into him, her neck a few inches away from his mouth. He swallowed hard, trying not to give in to the hunger, reminding himself that he was a civilized man, not a beast to jump on every morsel of food. He inhaled her scent, finding nothing unpleasant other than the chemical odor of a strong perfume. He preferred a woman's natural scent to anything that came out of a bottle, but he wasn't in a position to complain. His tongue ran over the points of his sharp canines, the hunger building until it was a dull roar in his ears, throbbing to the beat of his heart. The urge to bite, the need to drink deeply was almost overwhelming. All he had to do was sink his teeth in that tender white flesh . . .

"Take it, Paen. Take me. Take me now! Make me yours forever!"

It was the triumph in her voice that stopped him from giving in to the hunger. Like a bucketful of cold water tipped over his head, distaste washed over him at her words.

"You may know what I am, but I also know what you are," he said, stepping back, his voice cold and flat.

"What?" she asked, her eyes confused for a moment. "What do you mean? You aren't going to bite me? You aren't going to Dracula me and drink my blood? You aren't going to make me your eternal bride?"

"No," he answered, more amused than annoyed. "I'm not going to drink your blood, or marry you. My name is Paen Alasdair Scott, not Dracula, and I'm not a prince of the night, or a count, or even a dashing, romantic figure. I'm a simple Scot with an interest in the history and travels of Marco Polo, and a weakness for computer games."

"But . . . you're a vampire!" she protested. "You can't refuse me!"

"We prefer the names Moravian or Dark One. They are less dramatic, and result in fewer people arriving at the front door with torches and wooden stakes. As for refusing you . . ." He gestured toward the open door. "Thank you again, but I'm a busy man. If you wouldn't mind leaving now?"

"Well, I have nevah!" The confusion in Clarice's grey eyes changed to haughty anger as the twang cadence of her accent deepened. "There's just somethin' wrong with you, you know that?"

"Yes, I'm aware of it," he answered, still amused despite the irritating aspect of the interruption. "I'm more or less damned by an ancient curse. My parents hadn't completed the seven steps to Joinin when I was born, so unlike my younger brothers, I have no soul."

"But . . . your brother said that only a woman can save you. He said that you need a woman to become whole again."

"Clearly it's time for me to have yet another talk with Avery," Paen said, sighing a little. "He means well, but I've told him before—I have no intention of accepting a Beloved even if I did find her."

"Beloved?"

"Only a Beloved can redeem a Dark One's soul. But I don't need a woman to live a happy life," he told her, gently pushing her out the door. "I'm quite content on my own. I have my research, and family—although they can be annoying as hell sometimes—and given my brothers' randy natures, all the beautiful women I can look at. I even had a girlfriend a few years ago, although she left me for a software genius. So as you can see, I may be damned, but I'm just fine with it. Thanks again for the offer. See you later."

"But . . . you can't . . . you need to drink blood—"

Paen quietly closed the door on Clarice's outraged protests, turning the lock after a moment's thought. No sense in giving her the chance to pop back in and throw herself at him again.

“Alone at last,” he said to himself as he turned back toward his desk.

“Not exactly.”

Across the room, a shadow moved against a wall, separating itself to form into a man. Paen watched with interest, cautious but not overly concerned about the sudden appearance of what he believed was a demon in his study. “Today seems to be my day for entertaining guests. I assume this isn’t just a social call?”

The man-shaped demon chuckled. Paen was momentarily taken aback by such an act—demons were notorious for their lack of sense of humor. It was a rare one who could appreciate sarcasm and irony. “I’m not going to drag you down to Abaddon, if that’s what you are wondering. So I suppose in a sense, this could be construed as a social call. I’m Caspar Green.”

Paen looked at the hand the demon offered. It didn’t look like it concealed any spring-loaded razor blades, or deadly acid pumps, or even some horrible contagion that would cause various body parts to wart up and subsequently fall off, but you never really knew with demons. “Erm . . . you’ll forgive me for being rude, but I don’t recall ever hearing about a demon who assumed a mortal name.”

Caspar smiled. Paen glanced quickly toward a delicate glass-fronted secretary that held his more valuable manuscripts. Generally when demons smiled, things broke. “That would be because I’m not a demon. I am, in fact, an alastor.”

“Alastor?” The name tickled in the back of his mind.

“Yes.” Caspar tipped his head to the side. “I find myself somewhat offended that you thought I was a common demon. I assumed you were a man of some discernment.”

“Forgive me,” Paen said with a wry twist to his lips. “I am a bit of the stereotypically cloistered scholar. I haven’t had time to mingle much with citizens of the Otherworld, but correct me if I’m wrong—isn’t alastor another name for a demon?”

“I am of the demonic persuasion, yes, but not truly a demon. Alastors are not bound to demon lords—they can, however, be employed. A better name would be nemesis; it is what most alastors are commonly called. As for my name—I was mortal at one time. It is my preference to use a name that puts humans at ease.”

“I’m not human,” Paen pointed out, finally shaking the alastor’s hand. He might not be able to tell a demon from an alastor, but he wasn’t a fool. He’d heard enough stories of how tricky those beings born in the service of dark powers could be.

“No, you’re not, although some would say you’re close enough to count as human.” Caspar smiled again and gestured toward a chair. “May I?”

“Certainly. Er . . . I don’t often have denizens of Abaddon visiting. What is the proper protocol? Should I offer you a whisky, blood of a virgin . . . or would you prefer a small rodent?”

“Whisky will do just fine,” Caspar answered, seating himself in the chair opposite Paen’s desk. “Although the blood of a virgin . . . ?”

Paen poured some whisky into a small lead-crystal glass and gave it to the man. “I’m afraid we’re fresh out.”

“Ah. As I feared. The market price on virgin’s blood has been outrageous of late. Ever since the virgins formed a union, they have been unreasonable in their demands. Slainte.” Caspar sipped at his whisky. “Excellent. How old is it?”

“My father set it down the year I was born,” Paen answered, leaning a hip against his desk, his arm crossed over his chest. “What exactly is it you want?”

Caspar took another sip. “Extremely smooth for a whisky that’s . . . hmm. I judge it to be approximately three hundred years old?”

“Two hundred and forty-six.”

“Ah. Delightful, nonetheless.”

Paen frowned. His curiosity was roused by the being who sat before him, drinking his father’s whisky, but not so much that he was willing to spend all afternoon in polite chitchat with him.

“The reason I am here involves your father, actually. You have no doubt heard how he met your mother?”

“Yes,” Paen said, growing uneasy. Caspar Green might not be a demon, but nothing good could come of someone from the Otherworld being concerned with his father. “They met at the conclusion of what is now referred to as the French and Indian War. My mother was French. My father fought on the side of the English. His head was almost completely severed during one battle, and she found him and tended to him despite her family’s objections. They fell in love. What do my parents have to do with you?”

“A great deal, actually. Or rather, their meeting does. The story you’ve been told isn’t quite accurate—your father *was* wounded, and your mother *did* nurse him back to health, but he himself inflicted the injury.”

Paen thinned his lips. He didn’t believe anything so ridiculous. “Why on earth would he do such a foolish thing?”

“Because I told him his Beloved was nearby.”

“*You* told him?” Paen stared at the man in outright disbelief.

Caspar smiled—on the surface a pleasant smile, but Paen was aware of the aura of power that surrounded the alastor. “Yes. Your father engaged the demon lord Oriens to find his Beloved. I was charged with locating her, which I did. I informed your father of her situation, and counseled that a drastic action would be needed to get within her circle of friends. He took the action, and the rest, as they say, is history. Literally, in this case, but that’s one of the perks of being immortal.”

“Even assuming that’s true—and it sounds highly unlikely to me—what does that have to do with my father *now*?”

Caspar carefully set the glass onto the desk, clasping his hands over his knee, an affectation that for some reason annoyed Paen. “There is a little matter of the debt your father incurred by purchasing Oriens’s help.”

Paen’s jaw tightened. Yet another gold digger, albeit a demonic one. He went around to the other side of the desk, pulling out the estate checkbook. “How much?”

“You misunderstand me, Paen. The debt your father owes Oriens is not one that can be repaid by means of mortal money.”

“Oh?” Paen closed the checkbook, watching the man suspiciously. “What is it he owes for this debt then?”

“A simple thing, really. A small statue of a monkey. You may be familiar with it? I understand it is a family heirloom—the Jilin God is its most common name.”

Paen frowned as he dug through his memories. “A statue of a monkey? No, I’ve never heard of it, let alone being familiar with it.”

Caspar pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. “Here is a sketch of it. It’s about six inches high, black, made of ebony. Its origins are said to be Chinese, about six hundred years old.”

“Ming dynasty,” Paen said absently, still poking around in his memories. As far as he could remember, his father never mentioned anything about a monkey statue as a family heirloom. He himself knew every square inch of the castle, and he’d never seen such a statue.

“Yes. How perspicacious of you to know that. Are you familiar with the era?”

“Only in a collateral sense. I am doing some research on a knight in the service of Marco Polo. He was in China during the Ming dynasty. What proof do I have that any of what you’re telling me is true?”

Caspar smiled yet again. Paen was starting to get tired of that knowing smile. He felt decidedly out of his depths with the man, and it wasn’t a feeling he relished. “I thought you might ask for some proof. I have here”—Caspar pulled out a small leather case, the size to hold a passport—“a document signed by your father, and bearing his seal.”

Paen took the document over to where a magnifying light sat on his worktable. He read the document quickly. It simply stated that one Alec Munroe McGregor Scott, of Darmish, Scotland, did swear to provide the lord Oriens or his due representative with the statue known as the Jilin God in exchange for services rendered him. Paen, no stranger to antique parchment, and certainly familiar enough with it to detect modern paper doctored to look old, examined the item closely with the magnifying glass. He went so far as to pull out a small pocket microscope to examine the fiber content of the document, as well as the red wax seal.

“Very well. I concede this document is real. But why has Oriens waited two hundred and forty years to collect this debt?”

“Oriens is a busy demon lord. Perhaps it slipped his mind, or perhaps he had no need for the statue until now. Regardless of the why, the debt is now being called due, and it must be paid.”

“I have no idea what or where this Jilin God statue is. If Oriens waited this long, he can wait another three months until my parents return from the depths of the Bolivian forests to their home in La Paz.”

Caspar spread his hands. “Alas, it is not so easy. The debt must be repaid within one lunar cycle upon being called due, or else Oriens is entitled to claim the collateral used to secure his services.”

Paen could have sworn his blood turned to ice. The situation was quickly going from bad to worse. “What collateral?”

“There is really only one thing a demon lord wants—a soul.”

“My father promised his soul in order to have you locate his Beloved?”

“No, his soul was held in trust for another, so he could not use it,” Caspar answered, shaking his head. “He tried to, but Oriens wouldn’t accept that as collateral.”

Little glaciers rose in Paen’s heart. “Then whose soul did he use?”

Caspar smiled, just as Paen knew he would. “Why, that of his Beloved, naturally. Although strictly speaking he wasn’t in possession of her soul, the fact that she was his Beloved, and would by her very nature agree to sacrifice herself on his behalf, served as a guarantee. I’m afraid that means if you do not provide me with the Jilin God in the next five days, your mother’s soul is forfeit. Unfair to her, true, but that is the nature of these arrangements.”

“*Five days?*” Paen asked, his mind awl. He would die before he let a demon lord lay one hell-spawned finger on his mother, let alone her beautiful, pure soul. “What happened to a lunar cycle?”

“I’m afraid that it took me some time to track down your whereabouts,” Caspar said with faux apology.

“That’s ridiculous! Right, there are four of us. We’ll just divide up the work . . .”

“Oh, no, I’m afraid that’s not possible.” Caspar gave him a sad little smile. “Didn’t I tell you? This debt is yours alone to fulfill. You are your father’s son, you see.”

Paen frowned. “Why mine? My brothers are just as much the sons of my father as I am.”

“Yes, but you are the eldest. According to the agreement your father signed”—he gestured toward the note—“the debt must be repayed by the debtor himself, or the nearest member of his blood. That would be you, the oldest son.”

“That is completely outrageous. My brothers—”

“~~are not eligible to locate the missing statue. If they do, the debt will be considered forfeit, and the collateral will be collected.~~” Caspar plucked the promissory note from Paen’s hands and tucked it away in the leather case. “All that remains is five days. If you do not have the statue in that time . . . well. We won’t dwell on the unpleasant.”

“Get out,” Paen said, gritting his teeth against the pain that threatened to swamp him at the thought of what the alastor was saying.

“I understand that you are upset, but—”

“Get the hell out of my house! Now!” Paen roared, starting toward the unwelcome visitor.

“I will be in touch about your progress with the statue,” Caspar said hurriedly, backing toward the wall as Paen prepared to grab him and throw him out of the room. Hell, he wanted to throw him out of the country . . . off the planet, if he could manage it. “Until then, farewell!”

Paen snarled several obscenities and medieval oaths as the man’s form shimmered, then disappeared. He continued to swear under his breath over the next half hour as he placed four international phone calls and authorized three messengers to be sent out into the depths of the Bolivian forests in an attempt to locate his parents.

“I don’t suppose you have any idea where they are, or where this monkey god statue is?” he asked his brothers that evening.

“Not a clue on either count,” Avery said as he slipped on a leather jacket. “No one tells me anything. The whole thing sounds a bit dicey to me, to be honest. We can’t help you search for this statue because you’re the eldest? What’s up with that?”

“Some archaic medieval law still around a few hundred years ago, no doubt,” Paen grumbled. “There were all sorts of agreements then that operated under obsolete laws.”

“Well, I hate to be callous, but since we can’t help you search for the statue, I guess I’ll go out.”

“You’ll do nothing of the kind,” Paen said, stalking past his brother. “You and Dan will go to the Lachmanol Abbey in the Outer Hebrides, and beg the abbot for access to his very rare collection of sixteenth-century manuscripts. There you will scour the collection for references to this damned statue.”

“Me? Why me?” Paen’s second-youngest brother looked up from the evening paper. “Why can’t you go? And I thought this demon said none of us could look for the statue.”

“You’re not going to be looking for the statue itself. I want to know more about it—where it came from, what its history is, that sort of thing. You’re the only one besides me who knows Latin. Avery can use his charm to get access to the manuscripts, and you can translate them.”

“Sounds like a bloody bore, but I’ll do it for Mum.” Avery admired himself in the mirror again, then frowned at Paen. “You’re not going to brood the whole time we’re gone, are you? Because if you are, we won’t bring back any souvenir girls for you.”

“We’re going to an abbey, you idiot,” Daniel said, smacking his brother on the arm as he stretched and grabbed his coat.

“Bet you I could find some.”

Paen only just kept himself from rolling his eyes. “I’m not brooding. I never brood.”

His brothers, all three of the rotters, laughed.

“Paen, you’re the world’s champion brooder,” Daniel said, stretching again and squinting at the clock.

“Aye, and a broodaholic, to boot. I’m thinking we need to do an intervention, or maybe get you into one of those twelve-step programs. ‘Hi, my name is Paen, and I’m broody.’ Maybe that’ll help you

lighten up a bit.” Finn grinned at his brother.

Paen stifled the urge to sock him in the arm. Finn was just as tall as he was, and although he had a good twenty pounds on his brother, it had been a near thing the last time he wrestled Finn—or any of them, for that matter.

Instead, Paen gave them all a narrow-eyed look, wondering for the umpteenth time how his fair-haired mother and dark-haired father could produce four sons who differed so greatly in appearance. He took after his father in looks, with black hair that insisted on curling despite his efforts to make it lie flat, and grey eyes. Avery was every bit his blond-haired, blue-eyed mother’s son, while Finn and Daniel were somewhere in between. “There is a vast difference between being concerned for Mum’s soul and brooding. What you see here is concern, with just a dash of worry thrown in to keep from going stale. There’s not a single shred of brood on me.”

“Here it comes,” Avery told Finn.

The latter nodded. “The bit about us lot being so lucky because we have our souls, and him being damned and all. Same old, same old.”

“Well, I *am* damned! You don’t have the slightest concept what it is to be in my position,” Paen argued. “You have no idea the torment, the pain—”

“ ‘—the agony of living each day without any hope, without love shared with a soulmate, without any chance at redemption,’ ” his brothers all chanted together.

Paen growled. He loved his brothers, but there were times when he would pay good money to be an only child.

“And yet you claim you’re perfectly happy that way. We’ve told you that we’d move heaven and earth to help you find your Beloved,” Avery said. “Just say the word, and we’ll scour the length and breadth of Scotland for her. The whole of Britain, even!”

“I met a woman yesterday you might like,” Daniel said thoughtfully. “I could ring her up before we leave—”

“No!” Paen said quickly, a little chill running through him. “I’ve had enough of Avery all but pimping for me—I’ve no need for any more of you bringing home women you just know will turn out to be my Beloved. I don’t need a woman to save me. I’m perfectly happy, in a completely non-brooding way, just as I am, and besides, I’m well on the way to locating the *Simia Gestor Coda*.”

“Oh, not that faery story again,” Daniel said, rolling his eyes.

“It’s not a faery story.”

“I know, I know,” Daniel said, holding up his hands. “This book you’re always going on about supposedly contains the details about the origins of Dark Ones, including a way to unmake the curse binding you guys.”

“Exactly. I just have to find it, and I will be able to lift the curse myself. Completely without the assistance of any interfering woman, thank you.”

“Paen, you’ve looked for the last twenty-five years for that manuscript—I think it’s time you admit it doesn’t exist,” Avery said. The others nodded. “I don’t know why you’re so bent on fighting the fact that you need a woman to save you. Women are nice! They are smooth, and they smell good, and god knows they do things to my body that make my eyes cross with bliss. You need to get off this high horse of ‘I’ll save myself’ and get with the program, brother. Find your Beloved, let her save you, and make lots of little Paens.”

Paen glared at his irresponsible brother. “Just because I can keep my dick in my pants and you can—”

“Oh, I can, it’s just a lot more fun out and about,” Avery answered, pausing to punch Finn in the

shoulder until keys to a car were handed over. “Ta, mate. We’re off to this abbey of fun. I’ll call and let you know how many women I manage to find there, too.”

“Between the fast cars and faster women, you’re going to kill yourself one of these days,” Paen warned.

“One of the perks of being immortal, brother, is the ability to do whatever you want whenever you want, and to hell with the consequences. You should try it sometime.”

A muscle in Paen’s jaw twitched. “One of us has to have some responsibility and keep things together while Mum and Dad are off.”

Avery rolled his eyes and left the sitting room. Daniel grabbed his jacket and followed after his brother, saying, “I’m with Av on this, Paen. You need to loosen up a bit, and let go of some of that responsibility you’re always harping on. I’ve got my mobile phone. I’ll give you a ring if we find anything.”

“Well?” Paen turned to his remaining brother. “Don’t tell me you’re going to pass up an opportunity to get in a few digs about how I need to ignore the castle, the family, and Mum’s eternal happiness and instead live like there’s no tomorrow.”

Finn grinned. “Could I pass up such a wonderful chance? All that repressed sexuality—what you really need is to fall in love with some delicious bird, fuck your brains out, let her save you, and try out happy instead of gloomy.”

“Do you know how tiring it gets repeating that I don’t need a Beloved? Women I can, and do, have whenever I’m struck with the desire for sex. A female doesn’t need to bind herself to me to satisfy my sexual desires.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but here goes—Paen, you’re missing out on a whole world of pleasure by keeping yourself at an emotional distance from women. You might as well use slags for all the involvement you have with them. I know you equate feeling affection for a woman with a Beloved, but you know, you can actually *like* a woman you sleep with without her saving you. Maybe even love her a little, if you’re determined not to find your true better half.”

“I don’t have a better half,” Paen said, fighting the desire to punch something, *anything*. “I’m who I am. I might be in eternal torment, but love, souls, and emotional commitments are all overrated. If I didn’t know that for myself, all I’d have to do is look at you lot. Always falling in love with some woman or other, then moping around when they end up stomping all over your hearts—no, thanks. If all you’re going to do is lecture me, you might as well go, too.”

“I was about to ask what you wanted me to do to help you,” Finn said with a grin.

“To find the statue?” Paen ran a hand through his hair, happy to change the subject of conversation. “You can’t.”

“Not technically, no. So what can I do to help *you* find it?”

Paen felt as if the weight of the world had descended upon his shoulders. “To be honest, I’ve no idea where to even start looking for it. I’ve never come across a mention of it in the family papers, and since Dad is completely incommunicado until someone tracks him down and forces a satellite phone into his hand, I’m at a loss as to where to begin searching. It could be in the castle, hidden somewhere. It could have been lost or stolen or sold over the years, and I’d have no way of knowing.”

“Hmm,” Finn said. “Sounds like we need some professional help.”

“What sort of professional help?” Paen asked as his brother went to the phone. “If it’s anything involving demons, it’s right out. We’re in enough trouble because of them.”

Finn dug around in his jeans pocket and pulled out a handful of miscellaneous items, extracting a blue sticky note from his keys and change. “Not a demon. I met a woman last week in Edinburgh, an

underwear model—man, she had great tits, just how I like them, big enough for my hands but not fake-looking—and she said her cousin was trained as a Diviner, and the two of them were just opening up a private detective business. I bet a Diviner could figure out where the statue is. I'll give Clare a ring and get the cousin's number."

"Might as well," Paen said glumly as he slumped down into a chair. Despite his protestations to the contrary, he wanted nothing more than to brood about the latest trial fate had dumped on him. As if things weren't bad enough already . . . "It's not like a Diviner could make things any worse."

Chapter 1

“What do you think of the sign?”

Clare set down a box of desk supplies and a bouquet of fresh cut flowers, and frowned. “Well, to be honest, Sam, I wasn’t going to say anything about it, but I don’t think the crow landing on your head this morning is a good omen. It means your life is about to go crisis central. But I’m here to help, and you know I’ll do what I can to keep you from going outright insane.”

“No . . . I meant the sign on the door.” I nodded to where a local sign painter was putting away her stencils and paints.

“Oh. Mmm.” Clare tipped her head and considered the freshly painted words on the upper half of the open office door. “EYE SCRY, SAMANTHA COSSE AND CLARE BENNET, DISCREET PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS. It’s nice, but I still think it’s a bit too strange. People are going to think we’re not normal private investigators.”

“We aren’t normal, Clare.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m as normal as they come.” She plucked a tulip from the bouquet and went to the window, using her elbow to wipe a small clean patch on the grimy glass. “Isn’t it a lovely morning?”

I glanced out the window at the grey, sodden-looking sky, and shrugged as I arranged paper in my new printer/copier/fax machine. “It’s a typical Scottish May: grey, cold, and wet.”

“When I woke up this morning,” Clare said dreamily, unconsciously striking an elegant pose that made her a star on the fashion runways, “the dew had kissed all the sweet little flowers just as if faeries had danced upon them with damp little slippers. Don’t you think that’s lovely? I thought that up all by myself.”

“Very, um . . .” Clare blinked silver-tipped lashes at me. I relented under her hopeful expression. “Very poetic. But not terribly accurate, is it?”

She blinked again, her large blue eyes clouded with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Well . . . just look at you.” I waved a hand toward her torso. “You’re the opposite of short, sturdy, dark-haired me—you’re tall, lovely, elegant, and have that silver blond hair that everyone seems to rave about, but you’re hardly in a dancing-on-the-dew-kissed-flowers sort of form, are you? You’d squash the little buggers flat were you to try it in your human form.”

She rolled her expressive eyes and bopped me on the arm with her tulip. Clare always had flowers with her—she couldn’t help it any more than my mother could. It was just part of their genetic makeup. “You’re going to start that silly business again, and I won’t listen to it, I simply won’t listen to it.”

I took her by both arms and shook her gently. “You’re a faery, Clare. It’s time you face up to that fact. You’re a faery, your real name is Glimmerharp, and you were left with my aunt and uncle because your faery parents wanted you to have a better life than running around in wet shoes,

stamping dew onto flowers. I doubt if they would have done so had they known that your idea of a better life is to parade up and down in scanty lingerie in front of strangers with cameras, but that's neither here nor there. You are a faery, and the sooner you admit that, the happier everyone around you will be."

"I am not a faery; I am an underwear model."

"You're both."

"Oh!" She plucked a piece of the smooth red tulip's flower and popped it in her mouth. "You take that back!"

"I won't," I said calmly, releasing her to hook the printer up to the laptop that sat on the scarred and battered oak desk I'd claimed as my own. "It's the truth, and you know it, even if you are in denial."

"You're a fine one to talk about denial!" she said, marching over to her desk, a trail of tulip petals gently drifting to the floor behind her. "You deny your heritage every chance you get."

I laughed. I couldn't help it—the mere thought of me being able to ignore who I was, was beyond ridiculous. "There's no way I could deny my parentage—not after growing up the only kid in my neighborhood whose mother is a bona fida poetry-spouting, pointy-eared, gonna-live-forever elf. Years of Keebler jokes made sure I knew just how different I was, and we won't even go into what a mention of *Lord of the Rings* does to me. What I've never understood is how you can accept the fact that my mother is an elf, and yet insist that there are no such things as faeries."

"I refuse to talk to you when you get in that mood," Clare said, and picked up an empty milk jug she'd brought to serve as a vase. "I won't let you ruin the excitement of the day with all that nonsense."

"Excitement?" I looked around the small office as Clare left to fill the vase with water. The painter had toddled off, leaving the faint odor of acrylic paints behind her. Through the open door I could see a dark, dingy hallway that led to a couple of flats and a shared bathroom.

"That's not quite the word that comes to mind," I said loud enough that Clare could hear me down the hall. "But never fear! A little elbow grease and some creative decorating courtesy of that thrift store you saw on the way in should do much to wipe out the years of neglect. I just wish Mila would come and get her boxes of sex toys."

Clare's muffled voice drifted into the room as I crawled under the desk to plug in the computer equipment. "You shouldn't have told her she could keep her stock here."

"I had a hard enough time persuading her to rent this office to me—ow!" I rubbed the back of my head where I cracked it on the underside of the desk. "Evidently her sex store is doing a tremendous amount of business and she needs all the storage space she can get. Besides, she knocked a hundred pounds off the rent just for us putting up with a few extra boxes."

Clare's answer was drowned out by the sound of running water. I scooted backward under the desk dragging with me the phone cord to plug in the new set of phones I'd purchased. "Regardless of the naughty toys, I don't know how exciting this job is going to be to someone who spends time in Milan and Paris and Berlin being paid thousands of pounds to stand around and pout in her panties."

"It's not nearly as exciting as you might think," Clare said, coming back into the room. "That's why I decided to go on hiatus for a year. My modeling batteries need to be recharged, and this job should do wonders for that."

"Eh . . . OK." I plugged the cord into the appropriate wall socket, and jumped violently when the phone above me rang loudly, causing me to whack my head on the desk a second time.

"Phone," Clare said helpfully.

"Oh, thank you. I might have thought it was my umbrella ringing, otherwise." I hunkered down

under the desk rubbing my abused head.

~~“I’ll get it,” Clare said, hurrying over to her desk. “Your umbrella is ringing. Honestly, Sam! Your imagination! Good morning, Eye Scry, discreet private enquiries, this is Clare. How can I help?”~~

I crawled out from under my desk, wondering as I brushed off the dusty knees of my pants who was calling us. I’d only set up the phone lines the day before, and had given the number out to just one person other than Clare. It was probably just the phone company checking to see if the line worked. I turned on my laptop and sat down at my desk while Clare made little murmurs of encouragement to whoever was on the phone.

“I see. Well, I don’t believe that will be a problem, Mr. Race. My partner has a particular talent with finding lost objects. Oh, you did?” Clare looked at me, her eyes round. “Then perhaps it would be best if you talked to her yourself. Can you hold? Thank you.”

“Lost items?” I asked. “That’s not a client, is it?”

“Yes, it is. It’s a Mr. Owen Race. He’s a medieval specialist of some sort, and he wants us to find some sort of an antique book for him. But Sam—he says that Brother Jacob recommended you to him. I thought you were kicked out of the Order of Diviners?”

“I was, but Jake said he’d keep an ear out for me for anyone who might be able to use the services of a failed Diviner. Sounds like he found someone. Hello, this is Samantha Cosse. I understand you need some help locating an object?”

Like Clare’s, the man’s voice was English, very upper-class, positively reeking of places like Eton and Cambridge and of the BBC. It made me all the more aware of my flat, accentless (to my ears) Canadian speech. “Good morning, Miss Cosse. Yes, as I told your associate, I am seeking to locate a very rare medieval manuscript that was stolen from me recently—the *Simia Gestor Coda* is its name. I understand from Brother Jacob at the Diviners’ House that you studied there for several years and have a good deal of experience in locating missing items?”

Oh dear. He wanted a Diviner, and I was anything but one. I’d have to let him know right away that I wasn’t what he thought I was. “I’ve had some luck locating missing items, yes. But if you are seeking the assistance of a true Diviner, Mr. Race, I’m afraid you may have been misled. I did study at the Diviners’ House with the Order, but I was . . . well, to put it bluntly, I was kicked out before my novitiate was completed. Although I have been trained in elementary divination, I’m afraid I am unable to conduct the more advanced rituals.”

“I see. I appreciate such frankness, and can assure you that I have no need for the services of a professional Diviner. Brother Jacob recommended you to me because you apparently have a talent for locating items that goes beyond mere divination.”

I slumped back in my chair in relief. I hadn’t anticipated Jake sending me a customer, despite his declarations that he would do all he could to help me, but now that I had bared the ugly truth in my past, I could focus on the job being offered. “I will be happy to put the full resources of my firm at your disposal,” I said. “Perhaps we can meet to discuss this further?”

“Excellent. I’m in Barcelona at the moment, but I would be happy to pay your airfare out here.”

I blinked back my surprise. “Er . . . I appreciate the offer, Mr. Race, but we are still in the process of setting up our business, and I wouldn’t be comfortable leaving all the remaining work to my partner.” I motioned to Clare and wrote *he wants me to go to Barcelona* on the notepad. Clare looked panicky. I’d had to promise her, when we thought up the idea of the investigation agency, that I would handle all of what she termed the “messy businessy stuff.”

“Sam, no,” she whispered.

“Don’t worry,” I mouthed, then said into the phone, “That’s very generous of you, but I’m afraid

it's out of the question. However—" I raised my eyebrows in question. Clare nodded quickly. "However, my partner would be available to fly to Barcelona. She would be very happy to stand in my place and discuss with you all the necessary details."

"Erm . . . no, that won't be necessary," he said, sounding disappointed. I shook my head at Clare. "I will be returning to Edinburgh at the end of the week, so we can meet then."

"I would be happy to get started on your project if you can give me the details over the phone," I said in my most professional voice, opening a text document. "Why don't you give me the specifics of the item that was stolen, and later you can fax me any insurance documents you have, as well as the police report."

Twenty minutes later I hung up the phone and hit `SAVE` on my document file.

"Well?" Clare asked, absently nibbling on a carnation. "Do we have a job?"

I smiled. "We are employed! Let fly the doves and all that."

"Hurrah! I told you this was going to be exciting! Although I'm disappointed I won't be going to Barcelona. Such a pretty city. So, we're looking for a book?"

"Yes, some sort of medieval manuscript that was stolen. Evidently Mr. Race has quite a collection and he didn't notice the theft until he had ordered an inventory of his holdings a month ago. He's going to have his housekeeper round up some information about the manuscript, but until then, we can get to work on the little info he gave me. He believes the manuscript could well have been taken by a rival collector."

"Oooh. How thrilling! It's like an art theft, only with a medieval book."

"Mmm," I said, gathering up my bag and jacket. "I'm going to go visit a couple of antique shops and see if I can't get some info on who the big collectors are in Britain."

"What would you like me to do?" Clare asked, chewing another bit of flower.

"You'd better stop eating those flowers, or you won't have anything left but a vase full of stems," I said at the door.

She shot me a look of pure outrage. "I do not eat flowers!"

I raised my eyebrows and looked at the half-eaten carnation in her hand. She glared at it for a minute as if it had magically appeared there. "You're a faery, Clare. No one else eats flowers but really hard-core vegetarians, and I've seen you wolf down a steak, so I know you're not that. If you want to do something helpful, do an Internet search for me on the"—I consulted my notes—" *Simia Gestor Coda*. With a name like that, it has to have some sort of a history. I'd like to know everything you can find out about its past. All Mr. Race told me was that it was written by a mage who was supposedly in Marco Polo's service. Oh, also, pull up a list of the major antiquities dealers for England. It wouldn't hurt to know who might be dealing in something like a rare antique manuscript."

I spent the next couple of hours visiting various antique shops in and around the Royal Mile, the most famous street in all of Edinburgh. By the time I tottered into the last shop on my list, a small, dusty shop tucked away between a bookstore and a gyro shop, I was feeling uninspired. The antique dealers were particularly loath to talk about their clients, and none of them had heard of the *Coda*.

A little bell over the door jangled as I entered the shop. Like others of its ilk, this antiquities shop was filled to the rafters with statuary, objets d'art, stuffed animals, strange old mechanical pieces, books and illuminated manuscripts, and a myriad of other items whose use and purpose were shrouded in the distant reaches of the past. I browsed through the items, glancing periodically at a man I took to be the owner as he stood with his back to me in the doorway to another room, speaking to someone I couldn't see.

"Shoot," I said to myself as I glanced at my watch. I was three hours away from the office already,

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