

A full moon illuminated the unhallowed grounds of the cemetery, bathing the tombstones in an eerie glow. A werewolf howled, its keening bark echoing through the surrounding woods. Thunder and lightning clashed and collided, exploding into comets that lit up the night. Wind whistled through the live oaks, sounding like the whispers of the spirits buried deep below in the graveyard. A hoot owl screeched, green eyes glowing in the black of night, wings flapping as it took flight.

Bolting upright from her satin-lined coffin, Maura rose from the grave, casket hinges squeaking as she pushed back the brass casket lid. Roses permeated the air. Her icy flesh shivered. Tingles of pleasure danced down her spine, goose bumps prickling her skin. She sensed his presence but couldn't see him clearly in the fog-shrouded mist. But his eyes, oh his eyes, fiery red jewels that burned bright as sorcerers flames. They were unmistakably the eyes of her beloved. Just as he'd promised when they last made love in the moonlit lagoon, he'd be hers forevermore. Tonight, he'd come for her.

Overwhelmed by both panic and passion, her loins throbbed. Oh how she quivered. The closer he came, the better to see his handsome features. Silhouetted in dark shadows, moonlight illuminated the chiseled face of a fallen angel. His powerful body pulsated with raw sexual energy. Donned in black satin, his long, flowing cape billowed in the breeze. Shaggy black hair swirled around his powerful shoulders. Taking her hand, he kissed it.

"Come with me, my darling," he commanded, the silky smoothness of his hushed whisper sharpened by a steely edge of authority. "We have work to do."

Panic seized her, invisible fingers of fear coiling around her throat, every bit as throttling as the garrote that had strangled her. She traced the jagged scar on her long slender neck, fingers trembling. Fear clawed at her gut. In a heartbeat, she remembered being drained of energy, of strength, of life. The memory of her death left her shattered, unable to think.

Cool wind rippled through her long copper hair, blowing fiery tresses all askew. The wind stirred the scent of roses, rain and freshly-dug earth. It also stirred the scent of his skin. A musky blend of dark earth with a hint of spice. It was both subtle and overwhelming and simultaneously intoxicating. Yet she did nothing, said nothing as she sat mute in the coffin, waiting for him to make the next move. Fury rippled around him, almost tangible in its silence. She was expecting the move, anticipation gnawing at her nerve endings. Still, she flinched, gasping aloud when he abruptly yanked her from the casket in one smooth move, bringing her

close to his body. The electricity that sizzled between them was as highly charged as the thunder and lightning that continued to crash and collide through the blood-red sky. The words he whispered made her shudder.

“You know what you must do, Maura.”

“I can’t,” she whispered. “I’m afraid.”

“Beautiful, beautiful Maura,” he caressed her cheek. “So lovely, so naïve, the reason your husband took advantage of you in life, the reason he murdered you one year ago this night. He killed you to get his greedy hands on your money, your inheritance, your birthright. While you sleep in your satin-lined casket in the deep dark earth, he’s living the life of luxury in your exquisite mansion, your ancestral home. Are you going to let him get away with it?”

Breathless and terrified of the power he possessed, she stared at the mist rising from the lagoon where they had made love so many times, a swirl of blue-gray creeping against the pre-dawn sky. Her breath caught in her throat. “I’m afraid; killing just isn’t right.”

He laughed, the hollow guffaw echoing through the graveyard. “Control and manipulation are the driving forces to absolute power. The world is at your command once you take control. The execution must take place tonight.”

“I can’t. Murder is against everything I believe in. Don’t you understand. I just can’t.”

“Darling Maura,” his brittle cackle ricocheted off the tombstones. “You can and you will.”

“I need more time.”

His red eyes glittered as he closed the distance between them in one predatory stride. With a snarling growl that rivaled the thunder rolling across the sky, his fingers raked through her hair. Pressed so close to his body as the muscles quivered and quaked, she stared up at him, her arms coiling tight around his neck. He swept down, possessing her mouth with ravenous hunger. Her arms tightened, knowing she was his forevermore. He grazed her lips with his teeth, her throat, branding her his forevermore. A

werewolf howled, its keening wail slicing through the night. She smiled, an evil smile coiling her lips. “My Darling Dracula, I’m ready.”