

DISTRUST

A VAMPIRE STORY OF LOVE & FREEDOM

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DISTRUST

A VAMPIRE STORY OF LOVE & FREEDOM

By R Shannon

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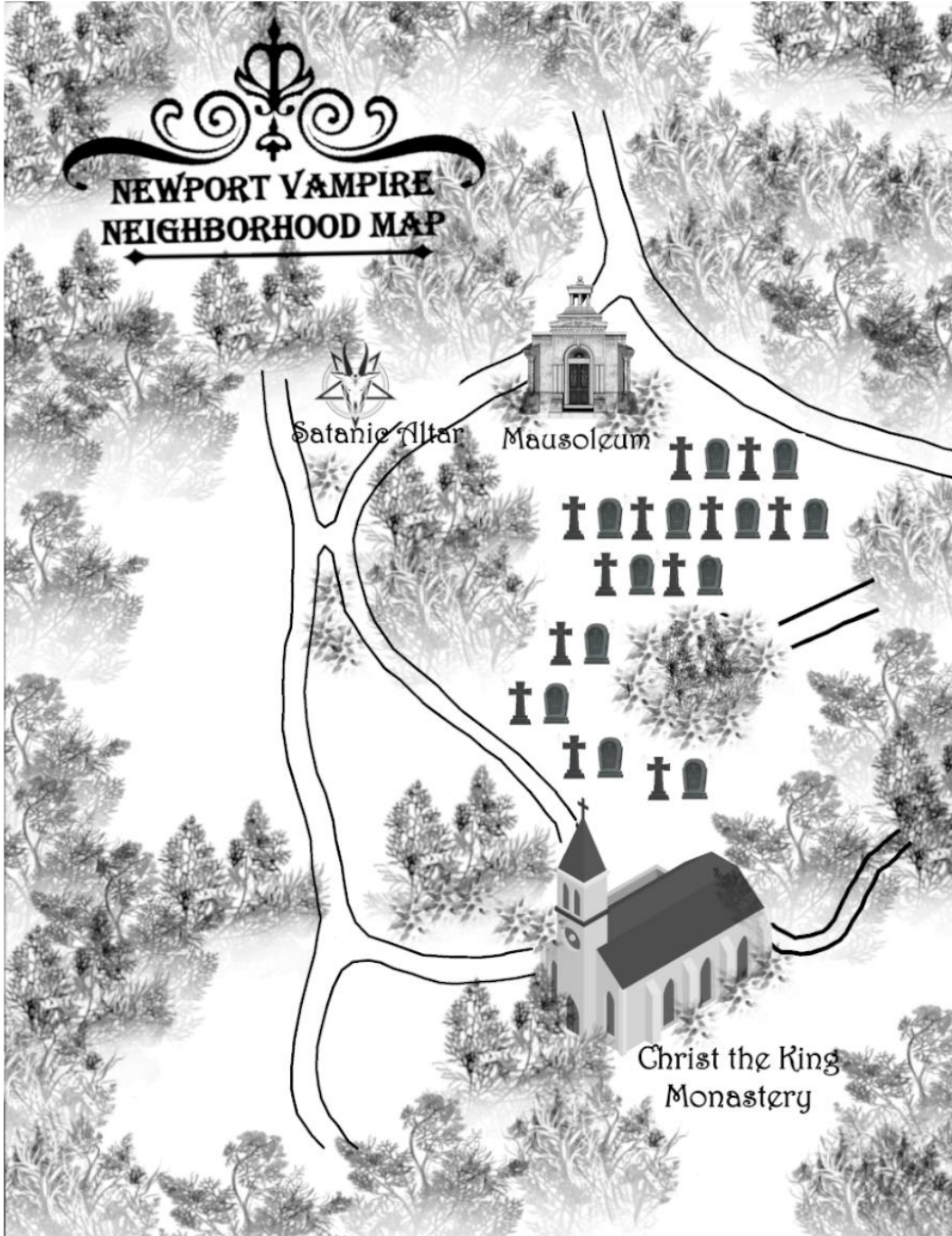
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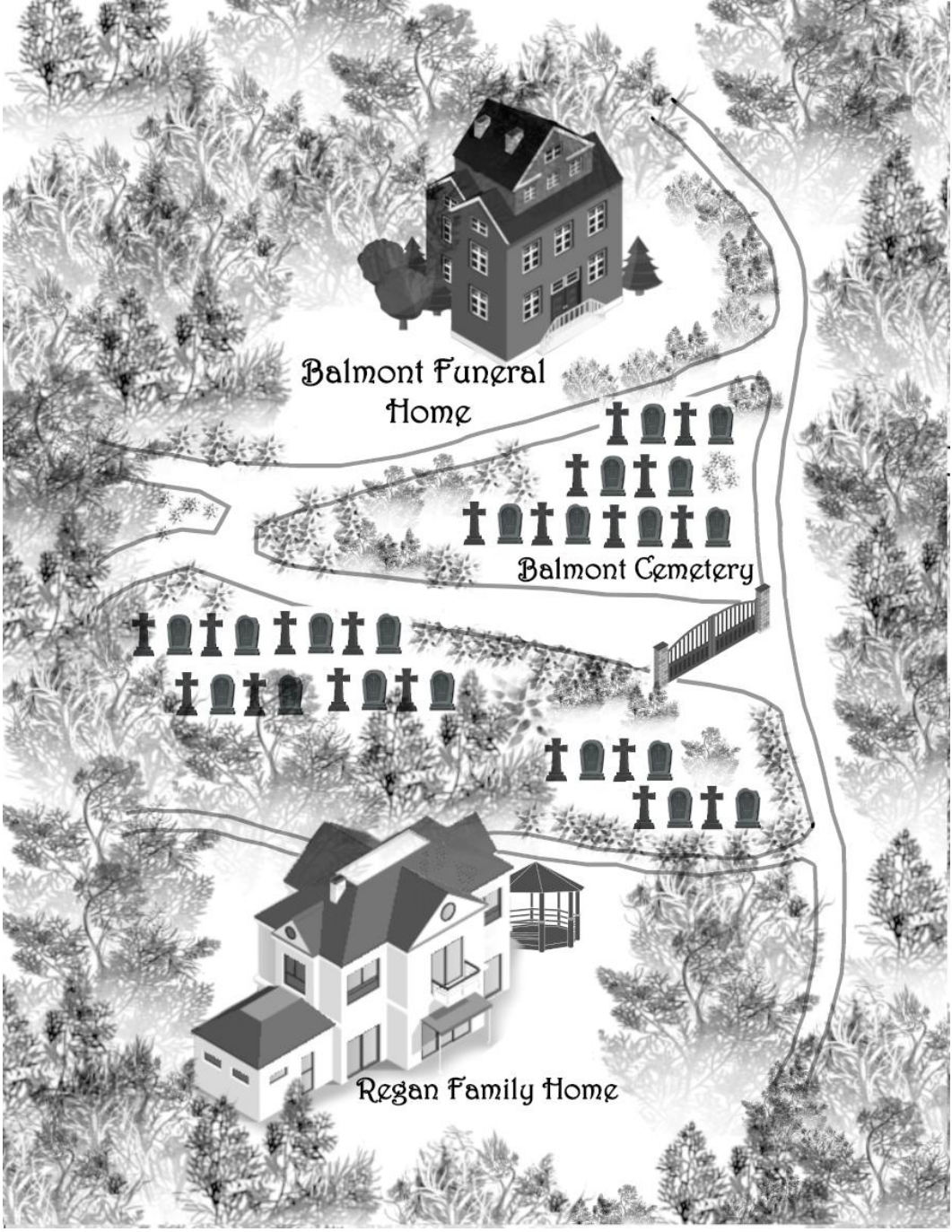
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White Gothic Publishing

MAP OF NEIGHBORHOOD





Balmont Funeral Home

Balmont Cemetery

Regan Family Home

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CHAPTER 1

It was the end of February and the harsh winter weather was battering Newport and the rest of the northeast for two months almost without stop. But the last two days brought temperatures up to thirty-nine degrees, which was considered the first sign of spring.

Detective Michael Sullivan was returning to the station from a witness interview at 9:30 in the morning. When he saw the light on at the Balmont Crematorium, he quickly pulled his unmarked vehicle into the lot and parked. He walked to the front door of the business and knocked. No one answered. He tried the doorknob and the door was open. He walked inside.

The entry room was small, had a receptionist desk, a chair, a computer, and a business phone. On one wall was shelving displaying about fifty urns and vault choices. No one was behind the desk. The computer was off. The room itself was toasty warm and Detective Sullivan could hear what sounded like a furnace going in the background. Because of where he was, he tried not to allow his imagination to go much further.

After two minutes of silence, Pete Lambert walked out into the reception room and said, "Hi, Detective. Can I help you?"

"Is Victoria back from her buying spree in Boston?" asked the detective, noting that Pete appeared to have been drinking already. His eyes were bloodshot and he had that puffy look of a drinker.

"No, she's not. I don't know when she's coming back. You'll have to ask Darius or Charlie at the funeral home."

"I spoke to Charlie a few days ago. He told me that Darius would reach out and have Victoria call me, but I haven't heard from her yet."

"I'll tell Charlie what you said, but I don't know what else to tell you." Pete shrugged his shoulders and just stood there.

Detective Sullivan hesitated a moment, looked around to let Pete know non-verbally that he was not happy about being blown off, and asked, "Who is your boss? Who do you report to?"

"Victoria, usually." Pete got nervous and he began to scratch his head and look away from the detective.

"What about now when she is out of town?"

"I report to Charlie. He oversees things here."

"Tell Charlie to have Darius call me."

"Okay, Detective, I will."

Detective Sullivan left the crematorium and drove two blocks north on Main Street and pulled into the Balmont Funeral Home. The funeral home, as well as the adjoining cemetery, was owned and operated by Darius Luca Lazarescu.

Unbeknownst to anyone in the Newport area, including Detective Sullivan, Darius was a vampire. He maintained a low profile and presented himself as a well-mannered and charming local businessman. Darius and his crematorium wound up on Detective Sullivan's radar over the last several months due to a *biting incident* that recently occurred at the Hornpipe Pub.

The detective had developed a general suspicion about everyone associated with Darius over the last few months. To make matters worse, his niece, Ciara Regan, was living with and working for Darius.

As he entered the funeral home, he heard the familiar water fountain in their receiving room and the ticking of the antique grandfather clock. Darius had furnished the funeral home with beautiful antique furniture, doodads, and other high-end accoutrements that gave the place a bit of a high-end snobbish feel which was popular with the Newport crowd.

He stood in the receiving room and within two minutes, the young receptionist came out to greet him. "Good morning, sir. My name is Starla. Can I help you?"

"Hello, Starla. I'm Detective Sullivan. I dropped by about a week ago to see if Darius had heard back from Victoria?"

"Yes, I remember now. She's not back yet," said Starla with an innocent smile.

"I understand that. I'm here on official business and I need Darius, as the owner of the crematorium, to call me as there is an open case I'm investigating."

"I'll tell him when he comes to work." Her eyes opened wide.

"I never see him here in the daytime. Does he ever come in early?"

"He never comes in before 4:30 in the afternoon, sometimes even later. He works the night shift."

Detective Sullivan could tell these were pat answers. He retrieved another business card from his upper pocket -- about the third he would be leaving in the last two weeks -- and passed it to Starla. "Please give my card to Darius and have him call me today or tomorrow."

"I will, Detective. I sure will." She smiled and looked at his card.

Sullivan left and drove back to the Newport Police Station.



Back at his desk in the police station, Detective Sullivan was working on his open files, making calls, hunting down new leads on several of his open cases.

Detective Wayne Billingsly walked over and sat in front of Michael's desk. He was eating popcorn chicken from a fast-food restaurant carton.

"Isn't it a little early for that?" asked Michael, scoffing.

"Not if you've been up since 4am like I've been." Wayne popped another two pieces into his mouth before holding the container open to Michael.

"No thanks. What's up?"

"The intern did a report on the neighborhood video on Steven Jenkins' car."

"What did it show?" asked Michael sitting back.

“The video shows Jenkins’ car being driven slowly into the neighborhood. It slows down and pulls over to the side of the road between the houses. And then nothing. The video never shows anyone leaving the car. It just appears stationary on the video over the next three days until one of the neighbors calls us about an abandoned car.”

“Are you sure the intern didn’t fast forward and miss something?” asked Det. Sullivan frowning.

“The kid said he watched every second of video,” said Wayne.

“Someone had to exit the car, so either the intern didn’t watch every second or the video may have some motion activation that shut off somewhere. If someone drove the car into the neighborhood, someone had to exit the car.”

“Anyway, I wanted to tell you that Steven Jenkins is officially missing and his brother Peter Jenkins is coming in today or tomorrow to fill out an official missing person’s report.”

“So the case is on hold?” asked Michael Sullivan

“It’s on hold until our alleged victim shows up.”

“I have a feeling we’re not going to see Steven Jenkins again,” said Sullivan.

“A guy with a history of drug charges disappears and you automatically think he’s never going to show up? What makes you think that? Every third case has a drug addict who disappears for a few months. He’ll be back.” He finished his popcorn chicken and tossed the cardboard container into Michael’s trash can.

“I just have a general suspicion about this case.”

“Well, just so you know, that case is on hold. The brother will file the missing person’s report, and the car has been gone over, nothing found, and it will be released from impound to Steven’s brother.”



Darius built a beautiful and spacious vampire lair underneath his funeral home which had two entrances, both of which were cleverly hidden to anyone passing by the property. The entire living space was lit using only wax candles. Beautiful antique candelabra and elaborate single candle holders were strewn throughout the lair, all of which gave the cave a beautiful and romantic setting.

Ciara Regan sat on a couch in front of Darius’ fireplace, staring into the flames. The heat felt healing to her as she waited for her body to replenish itself. Darius had bitten her and fed ravenously last night and she was still weak from the extra blood loss. She noticed that he tended to drink too much of her blood during times of stress.

Having been possessed by Darius for almost six months now, she was used to the ups and downs of being with a vampire. To an outsider, Ciara appeared to be madly in love with Darius, but she was only deep in his possession and control. To her, it felt like true love and she was wallowing in it.

Every few minutes, she looked up from her reading tablet and glanced over at his coffin. The grandfather clock in the living area chimed four o’clock. Dusk had broken so Darius would be rising at any moment.

Ciara was the beautiful daughter of one of the wealthiest and oldest families in Newport: the Regans. They lived in the mansion estate that bordered Darius’ funeral home and cemetery properties. Happenstance brought Ciara into Darius’

possession — or some might say it was a dark and unfortunate turn of luck on her part.

Through the last hundred years of his vampiric condition, Darius had chosen his women from runaways, widows or orphans, people who needed him. These sorts were easy to control and didn't have family members complicating matters for him or threatening his safety. Secrecy was the bedrock of his security. His survival rested on maintaining control over people around him and making sure they kept his secrets.

Lately, however, Darius' biggest pressures came from Ciara's family members who were everywhere all over town. Both families, the Regans and the Sullivans, were in the same Newport Rhode Island area going all the way back to the American Revolution.

Ciara's father, Patrick Regan, was a powerful and influential real estate developer and general mover-and-shaker in the state. Her mother, Elizabeth Regan, was a third-generation Newport socialite who held her head higher than the Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers, or any other of the nouveau riche who showed up through the years with their ill-gotten gains. Newport was still a place where bloodline and roots mattered.

Elizabeth Regan's brother, Detective Michael Sullivan of the Newport Police Department, was coming around looking to question Darius' cremation manager, Victoria, about a little run-in she had with the law recently. And not to be outdone by the other family members, Ciara's second cousin, Abbot Rene, headed the Christ the King Monastery, and he was calling the funeral home on a weekly basis to report which nights the gate had not been closed by eleven o'clock. Hence, Darius was presently on his own quest to put some distance between himself and all of Ciara's family members.



Darius slowly raised the lid of his coffin, but remained lying still, allowing the candlelight and fresh air to bring him around. Once out of his coffin, Ciara walked over at once to greet him. After a long and loving embrace, he kissed Ciara deeply and she came to life. At her level of possession, she lived to make him happy.

He immediately dressed for work. As he began the process of choosing his clothing, he said, "How was your day, Ciara?"

"It was too cold and I was too tired to go out, so I read by the fire. I hate it when you're sleeping and I'm alone." These were the words that Darius lived to hear, words of her needing and desiring him.

Before her possession, Ciara was a strong, self-confident woman enrolled in veterinary school and not given to bossy or controlling men.

Once he possessed her, Darius slowly and meticulously manipulated Ciara to let go of everything in her life. He saw it all as too much independence. She was now out of school, living with him full time, working with him in the funeral home, and totally dependent upon him for everything, including driving.

They both dressed for work. She stepped into the bathroom to blow-dry her hair and run a curling iron through the bottom layers. Within ten minutes, as she came out with her hair done and a full face of makeup, Darius couldn't help but smile. He adored her. She finished dressing and primping for work while Darius dressed in one of his many silk suits. He was six feet tall, with a full head of

dark brown hair. He was thin with pale white skin and piercing blue eyes. Some would say his coloring was naturally gothic.

Ciara's cell phone rang; it was her mother. To say Elizabeth Regan was not happy about the new arrangements in Ciara's life would be an understatement. From one day to the next, her beautiful daughter flunked out of vet school and was now shackled up with a man fourteen years older than her, who she knew for less than six months.

Patrick Regan, Ciara's father, felt the same way, but with the added insult of Darius sleeping with his daughter without benefit of marriage. The Regans came from a different world, one that still stood on tradition and they expected things to be done properly. If only Ciara's living arrangements were Elizabeth's biggest problem, but they weren't.



"Mom, I can't go back to school in the winter because the roads are too dangerous." With the phone crocked between her chin and shoulder, she fetched a pair of high heels from the closet.

"Ciara, you are being ridiculous about not driving in the wintertime. You have driven all winter since the day you received your permit. It's only since you're with Darius that you, all of a sudden, are too fearful to drive. You're like a prisoner there."

Ciara could feel the emotion in her mother's voice. "Mom, the black ice is invisible but it is deadly. It causes terrible car accidents all the time."

"Ciara, the streets were plowed a week ago and we've had rain more than once, not to mention the temperature has gone as high as forty in the middle of the day. There is no more black ice. That only occurs occasionally in the dead of winter. In any event, the streets are plowed and dry now and you are making too much of it." Her mother's frustration was coming through clearly.

"Mother, first of all, it does occur more frequently than people think and that's what makes it dangerous. You need to research it online.

"Secondly, Darius drives me wherever I want to go, so it's not a big deal." Ciara glanced over at Darius and he smiled at her. She wondered if he could hear her mother's exasperation leaking out from her cellphone.

"He drives you wherever you want to go? Then why hasn't Darius brought you over to see your family? I haven't seen you in almost a month. I'm very upset about this."

"I'm going to ask Darius to go for a visit and I'll let you know when I can, okay?"

"It's not like you to ask a man's permission, Ciara. You used to be your own person. Just tell Darius you want to see your parents and have him drive you over. You don't need permission from him."

"I will, Mother. Right now I need to finish dressing for work." Ciara lowered her voice trying to calm her mother.

"I love you, Ciara, and I want to see you."

"I love you too, Mom. I'll let you know when I can come over." Ciara hung up.

She finished dressing, and watched Darius to see if he would comment on the call from her mother. He only heard her side of things, but she was sure he knew what they were talking about. After about two minutes of silence, he did.

“Your mother is trying to make trouble for us, Ciara.”

“I don’t think so, Darius. She hasn’t adjusted to my no longer living with her and my father. I know she means well. She’s just used to seeing me more often. You’re my first serious boyfriend and she is getting used to things. And she definitely doesn’t get the whole black ice thing. We better go over to see her soon. Maybe tomorrow?”

“We will see her soon, I promise. We’ll have to go on a Saturday because we work nights. She’s being selfish, Ciara. She ought to understand about your fear of black ice. She has lived in these winters all her life. She is also not acknowledging your working here as a real job. That’s a sign of her selfishness, Ciara.”

Ciara didn’t comment, just continued getting ready for work.

He walked over and embraced her in a full hug, holding her in his arms for a long and tender moment. He kissed her on the lips and looked into her eyes. “I’m worried, Ciara, that she and your father are plotting in some subtle way to break us up. They are pointing out every little thing we do or don’t do. They want you to marry someone younger and someone of their choosing.”

Embracing him, Ciara said, “I don’t think they’re trying to break us up, Darius. She just needs more time to absorb all the changes. My sister told me my father said we both got boyfriends around the same time and she is experiencing empty-nest syndrome. She will come around.

“She needs to google *black ice*; I mean, I never knew about the dangers of it nor how many accidents it caused until you pointed it out to me this year, Darius.”

The hug ended and they both continued dressing for work. Darius put on his tie, slowly tied it and thought to himself, *‘I’m going to have to get another angle for hypnotizing her and keeping her here. After the winter passes, the black ice is not going to work anymore. It’s losing its usefulness already by calling too much attention to our situation.’*

He thought a minute as he inserted his ruby and gold cufflinks in each shirt sleeve. He then reached for his suit jacket from his armoire. *‘I guess I could use the recent political rioting and lootings we saw last summer. Most women would be afraid to be caught in something like that. Of course, that has died down over the winter, but it’s probably because criminal thugs don’t like the cold. It could start up at the first sign of spring.’*

‘I’ll have to find some statistics on the seasonal rise in crime over the summer. That will have to work unless or until I get a better idea. I’ll need to start laying the groundwork for the switch soon as Elizabeth is right, the roads are plowed and dry and the black ice has lost its believability.’ Darius pulled his arm sleeves down to make sure his cufflinks showed and he sat to wait as Ciara finished primping.

She walked nonchalantly out of the bathroom and he was taken again by her beauty. She had long brown, slightly wavy hair, blue eyes and a thin but womanly figure. Not six months ago, Darius lorded over his bevy of women as a ruthless dictator. But with Ciara, he felt nothing but the tenderest love for her.

The one and only time he had fallen in love was back in the 1700s when he married his only wife, Izabella, who he adored. During the 200 years he was part of the living dead, he resigned himself to feeling only lust and a desire to dominate and control his women. No one ever pierced his heart, not until Ciara came along.

As she walked in front of him and he caught her scent, he started thinking about being alone together after work. This would keep him distracted all during the wake service they would be presiding over upstairs. He reached out for her hand and led her up the secret staircase to the funeral home. All Darius' secrets and mysteries were exciting to Ciara.



~MEANWHILE~

Once Elizabeth finished her frustrating conversation with Ciara, she made her way downstairs to the kitchen. It was a bit of a walk as the Regan's estate home sat on fifteen acres of land that was purchased back in 1765. It was more of a farm back in the early days, but the Regans had accumulated wealth slowly and steadily over the years and by 1865, they built their own Gilded Age mansion, some ten years before the industrialists arrived.

In 1940, the previous generation of Regans built a new, more-modern mansion and donated the older estate house to a group of monks who started the Christ the King Monastery, which was still on the Regan property and still operational. Elizabeth's Cousin Rene was the abbot of the monastery today and a frequent guest at all of the charitable events and parties put on by the Regans.

As Elizabeth swept into the kitchen, her anxiety came in with her. Her younger daughter, Genevieve, was sitting at the table eating a yogurt. "What's the matter, Mom?"

"Who says something is wrong?" She began tidying up the counter area but her actions were filled with the extra energy that came with anger and frustration. It was the noise of her motions that gave her away.

"I can tell you're exasperated. Is it about Ciara?"

"Yes, it's about Ciara. I haven't seen her in a month and she just told me she has to ask Darius to drive her here because of the black ice. We haven't had snow in two weeks or more. I really think she has mental problems. I'm being serious." Elizabeth looked for some validation from her younger daughter.

"I've looked up *black ice* on the internet and there is such a thing. After a rain in winter, a very thin and invisible sheet of ice forms on the roads and it can be dangerous."

"There is such a thing, Genevieve, but it does not occur all the time. She was never afraid to drive before nor did she ever mention black ice to us. We live five blocks away from each other. This all started after she moved in with Darius. I told you he has some kind of Svengali-like hold on her. They are not even married and she said she has to ask him to do things?" She scoffed.

Elizabeth looked again at Genevieve but she, still loyal to her sister about the men they dated, looked down and chose not to respond.

"You don't ask John-Luke if you can go somewhere. You have to admit, Genevieve, she was never like this before. I just don't understand how she can

go from being a strong independent woman to this little submissive waif she has turned into.”

Genevieve hesitated a moment and said, “I know, Mom, I agree that Ciara is no longer herself. She fell in love with Darius and everything in her life went upside down. Dad said you have to wait for their honeymoon period to be over and then she will see the same problems herself.”

“You and John-Luke are in a honeymoon stage. You are both pursuing your own ambitions and share time together. That’s what dating should look like. That’s what I expect with Ciara. She quit school for him. She’s living there with him. She’s working for him. It’s not just me. Your father is not happy about this situation either.”

“Dad doesn’t like it, but he seems to be less frustrated by it than you, Mom.”

“Don’t let him fool you. He is secretly enraged over this. He just thinks we need to let go and wait this out but I just can’t let go of my daughter when I see signs of mental illness.”

“She is obsessive about the black ice, that’s for sure. But I don’t think it’s mental illness. I speak to her about other things and she seems okay. For some reason, she has just let this ice thing make her paranoid.”

“There’s something wrong. I just can’t put my finger on what it is.”

“It’ll be okay, Mom. Don’t worry so much.” Genevieve tossed her empty yogurt container in the trash and she went about her other plans.

Elizabeth finished putting away the dishes, stewing in silence.



Charlie Coogan was in the dressing room at the Balmont Funeral Home. He was dressing one of the deceased for his upcoming wake service which would be starting in less than four hours. With the deceased laying on his side, Charlie cut open the center back of the suit jacket with scissors.

Starla came into the dressing room and said, “Charlie, Detective Sullivan stopped in again and he wants Darius to call him. He seems like he’s mad now.” Starla passed Charlie the detective’s card.

“I’ve told Darius that he is looking for Victoria but he hasn’t let me in on any plans. I’ll tell him again.” Charlie put the card in his shirt pocket.

“Why did you cut the guy’s jacket?” asked Starla, who was a new employee.

“It loosens the fit and this way I can smooth down every wrinkle in the fabric when he is laying in the coffin with his hands crossed.”

“Wow, that’s interesting,” said Starla. “Are you going out for lunch, Charlie?”

“Marguerite is out getting sandwiches for us.”

“Are you two going to eat here? Would you mind answering the phones?” asked Starla.

“Where are you going?” asked Charlie.

“Inga, the psychic, has a cancellation and she can see me over lunch.” Starla smiled sweetly.

“You’re wasting your money on all that, Starla,” said Charlie scoffing.

“She’s really good. Everyone at the goth hangout is seeing her.” She waited for Charlie’s response.

“Go ahead. We’ll eat in your office and we’ll cover the phones.” Charlie shook his head and then his index finger at her. “You better be careful, Starla. You’re starting to lean over to the dark side with that new age stuff.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” said Starla as she grabbed her purse and her winter coat. After putting her coat on, she left out the front door. She got into her new Toyota Camry which Darius bought her and drove to Inga’s house.



Charlie finished posing the decedent’s hands crossed over his stomach and then smoothed down every fold and wrinkle in his jacket and shirt. He finished up by gently combing his hair into place while referencing a picture given to him by the widow. Marguerite showed up when he was finished. Perfect timing.

Marguerite was a 23-year-old beautiful woman with long, thick brown wavy hair and brown eyes. She was half Irish and half Cuban and had quite an exotic look about her, enough to first capture the attention of Darius, as well as the secret love and attention of her co-worker, Charlie.

“We have to eat in Starla’s office,” said Charlie as he came out of the dressing room. “She went out for lunch and we need to answer the phones.”

Marguerite cleared Starla’s desk enough to make an area for them to spread out their sandwiches. They sat down to eat and neither of them spoke right away. The awkwardness between them was on full display. They both hated it.

“I’m four full days out of Darius’ possession, Charlie. I know you’re ignoring me,” she said breaking the ice. “I don’t like this tension between us.”

“I don’t like it either. You better be careful, Marguerite, talking so openly about being out of his control and thinking about leaving.”

“I’m not thinking about it, Charlie; I’m doing it. Look what I bought at Walmart,” said Marguerite as she took out a flat-headed screwdriver from her purse and held it up for Charlie to see.

Charlie rolled his eyes. “The screwdriver is going to help you escape a vampire? Is that your plan?” Charlie chuckled, hesitated, and then said, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you may need a Plan B.”

“No. No, Charlie. The screwdriver is so I can take my car and then change the license plate so I can get further away in case he calls the cops and reports me missing or the car missing.”

“You’ve said twenty times you’re going to escape and then you never go. Darius comes along, bites you, and you walk around mesmerized for the next three days. I don’t want to hear it anymore.” Charlie broke eye contact and continued eating his sandwich.

“I want us to escape together, Charlie. We can be happy together. You’ve said it yourself.” She was leaning into him, but he remained distant.

“I’m not falling into your trap again, Marguerite. You claim you love me when you get away from Darius for a few days, but then you fall right back into his arms and suddenly, you don’t even know me. It’s awful to live through that.

I can't do it anymore. I just want to be friends, that's all. We're just co-workers and friends."

"I know you love me, Charlie. You've told me in the past. Love just doesn't go away like a cold."

"I do love you, Marguerite, but you belong to Darius. It's best we both face reality.

"And we both need to be careful because any talk of escaping or leaving by either one of us would be considered disloyalty by him. Don't let that screwdriver give you a false sense of security."

"I'm also going to make a copy of my embalming license and take the original with me," whispered Marguerite. "I was planning to do it this morning, but Starla came in early. But tomorrow I'll be in earlier than anyone." Marguerite leaned back and continued to eat.

"You wouldn't want to leave your fake embalming license behind," chuckled Charlie.

"It looks perfectly legitimate. As long as I have the original with the raised seal, it'll be fine. You're being negative to discourage me, Charlie. You were the one who used to tell me to run away and save myself." She was attempting to get eye contact but Charlie was avoiding it.

"You're acting brazen about this escaping, Marguerite. Darius can smell disloyalty. He has a way of sensing things that you aren't taking into account. I hope you don't wind up in the crematorium oven."

"I won't. I'm being careful. We're alone here."

They continued eating. The sexual undercurrent between them was palpable. It had its own heartbeat but Charlie was still determined to protect himself from another needless heartbreak.



CHAPTER 2

Charlie was Darius' watcher and right-hand man. He was a slender, good-looking 34-year-old with a full head of light brown hair. His hair was layered and always reached about an inch below his collar before he found time for a haircut. He worked long hours and was always on call.

This morning, Charlie walked down the stairs from his fourth-floor apartment and arrived at an empty funeral home. It was only seven-thirty and he was alone. He was anxious to get an early start today as tonight they were having a wake that hundreds of people from town would attend. Charlie had embalmed Mr. Wilks last night and this morning he would need to dress, make-up, and display him in his coffin.

It was times like these when Charlie was alone that his mind would wander back in time. He started life at second base, so to speak, as he was brought up in a decent but lower-income Christian home. Soon into his teens, he took the proverbial wrong turn. This turn started slowly, first with hanging out and drinking with the wrong crowd, then came the drugs, then the petty crime and illegal hustles. He wound up in jail by the time he was 25 years old, and that was after he received the free pass as a first offender and a slight wrist-slap as a second offender. When he wound up in state prison, he thought that was the low point of his life.

One night about two years into his sentence, Charlie and two other prisoners managed to escape from jail around the midnight hour. Against great odds, they made it over the prison wall, through the swamp and into the woods without getting caught, which alone was a small miracle. At that point, they decided to go their own separate ways as the prison authorities were surely looking for the three of them.

They muddied up the orange jumpsuits they wore, but *Madison County Jail* was still printed along the top back of the jumpsuits. Charlie knew his chances of any true escape were slim, but he kept putting one foot in front of the other and seeing where the path took him.

Within an hour of walking on a desolate road, not knowing where he even was anymore, Charlie heard a car, saw the headlights, stuck out his thumb and hoped for the best.

Darius Luca Lazarescu pulled over and gave Charlie a ride. Darius made polite small talk and never mentioned Charlie's orange jumpsuit. Without prompting, Darius purchased a Rhode Island tourist sweatshirt from the first gas station they saw, as well as a bag of food and handed them both to Charlie. They continued driving back towards Newport. Charlie made small talk about the weather and the Rhode Island area, which Darius participated in, but there were also long stretches of silence.

Darius seemed like a successful businessman and Charlie thought he died and went to heaven meeting such a nice guy. Of course, he couldn't understand why

this man was not fearful of an escaped convict, but Charlie hoped this was the Hand of Fate giving him a long-awaited break.

About an hour before dawn, however, Charlie was drained of half of his blood. It was then he realized he had entered a different kind of prison. He was chosen to be Darius' new protector and watcher, which meant he was in charge of watching out for him as he slept in his coffin. Apparently, the previous watcher had tried to escape from Darius and was not around anymore, hence Darius' need for a new watcher and right-hand man.

Charlie, once an alpha male, was treated like an animal for the first several days. Darius had strangled Charlie within one inch of his life on several occasions, mostly when he detected insolence or rebellion, allowing him to feel his supernatural strength and the impossibility of going up against him. Then Charlie was treated as a mere slave until his will was broken and he accepted his new lot in life. Once his transition to loyal watcher was completed, Darius began to treat him with a bit more trust and respect — but not too much. Darius trusted no one. Distrust was his state of being.

Charlie was with Darius for going on eight years now. He had proven his loyalty many times over by keeping all of Darius' secrets, helping him cover for some vampire mishaps, and running interference for him with Darius' bevy of women. There was nothing Darius valued higher than loyalty.

Aside from watching out for Darius while he slept, Charlie was also the main embalmer, occasional driver, occasional salesperson, and general handyman around the funeral home. He had anywhere from eight to fourteen hours of work per day to perform.

Once Charlie's spirit was broken and he was fully in Darius' control, the bloodletting came to an end. Darius preferred to feed only from females. The experience of being bled was now only a threat that still existed in the air between Darius and Charlie.

He tried not to think about his present circumstances as he was powerless to change things. It was during these lonely times that thoughts of how he wound up with Darius would stream up into his mind. Luckily, Starla, Marguerite, and even Pete came into work within the hour, and the busyness of the day kept Charlie's mind from going back into the past.



The parking lot filled almost to capacity by a quarter to seven. Darius hired a valet parking team to accommodate the mourners who arrived after the lot was filled. Tonight he and the other staff members would be doing more crowd control than any usual wake services.

Bob Wilkes was an ex-mayor of Newport and a life-long politician. These small-town celebrity wakes were more political events than memorial services. There were more handshakes, nods, and discretely-passed business cards than prayers or tears. Darius, Charlie, and Marguerite were working the front door, the receiving room and the viewing room.

Ciara was inside the staff room covering the phones and tending to the widow and family members as needed. Marguerite was inside the memorial service watching for any problems or needs among any of the mourners. Pete was doing whatever anyone needed, looking to Darius for instruction as the night proceeded.

The local pastor just finished a respectful and solemn eulogy but Bob Wilkes' friends were each stepping up to say a few words and the service started sounding like a comedy-roast event.



Charlie and Darius had closed the doors to the viewing room and were now milling around the reception area waiting for the service to end. At slightly above a whisper, Charlie said, "Darius, I wanted to mention that Ciara's uncle, Detective Sullivan, dropped in again asking if Victoria was back from her buying trip to Boston."

"When did he come?" asked Darius frowning.

"This morning. I didn't want to mention it until we were alone because I'm not sure who you want to know about it."

Darius continued meandering a bit in silence before whispering, "Ciara's relatives are popping up behind every door in this town. Why is her uncle pestering us about this criminal case that has no victim?"

Charlie shrugged.

"I've still got her uncle from the monastery supervising me on my closing of the cemetery gates by eleven o'clock. And now I've got the mother who I think is trying to start trouble between us for her own reasons. There's too many close family relations for me." Darius looked at his watch. It was almost 9:00 pm.

"Her family is in this area for over two hundred years. Her mother is a Daughter of the American Revolution which means they are here since the beginning of the country. They've been in this very town since then," said Charlie.

"How do you know all this?" asked Darius, showing signs of suspicious curiosity.

"Ciara talks about it when she's in the office during the day." Charlie smiled as he shrugged again.

"It's too much family and togetherness for a guy with as many secrets as I have."

They continued mulling about.

After a few moments of silent thinking, Darius whispered, "I am trying to reduce my level of possession with Ciara to allow her to fall in love with me, but every time I begin to let go, there is some meddling by her family that prevents me from letting go entirely. They all seem to be working against me."

"She loves you already, Darius. She talks about you constantly when she comes up when you're sleeping."

"Does she?" asked Darius showing an interest for more information.

"Yes, all the time," said Charlie.

"Unfortunately, possession often looks the same as love from the outside. I want to be with Ciara forever. I need to know she is truly in love with me, but I can't get a safe period of time to test her or to allow it to happen."

"I think she loves you already, but you're the boss."

“We’ve got to get her uncle, the detective, off my back about Victoria’s . . . legal problem,” said Darius as he glanced at Charlie.

Marguerite opened the door in the back and said to Darius: “Please help, there’s a woman who’s fainted.”

Darius said to Charlie over his shoulder, “Have Ciara call 911 for an ambulance.” He then proceeded into the service to take control over the situation until the paramedics showed up.

Fainters, loud emotional mourners, even vomiters; they were all business as usual in the funeral home.



After the mayor’s memorial service had finished, Darius closed and locked the funeral home. He and Ciara walked downstairs to the cave and sat together on the sofa in front of the fire. Darius fed the fire with another piece of wood and they cuddled together on the sofa. Ciara watched a show she liked and he pretended to watch. Ciara had a few television shows she liked, but Darius hated television; not the technology itself, but the modern-day celebrities and characters on most of the shows and movies. He considered them to be as degenerate as humans could be. Of course he was comparing them all to the man he used to be 200 years ago, which was before he turned to the dark side himself. He, of course, saw nothing hypocritical about his position.

He didn’t take well to new people in real life either; he was guarded and reserved. Some would say the funeral business was a perfect fit for him. He saw most clients once and then never again.

In her sweetest tone, Ciara said, “Darius, I want to visit my mother soon. She keeps calling me and telling me that I’m horrible to stay away so long. She refuses to accept that I’m afraid to drive. She wants us to come to dinner at her house this week.”

Normally, Darius didn’t take orders or even suggestions from his women as he considered both acts of insolence. With Ciara, however, it had been different. She reminded him of his life before he was taken into the world of the living dead. There was a gentleness, a softness about her. She made him feel like he wanted to be a better man. He enjoyed doting on her in a way he hadn’t experienced since his first marriage to Izabela back in Romania.

To an outsider, Ciara had a feminine and gentle way of speaking. She spoke to him in a soft pleading voice that disarmed him; made him almost cooperative. While running her hands through his hair and tucking it behind his ear, she said, “I want to see my parents soon, Darius.”

“Ciara, we can go on Saturday evening because we work nights during the week. Your mother should understand this already. Do you see what I mean when I say they’re making trouble? Why hasn’t your mother accepted that you work here Monday through Friday and sometimes on Saturdays?”

“She just needs a little more time, Darius. Please be patient with her.”

“Tell her we can come on Saturday night.”

She texted her mother a reply which he chose to interpret as obedience. “Your mother does not want you to grow up and have your own life. She would prefer us to break up so she can fix you up with another of her friends’ kids, someone from the right family.”

“She’s not trying to break us up, Darius. She and my dad don’t like the fourteen-year age difference between us and they don’t like it that I’m living with a man I’m not married to, but once we get engaged, they will come around. You’ll see.”

“I see a more sinister side of them that you are unable to see. I have no proof, Ciara, but I have a sixth sense about people. I can read people on a much deeper level than most. I sense your parents are used to getting their own way and they want to ultimately put distance between us so they can get more control over you.”

Ciara didn’t reply verbally, but she did shrug her shoulder.

“You don’t look convinced. You told me yourself your mother used to try fixing you and Genevieve up with every single guy from church and the country club.”

“She did do that,” said Ciara chuckling. “She did it to both of us and we both found our own men. That’s why the adjustment is taking this long.” She laughed.

Darius maintained eye contact which brought her deeper into his possession.

“Don’t worry, Darius. I’m not going to let my mother take control over me. My mother just fusses about my being pale sometimes and I can’t tell her why. She asked me to go to a doctor for an examination, but I told her I’m fine. But she’s not sneaky or vindictive like you’re imagining.”

“When did she ask you to get a medical examination? You never told me about that.” Fear of loss of control crept into his heart.

“She keeps telling me I’m too pale and too thin, that I’m obsessing about things, that I’m not like I used to be. She is convinced something is not right. She’s just getting used to me having my own life now. Plus, in time, she’ll get used to seeing me a little more pale than normal.”

“By the way, Ciara, the black ice is no longer a problem. I want you to forget about that now.”

“It is still a problem. We saw that accident the other night on the way to dinner, remember? You said yourself it was from the black ice.”

“Let’s not talk any more about the black ice tonight.” Darius pulled her close to him and kissed her. She then laid her head on the side of his shoulder and chest. They listened in silence to the crackling of the fire, cuddling together in the romance of the candlelight.

One of the many things Darius loved about Ciara was her ability to tolerate silence. He hated people who had an insecure need to fill every moment with chatter.

“I’ll let my mother know tomorrow that we’ll see her and my dad on Saturday, okay?” asked Ciara.

“Let’s wait until the end of next week and maybe we will have some news to report to them.” Darius raised his eyebrows and smiled.

Ciara sat up from leaning into him and said, “What do you mean?”

“You’ll see. I don’t want to ruin any surprises.”

They continued enjoying the romantic atmosphere. Darius could tell his last cryptic message added an excitement to Ciara’s mood. She kissed him on his

mouth and he could feel her excitement and desire for him. She had no idea she was deep in his possession; she merely thought she was madly in love.

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