



A LOVER'S PINCH

I BOLTED UPRIGHT, SLEEP broken by the sweet, metallic tang of blood on the air, snaking its way into the odd trance-like state that characterised a vampire's sleep. My dreams of her – always her these nights – shattered in an instant. My body caught up with my racing mind in mere seconds, centuries of instinct propelling me from the bed.

Erin.

The scent grew stronger with each step, filling my lungs with its heady, coppery call as I fled down the corridor, no bothering with a shirt. The song of it burned into my nostrils – summer storms and smoke, branded into my very being since the first time I'd caught it. Where was it coming from? The hallway below?

I flitted down the spiral staircase, down the sweeping landings and into the hallway in seconds. There, on the floor beneath the huge oak front doors, a pool of blood was spreading, thick and intense, staining the chequerboard tiles beneath it.

There was no mistaking it. Erin's blood. So much blood. I kent it even before I wrenched open the door – no one could survive such a loss...

No!

She lay propped against the wall, her arms and legs spread-eagled in a macabre display. Her head lolled forward, fire-bright hair obscuring her face. The posture was deliberate, calculated – a twisted exhibition of death I'd seen before, in another time. Prisoners made examples of. Memories I didnae want to revisit.

Her yellow hat – the one she'd worn on the hilltop – lay beside her.

I fell to my knees, reaching with trembling fingers, heedless of the sun as it burned my exposed skin, my stomach churning with horror the likes of which I'd ne'er kent – and caused many a horror in my time. *It cannae be her.*

Gently, I turned her face, to reveal dark eyes – open and unseeing, a round face, square chin... relief crashed through me in almost unbearable waves. It wasnae Erin. But the familiarity remained, and a gnawing dread made its way up my throat. The blood *was* Erin's, that much was clear. So much of it... but where had it come from?

I backed away from the stranger's body and into the shade of the manor, my mind racing. At the other end of the hallway, a clock ticked, marking each wasted second. Twas still daylight – late afternoon, but the sun was as high and fatal as ever.

Leaving the door open, I retreated further inside, darting back to my borrowed bedroom. If it wisnae Erin splayed on the doorstep, then where was she? Where had the blood come from? Was this a message of some kind?

Pulling on a black shirt and boots, I grabbed my densest, heaviest wool coat, though I didnae put it on. I might no ken this city well, but I'd heard stories of tunnels beneath the surface from Izzie – and I caught things, out and about. I could reach Erin

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through them. No an easy journey, but there wasnae a way in hell I'd wait til sundown when she might be—

No. I winnae think such things.

I called for Adam and Isabel on my way back to the door, but I didnae expect a response – Izzie would be sleeping, and I'd ne'er kent quite what Adam got up to with his days.

At the threshold, I hesitated only a moment, scenting the air for any sign of the perpetrator – for someone had left her here for me to find, no doubt about it. Nothing. Whoever had done this had moved quickly, decisively, and hadnae lingered. And neither could I.

The things ye'll do for love, Murray.

I recalled where Erin lived, but in my mind, the distance stretched impossibly between us: open skies, exposed places, and o' course, the light of the sun... twas a risk worth taking.

For her, it would ne'er be a question.

Pulling my coat above my head like a shade, I stepped out into the inferno.

PAIN SEARED THROUGH ME. MY skin smoked and crackled, afire with heat even through the heavy wool as I made a hasty path toward the entrance of a park I vaguely kent, no far from Adam's home. I hissed against the burning, but my mind was already adapting – pain could, and would be, endured. Her loss couldnae.

Beyond the park, I kent the city stretched before me like a bloody maze – miles of hills, dales, and merciless open ground between the manor and Erin's home. Trust Adam to settle where twas most inconvenient for my kind, though like as no he'd only been thinking of the architecture. Still, the tree-lined streets between

would offer some sporadic sanctuary, though my coat might as well have been tissue paper for all its protection. Beneath its fabric, my forearms took the brunt of the damage, bubbling with blisters in a sickening cycle of agony.

Dashing through the gated entrance, a woman clutching a shopping bag gasped as I passed – at my speed or the smoke trail I left in my wake, I couldnae say. Izzie would have my hide for a doormat if she kent I was flitting in plain sight.

I paused for a moment under a leafy canopy, trying to get my bearings – though I was loath to waste the time when each second could make all the difference to Erin, were she hurt. My heart, usually silent, pounded in my chest, and I willed it to slow that I might think straight.

It hadnae occurred to me when I'd arrived here that I'd need to ken the city well enough to move about in the day. I couldnae even recall the last time, if ever, I'd risked exposure to the sun like this – though I'd come close to trouble just weeks ago when I hadnae been able to resist dropping by Jolt to see Erin once more... All in all, twas no exactly a smart move for a vampire no to learn the lay of the land, but I'd been caught up in the raptures of... well, *her*, since my arrival.

I couldnae stay still for long, even with the slight protection of the trees. Keeping to the deepest of shadows, I followed the distant sound of a river, calm beneath the discordant but ever-present sounds of a waking city. No a sound I was too familiar with, these days, in truth, but I *did* ken that the river went east – toward the centre of the city, where I might find my way to the underground culverts that Izzie had mentioned. If only I'd asked her more about them at the time...

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An almost imperceptible breeze shifted the leaves overhead, and a streak of sunlight knifed through me. I hissed and pulled away, pressing myself against the rough bark of a sycamore. Every instinct was a-screaming to retreat, run, get away. My body fought me, demanding escape. But my heart told me to continue.

Keep moving, Murray, lad. Ye've endured worse by far.

Erin's face flashed in my mind, the last time I'd seen her – gilded by moonlight, unsure but determined, her lips parted—

I shook it off. It winnae be the last time. The prophecy said... no. It couldnae end like this.

The park's winding paths were disorienting, but the sounds of the river didnae fail me, and I followed its watery music like a blind man, letting its tune become my inner compass until I had more to go on. Twas more than that though – some sense within tugged at my heart, pulling me toward Erin by instinct alone – which meant right now, I'd follow it anywhere.

I moved like a wraith out of the park and into the core of the city, the sounds and smells of the waking world a discordant background noise that came secondary to the hellfire of my skin. The burning scent of my flesh dogged me, acrid and sharp, but at least age was on my side. My smoking skin healed fast in the moments of reprieve I found beneath canopies, bus shelters and the occasional shadow of a tower block.

Each step felt like wading through treacle – too slow, too human, when all I needed was to be at her side. My mind spiralled with visions of Erin, pale and still... Erin, fighting for consciousness, her light fading... My long-dead heart hammered against my ribs, the unfamiliar sensation adding to my confusion. Aye, I'd faced

down armies without flinching, but this – this helplessness – t'would be my unmaking.

Though I moved more quickly than a human might, my progress seemed slow while my mind raced ahead, thinking simultaneously of the next route to safety and the possibilities surrounding Erin. How badly must she have been hurt, to lose so much blood? I couldnae bear to think on it, but I must. There was good reason I'd spent many a year studying medicine, both practical and theoretical. If I could get to her in good time, mayhap I could save her. If I couldnae... then I might have to help her in the way only a vampire might – though like as no she'd hate me for it. She'd live, though.

Still following the distant sounds of the river, now underground but still audible to one such as myself, I slipped down a narrow alley and caught my rapidly deteriorating coat on a broken nail protruding from an old gateway. Tugging it, my strength – usually more a blessing than a curse – tore it from collar to hem. I should've learned better than to be fond of my clothes by now, especially when the fashions changed every bloody decade. But a tailor's training died hard, apparently.

The tattered wool fell away, taking my last connection to sanity with it. I let out a sound that was half snarl, half desperate sob. Another delay, and every obstacle between us was yet more torture. I fought to reclaim my composure, but it wasnae my finest moment. Plagues, war and starvation I could manage, but here I was, defeated by a nail and a bit of daylight.

No. I winnae let it happen. I winnae lose her before I'd truly had her. Twas a trial my immortal heart couldnae endure.

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Staying close to the walls, my desperation grew more fierce than ever without the small protection of the coat. I needed to find those tunnels, and fast. I should be close now. 'Twas simply a matter of finding an entrance...

I smelled the damp and rust before I saw it. An old service grate, discoloured and long forgotten. In moments, I'd torn the gate open, its hinges protesting, and dropped into the sweet, velvety darkness.

The relief was immediate. Cool, dank air balmed my ravaged flesh, and my sigh of release echoed against stone walls – a sound barely more than animal. The absence of pain was almost as shocking as its presence had been, leaving me temporarily dizzy as my senses readjusted.

My body, long accustomed to darkness, welcomed it like an old friend. The drip-drip-drip of water echoed against brick walls, each ring different as it hit stone, metal or the shallow stream below.

I plunged forward, ever onward toward Erin. Aye, the stench of stagnant water and decay might be foul as I stirred up unseen things beneath my feet, but twas better than the scent of my own heated flesh. In truth, the tunnels reminded me of the hidden passages beneath Edinburgh Castle, where I'd sought shelter once upon a time. Dark and damp, but merciful.

As I pushed through the labyrinthine passages, my ears caught water flow changes that mapped a vast network in my mind. My fingers traced centuries of history in the stone as I kept forward: Victorian sewage, industrial waste, and beneath it all, the original water that had carved these channels. Now that I was underground, some semblance of direction returned to me, and at each fork, I followed north without hesitation, my heart pulling me along. Even in pitch darkness, I'd find her.

Panic fuelled me faster than I kent I could move, and when I emerged again, the sun hung hardly any lower than when I'd entered – though no low enough. Its light struck like a physical blow after the tunnel's soothing darkness, though my thoughts remained clearer after some reprieve from the pain.

Here, closer to Erin's home, I kent the city better. I flew from shadow to shadow, using just about anything for cover. The city's steep hills – so much like Edinburgh's – worked against me, exposing me to the dying light... but I was almost to *her*.

Erin's street appeared before me, terraced houses climbing a steep hill. Her windows were dark and still. There wasnae a sign of life within.

I flitted the final distance to her door, pounding with my fist, calling her name. Nothing. She had to be here. Gods above and below, I'd trade every year left to me if only I could catch the sound of her heartbeat...

Leaning against the doorframe, I fought to stay upright, pressing close under the lintel. Burns I could heal from, given time. But Erin? Had she lost so much blood there was naught left of her? Was she unconscious, her heart still?

No. My body demanded a reprieve, but I'd have none of it.

Backing away to the other side of the street, where the shadows were deeper, I took in the house with a predator's eye. I'd been here before, kent where she slept – and though her bedroom curtains were open, there was no movement behind the glass. My pulse beat a rhythm in my ears – a rare occurrence – making it difficult to hear much else.

Nothing for it then, lad.

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I glanced left and right and bounded across the street in four steps. My muscles gathered to propel me upward in a quick leap that left me terrifyingly exposed – to the sun and to any human who might step out and witness. Fingers digging into the stone windowsill, I maintained a steady grip while the sun beat down on the back of my head. My skin audibly crackled beneath its wrath.

I worked my fingertips under the paintwork of the decaying sash window – a recently broken seal, from the look of it. Pushing it up, I swung myself around, slipping into her bedroom like a shadow. Seconds longer and I'd have been aflame.

Immediately, her presence assaulted my every sense, and I was drowning in the sweet and heady aroma of a summer storm, just after dusk in the Highlands. Memories pressed in as I breathed deeply – twas no longer just a captivating scent, but something woven into the verra fabric of my being. Each time I encountered her anew, my body recognised what my soul had always kent.

Moving quickly away from the window, the steamy air soothed my skin. As I came back to myself, her heartbeat sang like thunder – first, a subtle vibration through the floorboards. Then a rhythm that filled my ears with force and life. Each beat carried its own scent – the metallic tang of her blood, aye, but layered with spearmint and thyme from her soap, and the faint trace of coffee that always lingered on her skin. That steady rhythm was sweeter than any music.

The ladder to the attic beckoned, and I followed her essence upward like a man possessed. Which, in truth, I suppose I was – by lifetimes of waiting for her.

I flitted toward the sound of her heart, assailed by yet more sunlight the moment I emerged. Clinging to the walls and the

meagre shade, I saw – for the first time in the sun’s light – that beautiful fiery halo of hers, all burnished copper and autumn fire.

“Erin,” I sighed, my voice hoarse and almost breaking. The relief was almost a flavour in itself. She was here – and what’s more, she was, it seemed, entirely unharmed.

Sure in the knowledge of her safety, doubt began to return. The fire in my skin wasnae a damn thing compared to the war that had raged within these last weeks. Aye, I’d risked all to reach her – now I could only wonder if I’d a right to be on her life at all, and I kent she’d some doubts of her own...

My presence here put her in danger and had since the moment I’d arrived. Yet I was a fundamentally selfish creature. I couldnae stay away from her – our prophecy foretold as much. Still, my body demanded blood to heal, and a hunger like that would always keep a distance between us.

These thoughts took less than a second to run through my mind. As they did, she spun into a fighting stance, her body flowing into the position like it was born to it – which it might well have been. *Fierce and bonnie in equal measure.*

Understanding flooded her face as she dropped her fists and rushed to pull down the blinds.

“Shit. Was that you banging on the door?”

“Aye.” I struggled to get the simple word out. “I needed—”

Erin turned back to me, concern written across her features. There was something different about her – a softness in the way she approached me I hadnae seen since she’d learned the truth.

“Burnin’ to see you wasnae quite how I planned it though.” I’d pictured this meeting somewhat differently – mayhap with less smouldering flesh and more smouldering glances.

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She edged closer still, her usual hesitation holding her back for only a moment. Twas as though she'd come to some decision as I about our fate – though I hardly dared to hope it a favourable one. I winnae presume, and t'would always be her choice.

Still, the way her hands lingered above the fading red welts on my forearms, already healing now the sun was locked away... I could almost feel her touch, like electricity – absent these last few weeks.

"You're hurt," she murmured.

"Tis nothin'. Already healing."

The faint pink was disappearing fast, and her fingertips lowered, brushing the ghostly burns that were almost gone. I held back a shiver at the feel of her skin against mine, warm in a way that was almost indescribable – calming, seductive and sweet all at once.

Erin's voice was barely a whisper as she asked: "Is it painful?"

I couldnae take my gaze from her fingers, now sketching bittersweet patterns of pleasure-pain across my skin. "No," I murmured. "No anymore."

She glanced up at me beneath her lashes, and I heard the uptake in her heartbeat. Twas all I could do no to reach out and feel that intoxicating tempo for myself. Mayhap she saw the want in my face, since she took a step back.

Her chin lifted, resolve shaping her stance and tightening her muscles, but she didnae meet my eye again.

"So, what's up?"

The last thing I wanted was to make her uncomfortable, now that I kent she was safe and well.

The pith o' sense, an' pride o' worth, are higher rank than a' that. I recited the words, anchoring myself as I raked a hand through the hair that had fallen into my eyes. Twas a miracle I still had any after

a run through such fire.

Her attic was an unusual space – half-renovated, with plasterboards taped and left bare on the walls and exposed floorboards. A once-yellow sofa filled one side, with an easel, drawers full of what smelled to be paint, and papers strewn about most every surface. It spoke of a love for expression, in any medium. Of a voice that demanded to be heard.

She was watching me now. “Do you mind if I sit down?” I asked.

Erin nodded, her eyes still on me – though ne’er meeting my own. I settled into the worn fabric of the sofa, resting my forearms on my knees. My skin might have recovered on the surface, but I felt far from unblemished on the inside. I needed blood, and right quick. I couldnae stay, no matter how much I might want to.

She broke the silence this time. “Did something happen?”

How to tell her? To keep her from becoming even more afeart of this... this killer we couldnae see or ken?

“I thought you dead.” I couldnae control the break in my voice, but it only seemed to encourage her. She padded across the room and knelt before me, her gaze finally joining my own.

“Tell me.”

Oh, love.

“I was sleepin’, and I could sense the sun going down, when...” I flexed my fingers at my knees, clenching them tight together to keep from breaking. “I caught your scent.”

Erin quirked up an eyebrow in response, a look of something like curiosity and calculation crossing her face.

“I’ve been at the coffee shop all day with Adam,” she shrugged. “He must have had my scent on him.”

“No.” Twas vital she understood the significance of what had

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happened this afternoon. "This was pure. Twas your blood."

She leaned in, searching my face for something. "I'm fine, Nicholas. It wasn't me."

"It was *yours*," I insisted, unable to keep my hands still as I remembered it all. "I went downstairs, and twas everywhere. Under the door, seeping across the tiles... When I opened it..."

"What?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"She was face down, hair spread like fire. Wearin' your hat from the hilltop," I hesitated, but she needed to ken if she were to keep safe. "Someone went to a great deal of effort to hurt me, even for a moment."

Erin leaned back a little, her breathing measured. Her heartbeat, fluttering away, had returned to a more normal level. This close, I could count the freckles on her nose. See the tightness of her mouth as she thought it through. I wanted to brush the sadness and worry away, but—

"Who was it?" she asked. "Who was she?"

Nobody. Everybody. Anybody who might hurt me.

"Just another victim to them." I shook my head. "They didnae even feed – only left her there to taunt me. Showin' me how close they can get..." I couldnae keep a humourless laugh from escaping. "And we still dinnae know a damn thing."

"What do you mean, how close they can get?" she asked.

She didnae ken. But it had been unmistakable – there wasnae another thing in the world that could wake me from my sleep as well as that. And with nae even a clue who was hunting us, I couldnae think of any way to keep her safe that didnae mean leaving her. The verra idea cut deeper than any blade, but if it meant her safety... better the ache of separation than Erin come to harm.

"Twas *your* blood, Erin. No just your scent. I'd ken it anywhere."

Her nose wrinkled, and she looked away at something behind me, her mind somewhere else. A shiver ran through her, and I clenched my hands together again to keep from reaching out.

"We'll figure it out," she murmured eventually. Then, more quickly: "What about the accent? My dad told Tom the person calling the house had an accent. If it was the same as yours, that would narrow it down, wouldn't it?"

I leaned back and rubbed at my jaw absently. There was merit in the idea, but it winnae narrow our search down much. It could take lifetimes again to go over my history for anyone with a Scots accent that might hold a grudge. I'd made my fair share of enemies – probably more than most.

"Ach, that's no enough to go on. I lived in Scotland for years. Met too many people to count. And as time's gone on, the dialect's changed."

"It wouldn't be someone from that far back, though. They'd have to have spent time with you *since* then," she kept going. "It would be someone who knows your history well enough to use it against you."

Shaking my head, a lock of hair fell into my eyes before I pushed it away once more. "I've never made a secret o' my past. Tis my present that concerns me. It's only a matter of time before they come for ye properly."

She drew her hands to mine, her small fingers covering my own and bringing them to stillness. Every touch was warmth and heat – nothing like the sun, but full of something I hadnae thought to find again in this life. There was *peace* in Erin's touch, and it flooded through every inch of my form as her fingertips followed the smallest

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of marks on my skin, taking in the details like no other had in years.

She brushed the uneven patches on my thumbs, and I watched her curiously. "From the sword," I explained, though I didnae ken what she was searching for. "Back when I was human. Some marks are... too deeply ingrained for immortality to fade."

She nodded, and a small, secretive smile broke her face, like the full moon parting the clouds. Every slight shift of her body near mine sent signals racing through me like lightning across the Scottish moors – wild, untamed, and impossible to ignore.

Erin glanced toward the wee light still escaping from under the blind behind her. "The sun's almost down."

Let it stay up and keep burnin'.

"Aye." I shouldnae linger. I could feel the hunger building, my body demanding nourishment to feed its unnatural strength. But tension charged between us. Her skin touched mine, fuelling my thirst and my heart alike, fit to burst. All hesitance faded away, leaving only blessed heat.

"We should get to the manor. We can find out what Adam and Isabel think about all this." Her eyes met mine, determination tightening them. "Identify the victim at least. She deserves that much."

As noble as ye are beautiful. Could ye be mine, love?

I wanted her, and with that thought, all semblance of sanity fled.

The air between us shifted, laden with an unspoken promise. Her scent bloomed richer, sweeter – its smoke-like quality intensifying as her pulse quickened beneath her skin. I could feel the subtle changes in her body's warmth, a heat that called to the coldness in me like a beacon. A delicate flush spread across her collarbone, hardly visible, though it told me all that her words

didnae. Even her breathing betrayed her – faster, shallower, its soft sound filling my ears. Everything about her invited me closer, and I could taste her desire.

My restraint, long held in check, surrendered as I claimed her mouth with mine. She tasted like a late summer storm, and the heat of her scorched through my flesh, awakening every dormant sense.

As she moved up and against me, the soft weight of her breasts pressed against my chest, and her hands found my face. I sank back into the sofa, drawing her with me until she straddled my lap. Blood rushed south in a dizzying wave, an exquisite tension building as I hardened against the restraints of my jeans. I couldnae hold back, and I didnae want to. Devouring her mouth, I memorised the sweet slide of her tongue against mine, just as I'd imagined it. Sliding my hand up her side, I cupped her breast through her jumper, and her heart raced beneath my palm.

Erin's hands pushed through my hair as her scent encompassed my senses. A groan escaped me as she pressed closer, each slight movement sending fireworks of pleasure through my flesh. Twas the sweetest of torments – her heat against my aching cock, making all coherent thought impossible.

My fingers tangled in her auburn locks, freeing it across her shoulders while my other hand held her firmly against me. I couldnae take my eyes from her in the semi-darkness, lost in the miracle of her fire, the perfect weight of her in my lap. Every movement sent a fresh wave of need coursing through me, the pressure and need within growing with each subtle shift of her body against mine.

The prophecy hadnae mentioned the fierce ache of wanting a lass such as her, and how she'd feel once I found her. Her quick,

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uneven breaths matched the rhythm of my need as she moved against me, the exquisite friction making my body throb with desire. 'Twas enough to stir things that rarely stirred within me, and my heart, usually so stoic, stuttered beneath her palm. Three beats that shook me to my core. She pressed deeper into my body, the divine pressure against my hard cock almost undoing all control, hunger flaring within me as I traced my lips along her collarbone.

"Gods, love," I murmured against her skin, "What're ye doin' to me?"

If I didnae pull back now, I ne'er would.

It took everything I had to break away, and I lifted her gently aside to stand. In truth, every fibre of my being protested the loss of contact. And Erin's eyes, open now, told me she wanted more as much as I did. But I couldnae. No tonight. No with what I had planned. Her lips, swollen from my kisses, curved into a wry smile as she looked up at me, and with that one look I almost gave in again.

"We should get goin'," I managed, though my voice was still coarse with wanting. "I'll meet you there."