

A VAMPIRE HUNTRESS LEGEND

Μίσιον

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Prologue

Sarah Richards stood in the middle of her bedroom floor trying to console her infant who was wailing at the top of her tiny lungs. Yes, she knew what pain was, and wanted to cry out as much as her baby was carrying on right now. Instead, silent tears slid down the sides of her face as she turned her chin up to the ceiling and shut her eyes. How, Lord, was a preacher's wife supposed to deal with the fact that her husband was having an affair?

For months she'd denied the obvious. But now her husband's lies regarding his whereabouts had been found out. He'd even violated the sanctity of their home by bringing this woman to their bed—their marital bed. Evidence of the marriage-violator's perfume and blood still clung to the sheets. She'd only been gone an hour on a church errand her husband had contrived for her to do. One hour, and now this?

Sarah covered her mouth and turned away, hastening from the sight and stench of the filth, taking her baby girl to lay her in her crib. With her hands trembling, she left the screaming infant, whose wails intensified as she turned away from her. Shame burned through her. How could she call the church elders, or talk to Mother Stone about something like this? How did a preacher's wife, the first lady of the church, force her lips to say that her husband, the Reverend Richards, had lost his natural black mind?



Amid the now hiccupping bleats from the nursery, Sarah became very still as she heard movement in the small clapboard house below her. There were two voices. One soft, seductive, the other was that of her husband's. He'd brought this whore back to his home again! Once was not enough? Did he think she was so foolish as to run another church errand to an elderly neighbor, at night, again, so he could be off doing whatever? Couldn't he hear his own child screaming her lungs out—and wouldn't he know that *his wife* was upstairs? Did he have so little respect for her, or was it that this whore's pull was that strong?

Tears of bitter rage and hurt stung Sarah's eyes, the pain of her acknowledgement almost crushing her ribcage as the muscles around her heart constricted. This woman, this transgressor, had a hold on her husband that not even the Lord could seem to break... because Father God knew, she'd prayed on it from the first inkling of doubt. Now, her husband had brought a violator back into his house? *Her* house. A home designed for a minister, his wife, and children across the street from hallowed ground? Sarah felt her knees begin to buckle as she envisioned the faces of loyal parishioners that hung on the good Reverend's every word... just as she once had. This house was not a home, nor was it a place where she or her child could find peace.

She resisted her first instinct, which was to barrel downstairs to confront her husband and the heifer that had crossed her threshold. But something slithered inside Sarah's soul and gave her pause. The green-eyed monster raised its ugly head. She had to know what this hussy looked like... who was this woman that could break up hearth and home using something that all women had? She wanted to spy and know the things her husband said to this home-wrecker. What lies had Armand Richards told?

Silently, like a thief in the night, Sarah Richards crept down the hall, hugging the wall. She knew this house by heart and easily avoided the creaky floorboards. Stretching her body, she clung to the very paint as she peered around the corner of the landing. The baby's cries escalated, her pulse rising along with it. She held her breath as she rounded the corner—and froze.

A tall, handsome, sensual male figure the color of café au lait and dressed in



an impeccable black suit, ran a palm across her husband's jaw. The caress was sensuality personified. The sight stole the scream from Sarah's lungs, as her husband closed his eyes and dropped his head back in a display of sheer feminine submission. Sarah took the stairs one-by-one, clutching the handrail to keep from passing out. She couldn't breathe as she watched in abject horror while this man... a man... not a woman... embraced her husband like a lover and lowered his head to Armand's exposed throat.

When she heard her husband groan, something fragile within her snapped. Everything became a blur. Her feet flew down the stairs; her screams outstripped her infant daughter's. The words became a chant—"God, no! Not that!" She would crucify this beast, the fouler of her household! There was no rational thought as she hurled herself forward trying to grab hold of his broad shoulders. She wanted blood. A pound of flesh! But the agile intruder simply swept her husband up in his arms as though he were sweeping away his bride, and deftly slipped through the door with him.

Sarah gave chase into the front yard, screaming, crying, hollering behind them, but only the night heard her. She spun in a crazed circle, searching the darkness for them. Where had this lover have taken her husband? And so quickly? Sarah fell to her knees in the gravel driveway. The stones cut through her nightgown and pierced her knees. Bloodied, she lay outstretched sobbing a futile prayer. A man? It was a man. Dear Jesus in Heaven, no! A man, gorgeous, with jet-black, penetrating eyes, a regal carriage, flawless skin, thick, black lashes, onyx curls that would shame any woman... a man... please no... a man that stood six feet two, with a solid frame and strong enough to lift her husband like Armand was a baby! No!

She heaved and vomited, wiped her mouth and clawed the gravel packed dirt until she could push herself upright. She stared up at the sky and then at the lit window of her daughter's room. Sarah walked slowly back to the house and reached for the telephone. The church matriarch should send her daughter, Marlene, to look after the baby tonight, she heard her inner voice say. Marlene was good with infants. She was a nice church girl.



Right now, Sarah Richards had an errand to run. One that she'd put off all these months. She needed something more than prayer. Her husband was with a man, and the church elders didn't know nothing about pain like that. The old lady who lived on the edge of the swamps had potions and such to correct these kinds of abominations. And what Sarah would tell her would stay between her and the old witch.

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For three days Sarah sat at the living room window as the church elders held the prayer vigil at her home. Young Marlene had brought them with her when Sarah had hysterically called for a babysitter at that odd hour of the night, and had told the girl that her husband was gone. What else had she expected? One didn't call a young woman at that hour and think the child wouldn't have to explain things to a mother, who would then in turn call in church reinforcements—not when there was a problem at the church head's house.

But desperation had kept Sarah from thinking things through that far. If they thought he'd just run off, fine. That had been enough for the old folks to mount a prayer posse—Minister was nowhere to be found, his wife and child had been abandoned. Evil was at work. That was all Sarah would say on the matter.

She slept in the parlor chair while she struggled with her plan, unable to ever go back to her own bed, unable to even lie down on the couch. She refused to eat, barely took a sip of water, didn't move, just stared. Who knew what other piece of furniture had been violated within her home? Each day that passed the black bag she'd hidden in the pantry issued a more urgent call for her to take matters into her own hands. Yet, to do so, would be a death of all she'd been brought up to believe in. It would be flying directly in the face of The Lord. Three days, and three long nights, Sarah pondered the seductive choice.

She quietly thanked the praying people that had descended upon her house, never saying so out loud, just in her mind. Their eyes remained lowered and she appreciated their discretion, and she said a prayer of thanks that young Marlene Stone was keeping such good care of her child while her nerves took leave.

Sarah Richards knew that she had checked out of life. Her eyes simply



watched the point of nothing beyond the window. But on this third night, she also knew what she had to do. The elders, for all their prayers, didn't know where her husband's car had disappeared, or where the good Reverend was, for that matter. But the old seer had spoken of a mansion—a plantation. Had given her directions and landmarks to follow. And she would arm herself with her spell and a butcher knife to right this wrong as soon as the sun set... just like the witch had advised.

Without a word, Sarah stood and feigned illness, leaving the prayer warriors that had murmured without relent since the night she'd seen too much. Sarah went to the bathroom and splashed water on her face, and snuck into the pantry to collect her bag that had been secretly readied. In her bare feet and robe, she slipped from the house and into the night without a sound. She was gonna fetch back her husband, or die trying.

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Sarah stood in the center of weeping willows with tears streaming down her cheeks and stared at the expansive estate. Elaborate ironwork graced the veranda that rimmed the entire second floor of the mansion. Tall white columns created a formidable entrance to the place she'd dared to go. Spanish moss billowed from the trees and nary a cricket sounded. Her husband's car was in the driveway, just as the old woman had prophesized. Sarah's hand clutched the satchel and her feet never consulted her brain as she moved forward, rounding the mansion to the back door that was surprisingly unlocked.

The mansion was eerily quiet as she slipped into the darkness within. Money, power... what riches had been promised her husband by this wealthy perversion of a lover, she wondered? How could a man she'd loved with all her heart and soul do this to her? How could he live such a lie, allow her to bear a child for him? How could he do this to his baby girl?

New tears replenished the salty stream that had dried on Sarah's face. She'd loved Armand Richards since they were children, and had never known any other man in the world but him.



Her footsteps took her through the house, each room making her walk more quickly as she saw sumptuous wealth—but not her husband. She hurried up the winding staircase toward the upper levels of the mansion, listening intently for the sounds of her husband in the throes of passion, but heard nothing. Every well-appointed room was vacant. The seer had been wrong. Armand was not here. But it was clear that her husband had been here at one time. Perhaps he and his man-friend were out on the town, or secluded in another love nest? Sarah's mind took a sinister turn; she squeezed her eyes shut as she saw them naked together. Bile rose within her throat as images of her husband with this seductive man lacerated her spirit. No. This had to be fixed! This was the only way.

The opportunity their absence provided was perfect. She would do what she had to do—go into the wine cellar, the base of the house and cast the spell. Sarah covered her heart and said a prayer for her child, and asked for forgiveness. She knew her prescription was wrong as she tiptoed down the long hallway, found the stairs and descended to the first floor. The long walk gave her time to explain with contrition that she had to *do* something, could not just sit and wait for this to be *made* right. All she asked was that Father God would understand and spare her baby girl—despite what it said in the Good Book about soothsayers and spell-casters... or taking matters into one's own hands. This was a special case, and He had to understand her desperation.

Her bare feet stung with the cuts and abrasions she sustained from walking, crazed, through the woods, over bramble, across driveway gravel for five miles in the dark. The bag of black magic weighed heavily in her hand as she shifted the bulk of it onto her hip, extracted a black candle and a small box of stick matches, lit it, then clumsily stowed away the matches, and resumed her slow descent down into the damp cavern of the first level of the mansion.

Slick stone walls reflected the light from the sputtering flame, and the coolness of the room belied the humidity that made her summer robe and gown cling to her skin. Perspiration from her shattered nerves seeped from her pores, sending a rivulet of adrenaline-filled sweat between her breasts and down her back. Undaunted, she began making the circle in the dirt, using the butcher knife to carve



the strange star shape that the old woman had drawn for her on crumpled piece of paper. Sarah's lips moved with purpose as she opened the Mason jar and splashed blood from the gutted rooster upon each point of the star. And as she set each black candle in place, and closed her eyes, constantly murmuring, the floor beneath her began to move.

Immediately plumes of thick, yellowish smoke rose, choking her in a sulfuric, blackening haze. The rack of wine bottles on the wall began to explode, sending shards of glass to cover her. Splinters from flying wood and glass cut into her skin like shrapnel. A scream choked by spit, terror, and smoke was torn from her throat as she ran and huddled in a corner against the wall.

He could not believe his good fortune. Fallon Nuit contained his amusement as his strategy took root. Providence of this magnitude couldn't have been conjured by the highest sorcerers of old. A fluke. A variable. A tiny rip in the fabric of supernatural law, all caused by a frightened, but foolish, woman. Jealousy had ironically released the green-eyed monster within her—along with another, more dangerous entity that the poor human creature obviously hadn't anticipated... nor had The Vampire Council. Pity. A gross oversight. They couldn't keep him incarcerated for a violation of their staunch, outdated High Council rules, as they had planned. There were things that even vampires frowned upon. Then again, there was this variable called luck.

"You have inadvertently been summoned to my lair," Nuit crooned in a seductive tone toward the demon that arose with him from the billowing cloud of smoke.

"I was called, yes. That gives me the right—"

"No," Nuit replied with a lethal warning between his teeth. "You have no *rights*, but do have the misfortune to be a demon trapped in a master vampire's lair."

Two formidable adversaries stared at each other for a moment. The snake-like creature appeared stunned, then outraged. However, when it offered no re-



buttal, Nuit pressed on, his hunger for the fresh taste of blood stoked by the scent of the frail female human trying to hide herself in the corner of his wine cellar, notwithstanding.

“Cohabitation without cooperation is not an option.” Nuit studied his manicured nails and sighed. “Do remember that I am of the more evolved order of the dark realms, and now freed, I could make existence for you here torturous. But I am a man of reason.”

The demon looked at him, and then glanced at the cowering woman on the floor. “We could come to terms. Fair exchange is no robbery.”

Fallon Nuit threw his head back and laughed. “Indeed!”