

THIRST FOR LOVE

Perched on the edge of a steep cliff overlooking the treacherous Devlin Bay, Morbid Castle sat eerily against the backdrop of a sinister night sky. Situated an hours' coach ride from the nearest town, one narrow road snaking through dense forest the only indication of possible habitation, meant it was extremely isolated with little chance of visitors. Many a boat running aground on the jagged coastline provided Oliver with enough produce to satisfy his cravings and quench his thirst. His family moved on, preferring to settle in more populated areas. Oliver was loathe to leave, content to fend for himself in his familiar surroundings. Years of solitude spent in the cavernous gothic castle, home to generations of Morbids', made him self-sufficient.

The storm raged unabated, matched only by Oliver's thunderous mood. Anthea's sudden, vicious outburst and subsequent dramatic exit had enraged him. He balled his fists as tidal waves of emotion crashed through him. The constant pounding of the ocean against the rocks below ricocheted in his skull and he punched the wall in frustration, gouging a substantial hole in the stone and dislodging a century old painting. Cursing, he righted the masterpiece, ignored his scraped knuckles and continued pacing. Howling winds rattled the glass window panes and in the glow of the gas lamps he noticed his ghostly pallor was all too evident. *She's right, he grimaced, I'm too old, too irascible.*

Her angry voice intruded on his thoughts, her harsh words replayed in his head, "Forgive me, Oliver, but I grow weary of waiting. I'm not getting any younger! It's what all girls' dream of. You say you love me yet you deprive me so. You're so selfish and a stick in the mud! You're not the only gentleman to fancy me, you know! I can't wait forever, I won't!" She avoided looking at him directly, for fear of losing

herself in his hypnotic gaze. He could still hear the swish of her skirts as she flounced from the room and he flinched as he recalled the heavy oak door slamming in her wake. A cold draught whistled and swirled around the hearth as he moved to stoke the dying embers of the open fire in readiness for her return. Although the drawing room was heating up, he felt as though icy fingers had wrapped around his heart. As the flames danced he was reminded of her cascading, fiery curls. An image swam before him.... enigmatic green eyes, enchanting beauty and an ethereal grace...she enthralled him from the moment she'd washed ashore like a stranded mermaid, the only survivor of a shipwreck which claimed the lives of her parents. He nursed her back to health and reluctantly took her into town but to his immense satisfaction she returned to him and they spent a number of volatile but happy years together.

Collapsing into the nearest armchair, his demeanour as gloomy as the ominous grey clouds, bony elbows resting on knees, he ran both hands through his overlong, black hair trying to make sense of her tirade. In some distant corridor of his mind, he knew he should go after her, knew he could give her what she so desperately wanted, but was it what *he* wanted? He loved her, of that he was certain, but forever was a long time to be bound to someone and her temper was a force to be reckoned with. He listened to the haunting silence, interspersed with creaks and groans from the old house and his future yawned in front of him... lonely...desolate.... boring.... Something stirred in the pit of his stomach and he could not ignore his yearning for her.

Oliver sprang out of the chair, his footsteps echoed as he strode purposefully along the ancient floorboards. He shrugged into his greatcoat and prepared himself for the onslaught as he tugged on the front doorhandle. Rain lashed his bare face,

stinging as though punctured by a thousand needles and dribbled down his neck, drenching him within seconds. He battled his way through the torrential rain, boots sinking in the sodden earth. Oliver called her name but his words were whipped from his mouth and carried out to sea. He could not imagine her leaving in the midst of such a tempest and was relieved to find his horse and carriage still tethered. She appeared not to have taken cover in any of the buildings and the continual downpour made it impossible to uncover any tracks. Increasingly anxious, Oliver trudged to the edge of the cliff and gasped as loud cracks of lightning assaulted the evening sky, illuminating a lone figure, crumpled awkwardly at the foot of the cliff.

Recognising Anthea's emerald gown, adrenaline coursed through him. He scrabbled down the cliff face with supernatural speed, oblivious to the multitude gashes to his limbs. He could hardly breathe at the thought of having driven her to her death. Had she intended to take her own life or chanced upon her fate by accident? As he reached her broken body, he cradled her to his chest and an unearthly scream tore from his throat. Salt spray and rain mingled with his tears and, engulfed by grief he wept bitterly, crying out her name over and over. He continued to embrace her until his sobs subsided, his thoughts as tumultuous as the sea. Inhaling great gulps of air to calm himself, he gently scraped away silky strands of sopping wet hair, exposing her exquisite face and an expanse of milky white skin at her throat. A faint pulse throbbed beneath his freezing fingers and he grinned foolishly, oblivious to the buffeting winds. Tonight he would bend to her will, she would retain her youth and beauty for all eternity and for better or worse she would remain beholden to him. Her fading scent intoxicated him and he finally surrendered to his hunger for her. He bared his teeth, canines glinting in the moonlight, and with

one swift, graceful movement he sunk his fangs into her jugular vein and feasted greedily on the delicious juices of her blood.