



MIRACLE AT BLOOD MANOR

By Marie Harte

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As Arisa Clarke gazed out the schoolroom window while her tenth graders muddled through their literature exams, she couldn't help staring at the bed of dead grass where the school mascot, a monstrously large, not to mention creepy, stone sculpture had stood just yesterday. One more mystery to add to the dozens fogging her brain.

In the two short months she'd been teaching at the ominously named Blood Manor High School, she'd witnessed random disappearances, strange sounds that didn't belong in the dark, let alone in the light of day outside of her classroom, and more than one teacher creeping into the school's allegedly broken-down service elevator. Arisa had peeked inside of it just once. Five floor buttons for a building with two levels and a basement?

And then there were the rumors. Beth Johnson had sent Kathie Wilkes a note about a *werewolf* stalking Ed Rowlands, the Phys Ed teacher. Goth-girl Myra Fowles supposedly had a thing for the ageless librarian, Mr. Tersch, whom she lovingly referred to as a blood-sucking vampire. And then there was the vanishing principal with whom she'd fallen in both instant and unexplainable love...

The shrill ring of the bell announced the end of class, and Arisa stood to gather tests and smiles from her surprisingly well-mannered students as they departed for their lockers. She glanced at the clock. A quarter to three, the end of the day. Once the last student left, she sank back into her seat and pondered the bizarre job she'd wouldn't trade for the world, mysteries and all.

A posh teaching gig in the city had paid extremely well but left her unfulfilled. Wealthy parents doted embarrassingly on her young students, city-kids who likely knew more about

stocks and mutual funds than she did, and less about sacrifice and what it meant to earn success.

So the invitation to return to her now-deceased mother's hometown, a guaranteed job waiting with a decent salary and rent-free home, had certainly piqued her interest. Arisa glanced out the window again, taken by the amber and red leaves floating through the cool wind onto the ground...where the one-thousand-pound statue should have been standing. Its disappearance and the black bark of the trees against the bleak gray sky made her think of horror movies, and the picture needed only a full moon and a bat to be complete.

"Wonder if they have Dracula at the video store?" she murmured, tapping her low-heeled shoe against the floor. She watched as students flowed over the grounds like ants around a picnic, yet the familiar sight of learning, the smell of musty textbooks and chalk—Blood Manor had yet to convert to White Boards—gave her a sense of homecoming. Which was odd, considering she'd never lived in Wicker Abbey, merely visited.

"How do you like the school so far?" A deep voice broke her from her musings and nearly made her fall out of her chair.

Containing a gasp, she steadied herself before a large male hand covered her forearm. *Whoa Nelly*, libido overload.

"Okay?" He let her go, his smooth palm gliding along the skin of her forearm leaving a wicked pleasure in its wake.

Crap. There went her peace of mind. Principal Thomas Malevay was her worst nightmare. Handsome, sexy, mouthwatering...and totally, one hundred percent the consummate professional. Proper and distanced, yet friendly enough to have the staff calling him by his first name. If *Thomas* knew even half the thoughts she'd had of him since arriving in the school, she had no doubt she'd be banished from Blood Manor, and probably Wicker Abbey, for life.

Hell, his family ran the town. His father was mayor, his mother the school board superintendent. Thomas ran the blasted high school. His sister owned the local diner, his brother was chief of police and his cousin the town vet.

Despite the fact that the Malevays ran everything, they still acted like regular townsfolk. For such a small town, Wicker Abbey functioned like a well-oiled machine. And except for the rampant gossip that prevented even the smallest hope of privacy, Arisa found herself loving her new environment. And she had to thank the small mysteries keeping her mind occupied and away from her yummy boss.

He was looking at her again with that intent expression, the one that said, "What do we have here?"

“Arisa?” His voice was warm, like caramel syrup drizzled over soft vanilla ice cream.

“Oh, um.” She worried her lip, concerned that she couldn’t stop thinking about licking some part of the man. And that was *so* not normal, at least not for her. “I love the place. Really, I do.” She took a deep breath, wondering. “But I’m curious about a few things.”

He leaned a hip against her desk and crossed muscular arms over his broad chest. Dark brown eyes regarded her with interest, and she had to refrain from wiping the hank of black hair from his forehead to better see him, and to feel that silk through her aching fingertips.

“The mascot is missing.” She pointed to the window.

“He always is at this time of year.”

Arisa blinked, thoroughly confused. “Ah, okay. And what about the elevator?”

“What about it?”

“If it’s broken, why are the teachers always in and out of it? And why are there buttons for five floors instead of three?”

Thomas smiled, and as he studied her, his grin widened, showcasing bright white teeth between full red lips. *Was it getting hotter in here or what?*

“Anything else?”

She frowned. He didn’t seem to be taking her seriously, and he was beginning to annoy here, despite the way he made her heart race. “Yeah, as a matter of fact. The kids seem to think a werewolf’s after Ed, and that Tersch—what is his first name anyway?—is a vampire.” She mimicked his stance, crossing her arms over her unfortunately less than ample chest.

To her discomfort, his gaze zeroed in on her movement, and he slowly licked his lips as his gaze darkened to black.

“You came highly recommended.” His voice had thickened, and he leaned closer as he continued. “Said you were the perfect woman for the job.”

She wanted to melt at his feet, caught in the husky cadence of need. Instead, the practical idiot inside of her shook her head to break the spell, and she swallowed, audibly.

“Who said? Who recommended me?”

Confused, she could only watch as the scene unfolded in slow motion. He didn’t answer, and instead took her by the shoulders and forced her to stand. Then he backed her against the wall behind her desk and crowded her, his body pressing into hers with a firmness that belied his unhurried deliberation.

Mr. Professional was touching her and liking it!

His lips descended leisurely, his breath a guarantee of pleasure, before settling with command over her mouth. Seconds seemed like forever as something clicked within her, and a sudden door within her mind crashed open.

Sights and sounds faded, everything but the taste of Thomas was obliterated as the man before her transformed into her other half, as if he'd been created just for her. Under his kiss, she tasted magic, passion, and a blossoming flower of affection which promised to lead to so much more.

Thomas broke from her mouth, panting, and grinned down at her with so much feeling she was hard-pressed not to grab him and continue the kiss.

“Damn. I’ve been waiting for you a long time.”

“Huh?” *Great comeback, Arisa. Enthrall the man with your non-existent wit.*

Thomas chuckled and hugged her to him, his body clearly telling her he was far from through with their familiarity. “I think you’re finally ready for what I have to show you.”

His heart? His feelings? Oh God. His naked, ripped body? Questions burst like fireworks through her mind. “What? What are you going to show me?”

“The teacher’s lounge.”

She froze, thinking she’d heard wrong. He tugged her, and she stumbled after him, simultaneously disappointed, stunned, and surprisingly amused. Mr. Professional had kissed the breath out of her—one of his teachers—when he’d been known to go out of his way to discourage fraternization between teachers and staff. What did that mean? For that matter, why hadn’t he responded to any of her questions? And who the heck had recommended her for this job?

They walked quickly down the corridor. But instead of the cramped space between French class and the library, Thomas took her to the end of the hallway, where the light faded and darkness obscured the gun-metal gray elevator doors.

He touched his thumb to the sole button on the panel, and they stared at each other, waiting for the lift to return.

“Why did you do that?” Arisa fingered her throbbing lips.

“Because I had to.” He stared hard at her mouth, and she saw the convulsive movement of his neck as he swallowed. “I’ve been waiting to do that forever.”

“Interesting, considering I just moved in a few months ago.”

Thomas stared at her, cocking his head as if to get a new perspective. “I’m going to answer your questions, Arisa. And then I’m going to ask you an important question of my own.”

She nodded, waiting, her breath shallow with anticipation. The elevator suddenly dinged and they stepped together into the small space. Thomas hit the button for the top floor, *the fifth floor*, and the elevator began moving.

It stopped and they left, walking down a nondescript, bland yellow hallway that couldn't possibly exist. A figure grumbled under its breath and approached, and Arisa froze as she realized it was the stone mascot, what looked a lot like an upright gargoyle, *walking* past them.

"Don't mind Harry." Thomas pulled her with him into a grand yet cozy office.

Arisa merely stared, not sure what to think or say. Thomas sat in a large, buttery-soft leather chair and pulled Arisa onto his lap. *His lap*.

"Okay. Let's keep this simple. Harry wakes every October. He's actually a golem, despite what the kids say. A gargoyle is something entirely different.

"Ed is being hunted by a werewolf--Julia Stims--who owns the floral shop. She's courting, and Ed, being the undead, is naturally shy.

"Tersch has no last name. It's just Tersch. And he's a vampire. But he's strictly into vegan blood, and he never indulges on school grounds.

"As to who recommended you, that would be your dead mother. She was a necromancer, like you'll be in time. Which makes you the perfect candidate to teach Death 101, I'd think." His eyes twinkled.

Arisa stared at him. God help her, but he was serious. And to her bewilderment, she *believed* him. Even as she questioned her feelings, she couldn't help asking, "And you? Who are you?"

"The man who was born loving you." He smiled gently at her stunned look. "Sometimes it's easier to believe in werewolves, golems and druids—that's what I am, by the way—than in something so intangible as love.

"Now answer my question, Arisa. As impossible as it seems, do you love me?"

She studied him, the glints of humor in his eyes, the warmth in his skin, the curl of affection in his hard lips. "I shouldn't believe you about any of this. I shouldn't be surrounded by things that go bump in the night. There's no way I should have the ability to talk to dead people." She sighed as he nuzzled her neck, gooseflesh making its way over her body like electric fingers of need. Her heart settled on a quiet sigh of surrender. "And I definitely shouldn't love you. But God knows, I do."

In a blink their clothes vanished, and Thomas kissed her full on the lips. "That's the answer I was hoping for." And together they made magic.