

Calum's Curse



Boxed Set

By

Sky Purington

The Victorian Lure



Calum's Curse

Book One

By

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SKY PURINGTON

Calum's Curse:
Ardetha Vampyre

THE
VICTORIAN
LURE

Prologue



Newbury, England
1987

The vampire shivered with pleasure. Fear tasted nearly as scrumptious as blood. He threw the lifeless human aside and focused on the other child.

Not her, his brother whispered in his mind. She will be needed.

Stalking closer to the petrified girl, he leaned down, smelled her sweet hair. Tears streamed from her little green eyes. So tempting.

The black satchel heated in his palm. The talisman within burned.

A reminder.

With a low growl, he pulled back. If this was the only way to free his brother, so be it.

“Pay close attention,” he said softly to the child. His eyes focused on hers, held them enthralled. She calmed beneath his unnatural allure. “This is what you will need to do.”

As he spoke, she nodded. When finished he leaned close and kissed her forehead. She might remember him, but his message would remain locked away inside her—a great secret to be revealed later. “I look forward to seeing you again someday, my dear.”

Frustrated, he flew out the window and soared over the countryside. The starless night soothed his disgruntled mind.

You must not go near her again. She belongs to me.

If it were not for the great love he bore his brother, her blood would already be flowing in his veins.

But remember, she is but a means to an end. See this through, and I will share.

A rush of excitement crackled over his skin. Anticipation aroused him. The wait would be worth it.

Chapter One



Rye Beach, New Hampshire
2011

W*alk in. Never look back. Leave it all behind.*

The icy ocean swirled around her ankles. The steady ebb and flow of waves an undeniable invitation.

“Don’t do it.”

“What?” Dakota spun. Nobody stood there. Only the Queen Anne Victorian mansion gazed down from its perch across the dark, desolate road. Her new home seemed more sinister than the fate she’d contemplated moments ago. She ran a shaky hand through her short locks and shivered. What was she thinking? With a deep breath, she sucked in the salty autumn air and frowned. Why, after all this time, did she suddenly turn coward?

“Shake it off, stay strong,” Dad had always said. And, to this day, she had.

Imagine if he could see her now. Dakota headed for the house. Pins and needles stung her wet feet when she crossed grainy sand and frozen asphalt. As she climbed the stairs to the front door, light flooded the foyer. Thank God the power was on. It was about time. The thought of spending the night huddled in front of the fireplace drinking bottled water hadn’t appealed to her in the least. Locating the thermostat, she cranked the heat.

An eerie chill slithered up her spine. Alert, she studied every corner. Was someone watching her? *Impossible*. It had to be her imagination.

Ten minutes later, she plunked down in front of the one thing worth living for. Her top of the line computer. Snuggling deeper into her oversized sweatshirt, she defrosted her toes in fuzzy slippers and logged on. With a couple of clicks of her mouse, she had surfed through her competitor’s sites, looking for functionality and/or upgrades. She knew damned well they were doing the same thing.

Screw them.

Give it a month or two, and she’d leave most of them in the dust. After all, the social networking site she created was different than most. It had two options for customers to choose from. One section brought fans of anything paranormal together. Like vampires, werewolves, shape-shifters, creatures of the night? It included a feature that allowed people to create their own unique page and befriend whoever they liked on the site. The other—and far more lucrative option—was the dating section. Looking for a fellow reaper devotee, maybe a sexy hunk with fangs in his closet? Don’t go any further. In addition, her site had superior security that was implemented and designed differently than any other site online.

So far, jackpot.

3.4 million dollars later, she was still undecided whether to sell to one of the top search engines. She took a sip from a teeming glass of merlot and admired her site’s splash page. Twisting in from a murky pool of black and gray it ended on a small red dot. Click on the dot, and a werewolf sprang forward, fangs dripping blood, eyes eager. Click again and enter the main site. She grinned. It wasn’t always a werewolf. She’d created over ten different ferocious monsters and coded them to randomly display on her splash page.

She clicked on the words, *Welcome, madness. Name your space.*

Enter name. She typed, "*Last Girl Standing.*"

Enter password. She typed, "*beyourass.*"

Once the page loaded, Dakota sifted through comments, mail, invites. Why the hell had she created a page here? Morbid curiosity she supposed. Or just shitty memories. Then again, she'd made a few good friends. One, in particular, had caught her attention. He called himself "Ghost of a Chance." Like her, he was a software engineer, specializing in web development, so they'd had numerous conversations about graphics, animation, advertising, and other related topics. Besides that, she knew little about him personally.

A previously left instant message popped up from him. "Looks like I missed you. Hope to chat soon."

Dakota smiled and closed the message. She didn't even know what he looked like, where he came from, but she wanted to know more. Much more.

A sizzling fire erupted in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen. Someone was trying to contact her via instant message. Hell, she thought that'd been set to invisible. Eyes narrowed, she clicked on the inquiring name "I Remember You." Whoever they were had typed, "Wanna have some fun?"

Um, no.

Just about to sign off chat, she stopped when they typed, "Aw, c'mon Miss England!"

Dakota froze. She flexed her fingers and typed, "Who is this?"

Only a site "friend" could instant message her.

No response.

They must've got the wrong person.

About to sign off, another message appeared.

"Has it been so long that you've forgotten me?"

She typed, "Think you got the wrong person."

"Hmmm, doubt it."

Knees tapping beneath the desk, fingers shaking slightly, Dakota shook her head.

"Getting nervous, Miss England?"

So not gonna take this. Dakota logged out of the site and closed the browser. Strangely enough, the splash page popped up again. She frowned. Click, click. The browser wouldn't close. Dakota hit the "off" button on the computer.

Still no change.

The splash page had loaded. The red point wanted to be clicked. Hell, if she would. She took her hand off the mouse. It clicked on its own. Eyes wide, she rolled back. Instead of a creature screaming forward, an image of Earth did. Long-fingered masculine hands formed around the globe. Even the wide, half-mooned nail beds could be seen.

Dakota blinked. "I've gotta be seeing things," she whispered.

The hands began to decay, the cuticles peeled back, the knuckles crawled with vermin. Someone whispered, "Are you sure?"

Dakota covered her mouth with her hand and shook her head again.

A teeth-grinding laugh blared through her speakers. The hands twirled the planet, faster and faster. She pinched the bridge of her nose and narrowed her eyes. Think. She leaned over and pulled the computer cord from the wall. Still, the hands decayed faster while they whirled the globe quicker. At that exact moment, the miniature portrayal of Earth flew out of the computer screen and sailed over her head.

Dakota swiveled her chair and gripped the armrests. Her wine glass hit the floor and shattered. This can't be happening. But no, the eighteen-inch portrayal of Earth hit the far wall. It slammed to the floor, rolled and stopped at her feet. Red wine swirled around the planet. She peered down. It looked like something. *But what? Holy crap.* It appeared Earth was drowning in blood.

Blinking, Dakota tried to clear her vision. This had to be a joke. What if it wasn't? Should she run? Get the heck out of there. She didn't know what to do so. Foolish or brave, she leaned over and studied the very real globe smoking at her feet. She touched the surface and yanked her hand back. *Ouch! Hot!* Cocking her head, she looked closer. A burn clearly marked the country of Scotland.

Slowly, carefully, Dakota rolled her chair away. The globe must have been there all along. This was a figment of her imagination. The computer whirred. She swung back to the screen. Blood boiled beneath her cheeks. Fear made her limbs freeze. Hell had a name.

And it had found her at last.

Leathan Stewart frowned and gazed up at the house. Why had she lied to him? It wasn't in good condition. As far as he could tell, the oversized Victorian should be condemned by the local building inspector, bound up with yellow tape, and labeled, "Don't breathe on me. I might fall down."

She'd actually purchased this thing recently?

He waved his team on and walked through a thick layer of crinkly brown leaves. "Look at this mess. The shutters are drooping. The paint's peeling. And—" He shook his head. "What's that smell?" Halfway up the crooked, creaky steps, the front door opened.

"Hello?" he said. No one responded. *What the hell?*

The door opened further. Inch by inch, it revealed a foyer that looked far different than the exterior. Leathan stepped inside and expected to see the woman who contacted him. Instead, he found an empty foyer with gleaming dark hardwood floors.

A low whistle sounded behind him. "Based on the outside, I would have thought whoever bought this house was crazed but maybe not. Hell of a foyer!"

Leathan silenced his fellow paranormal investigator, Devin, with a sharp shake of his head. The others followed them inside, all silent.

"She's here somewhere." He started to climb the stairs. "Devin, search the first floor, Seth, the second, Andrea, the third. I'm going to the top, where she said she might be."

As he walked, he paid attention to details. To the common eye, everything looked pristine and new. But he had a talent. He could look closer and see it as it had been. Sort of a psychic ability. At first, he saw faded areas in the paint where pictures had once hung and holes in the hardwood that must have tacked a run rug. He looked up. The ceiling was starting to peel; small water stains marred the corners on the second floor and the odor of mildew faint but there.

When he looked closer at the walls, he envisioned the paintings that had once hung there, unknown faces from the nineteen fifties based on their clothing. The stair runner had been red, then faded, then removed. The stains on the ceiling, a problem never fixed because the former family couldn't afford it.

Using his gift, he stopped looking and started feeling. A tear slid down his cheek. Not his but that of the woman who had removed the paintings because they were moving. Her husband wanted a divorce. Aggravation when she spilled warm milk on the carpet runner when rushing to get it to her child on the second floor. Would she be able to get the stain out? Then the day she

moved, two children in tow and glared one last time at that water stain on the ceiling. Why did her husband blame her for that too?

An uncomfortable shiver rippled through him.

There was more to this house, much more, much deeper and something didn't want him here...or did it? Well worth investigating. Climbing the last stair to the third floor, he looked around. Energy pulsed here, stronger than anywhere else. Usually, he could see it, darkness at the corner of everything. This time, he couldn't. But he could feel it. Like a dull throb at the base of his skull.

When he opened the door to the fourth floor, it was to a faint gust of cool rosewood-scented air. He climbed stairs covered with a thin tan carpet until he reached the top.

Then he saw her.

He almost stumbled back. It felt like a freight train drove through him. Leathan blinked twice. He had expected her to look a thousand different ways but nothing like she did. Maybe five-eight, with a slender build, she was beautiful, exotic.

When she stepped beneath one of the three lights, he took an involuntary step back and sucked in a breath. *Damned hot*. Surreal with pale, silky smooth skin, her rich blue-black hair was cut in a stylish bob fashioned longer in the front, and shorter in the back. The light cast her face into a striking combination of cheekbones carved high and wide, lips full and pouty. Her chin line was delicately chiseled from a hard square into oval slopes made to fit a man's hands. Startling green eyes appraised him.

Her greeting was not what he expected.

With a simple nod, she turned away and walked to the state of the art computer system tucked in the far corner of the room. "I'm glad you came. This whole house is screwed, and it all started here, Mr. Stewart."

"Leathan." He lowered a bag from his shoulder and surveyed the room. The door to a small bathroom stood ajar next to a makeshift kitchenette in the corner of the room. A two person table with what looked to be a left-over microwavable soup bowl and spoon had been placed next to a tiny built-in counter with a microwave on it, a mid-sized refrigerator beneath. A mattress without a box-spring cuddled in another corner.

"Good thing I had a bathroom and some food up here or I might not have made it," she said softly. Honestly, after a week, he fully expected to find her cowering and completely mad. But no, she appeared composed, totally unafraid, which made him wonder.

"I came as soon as I could." Leathan headed for the computer. "Good to meet you...Dakota, I'm assuming?"

"Yeah, Dakota, sorry." She paced away from the computer.

Was this a hoax? Dakota didn't act as though she feared for her life. If anything, she struck him as rude, almost careless in her attitude.

"I'm completely trapped on this floor," she continued.

"You said as much in your email," he replied and sat in the swivel chair in front of her computer. "Your claim seemed interesting enough to warrant investigation."

Dakota's brows furrowed. "I must have been persuasive for you to come so far."

Truth told she hadn't been convincing at all. However, something about her email struck him. At core, he sensed desperation. Almost as if he could read between her words—vague as they were—and see what she meant to write. What if he had ignored her, as everyone else probably would have, and her story was true?

And, despite himself, he was a fan of her website.

Leaning back in the chair, he watched her pace. "I assume you believe in the paranormal, Dakota."

Her gaze flickered his way. "Now I do."

He didn't expect that response. "So you were strictly a non-believer before? I find that hard to believe."

"I didn't say that." Dakota shrugged. "What does it really matter?"

Leathan didn't reply right away. His silence forced her to stop pacing.

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you trying to figure out if I'm prone to fantasies? If I made all this up based on my networking site?"

"Sorry," he said. "This is part of what I do. Try to understand the homeowner as well as what's haunting them."

Aggravation shifted her green eyes to a sultry moss-like shade. "You want to understand me? Then get me the hell off this floor."

Leathan kept his eyes locked with hers for a few moments. She should be crazy, out of her mind if what she said was true. Why wasn't she afraid?

The dull throb at the base of his head had subsided when he came to this floor. Could there be paranormal activity on this level? Sure, but unlikely. However, his job first and foremost was to disprove a haunting. Best to start here he supposed. They'd deal with downstairs later.

Swiveling around, he hit the 'on' button. "Based on what you told me I think we should address what you saw on the computer first."

Thump. He looked over his shoulder. Dakota had walked back against the wall, eyes round. Leathan stood and followed her. So she really was frightened.

Dakota's gaze stayed on him. "Shut it off."

Within a foot, he stopped. "No."

"Get me off this floor first then explore it all you want."

"Are you that afraid of it?" He angled his body so she had a clear shot of the computer.

"I've been stuck on this floor for one week after seeing—" Her words trailed off. He knew she worked hard to keep her eyes on him and not turn away from everything. "Please," she whispered.

Leathan contemplated her for several moments. Dakota was stubborn. She was also terrified. He could see how she struggled to keep herself together. They'd further investigate the computer later. "All right, let's get you off this floor."

Relief shrunk her pupils. Her shoulders fell a quarter of an inch. "Thank you."

"There is a condition, though," he said.

"I didn't realize ghost hunters came with conditions."

"If I get you off this floor, I want to know *everything*. All the things you aren't telling me now," he countered.

"Aren't you curious why I'm not telling you everything right away?"

"No. Fear does funny things to people. And I have a feeling you have quite a few fears. I only ask that you tell me everything once I help you face this one."

Dakota nodded. "I asked you to come. You did. I'm grateful. Of course, I'll tell you everything once you get me off this floor, out of this house."

Leathan nodded. Before they left the attic, he wanted to try something. He went to the nearest window and wedged it open. Snowflakes curled in on an icy wind and caught on his five o'clock shadow. He held up a hand. "Come."

"What's the point?"

"I would think that's obvious." He wiggled his forefinger. "Come. I need to see if you can stick out your hand."

Dakota nodded. "I can."

He narrowed his eyes. Understanding dawned. She didn't like heights. So he challenged her pride. "What don't you fear?"

Just as he figured, fire flared in her eyes. She threw back her shoulders and came to him. "I'm starting to think contacting you was a mistake."

Before she made more excuses, Leathan took her hand and pulled it out the window. Nothing stopped it. Not even a sluggish otherworldly cloud of resistance. Still, her hand gripped his. The muscles in her slender forearm clenched. Placing his free hand over her arm, he stiffened when he felt what he could only describe as intense static electricity shoot through him.

She made a low sound of shock—possibly pain—and he loosened his hold. Had she felt it too? Dakota's eyes met his. Her finely arched brows drew down. "Let go."

He did. She rubbed her hand before tucking it into her sweatshirt pocket.

"So what, should I have scaled four stories to the ground with sheets tied together?" Dakota spun away and walked to the top of the stairs. "I suppose most would've tried."

Leathan rubbed his fingers together, recovered from the aftershocks of touching her. "You don't have enough sheets to have made it."

A small smile graced her face then vanished. "I'll tell you one thing now."

"What's that?"

"Despite my doubts, you *were* meant to be here."

He tried not to ask her a thousand questions, knew she needed time, needed to escape from what she considered the most imminent danger. "Let's get you out of here."

Dakota's chest heaved. She nodded. "That'd be great."

For a split second, he wished she wasn't wearing such a baggy sweatshirt. That he could see her figure a little more clearly. Where had that thought come from? Shaking his head, he walked down the stairs and stopped, feet on the door jam. Looking back, he raised his hand and gave a come-hither motion.

"Every time I try to cross that threshold the pain is unbearable."

"Take three steps down," he urged. "Prove to me you're willing to try. I'll talk you through the rest."

Dakota's nostrils flared. "Talk me through the rest, eh?"

"Just do it."

Staring at him, she battled within until she came to a conclusion and quickly descended three steps before she froze, clearly upset. He'd have to handle this another way.

"See, was that so bad?" he said. "But what about that?"

He pointed behind her. She looked.

Fast—before she knew his intentions—he climbed the stairs and scooped her up. Dakota yelped and wrapped her arms around his neck. Leathan left the fourth floor and flew down the stairs.

"Out of the house, please," she urged in his ear.

Not a problem. Passing through the foyer, he opened the front door, transcended the stairs, and stopped. Bottle cap snowflakes drifted in thick sheets. Wind whipped and stung the side of his face.

Dakota gripped his neck tighter, nails dug into his skin. "I'm out. I'm out."

She repeated those words over and over. Carefully, he set her down. When her feet hit the ground, she pulled away, turned, and started to run.

Damn woman.

By the time he caught up, she was halfway to the ocean. He grabbed her arm. She yanked and twirled away. Leathan growled and pursued. *Fast little thing!* When he once more caught up, she was ankle deep in the water. From behind he wrapped his arms around her chest and pulled her close. “Are you mad?” he roared.

Dakota said nothing at first. Her body shook. Her head rocked back and forth. When she spoke, her voice sounded hoarse, desperate. “Let me go.”

Frowning, he pulled her closer. “No. You’re out of the house. I got you here. You owe me an explanation, lass.” Leathan spun her, grabbed her arms, and forced Dakota to look at him. “You owe me.”

Bleary eyed, she peered at him through the veil of falling snow. “It should have ended here, to begin with. This wouldn’t be happening now, the past week, had I only possessed the courage.”

Sudden comprehension made his jaw drop. She was suicidal. Every fiber of his being wanted to shove her into the water, say “good riddance, be done with it you coward above all cowards”...but he couldn’t. How was it that a woman like this wanted to end her life? What on God’s green Earth had brought her to such a point?

Then he thought better. Those who wanted such deserved it. He released her abruptly. Dakota stumbled before she landed with a splash into the water.

Leathan turned away, disgusted. Old wounds threatened to resurface. He’d dealt with suicide before. Damned if he would again. Human life was a gift.

“Screw you!”

Screw him? Furious, he spun to witness Dakota stumbling out of the sea.

“Go for it.” Walking backward, he nodded toward the black ocean beyond. “I won’t stop you from that. Not the sort of service you sought me out for. Sorry.”

Dakota stopped, wide-eyed, legs akimbo, arms shaking. “We have a bigger problem.”

“What bigger problem could there be?” He walked her way. “A haunted house or its suicidal owner?”

Dakota’s eyes grew wider as she stared at the house. “I think the haunted house wins.”

When was the last time he’d got so aggravated with a woman? Especially one he’d just met. Had she *really* been trapped on the fourth floor or had that been some sort of a suicidal cry for help? Who cared if he’d sensed the house was a little spooked. Leathan would leave this case for another investigative crew. “My team and I will leave in the morn. It’s obvious you sought me for whatever twisted reasons your mind told you to.”

Dakota’s gaze fell from the horizon. Her eyes narrowed. “You’re a complete jackass.”

“And you have some serious issues to tackle.”

“Do I?”

“I’m convinced.”

“Turn around and tell me if you still feel the same.”

For no other reason than to make his way back to his team, Leathan turned...then stopped short.

Holy shit.

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Darkest Memory- Book One
Heart of Vesuvius- Book Two

About the Author



Sky Purington is the bestselling author of over thirty novels and several novellas. A New Englander born and bred who recently moved to Virginia, Sky was raised hearing stories of folklore, myth, and legend. When combined with a love for nature, romance, and time-travel, elements from the stories of her youth found release in her books.

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