

BOOK 5

VAMP CHRONICLES

CHRISTIN LOVELL



Darkness Falls

Vamp Chronicles
DARKNESS FALLS
Book Five

Christin Lovell

Susie Hatfield, *editor*

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DARKNESS FALLS

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VAMP CHRONICLES

Diary of a Vampeen
Vamp Yourself for War
Hit the Road Jack

The Innocence of White (short)

Vamp Versus Vamp

Darkness Falls

Reflections (short)

Vigilante

The Break of Dawn (coming soon!)

DARKNESS FALLS

Lexi's life is changing, but her enemies aren't. She and Kellan are running against the clock as the prophecy closes in on them.

And then one falls...

In the newest heart-pounding edition of the Vamp Chronicles, follow Lexi, Kellan, Kai and their friends as their worlds collide and are turned upside down. Relationships are challenged and new alliances are formed as vampeens and vampires come together in the greatest battle yet.

Love will be redefined as death claims one of their own. There is more at risk than ever now that a little one is on the way...

Can Kellan escape fate? Or will Kai rise up to claim Lexi as his destiny?

*To all my readers, thank you for your support.
To some in particular, thank you for your inspiration.
To Ismael, Chayce and Jewel, you will never be forgotten.*

⁴Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, ⁶does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷bears all

things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

**Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.*

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 nasb.

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Darkness Falls

Chapter One

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Kellan checked with me for what seemed like the thousandth time. He wrapped his arm around my waist, drawing me closer to him. He gazed deeply into my eyes, preparing to analyze my answer.

“I’m positive. This is something best done by me and me alone. Having you anywhere nearby would be a mistake.” I swallowed past the serum, rising in the back of my throat; I recognized my body’s response for what it was: fear. I dreaded this moment...I was dreading his reaction.

“I’m coming with you. I’ll stay outside, but you can’t go unguarded.” Drexel crossed his arms, his buff biceps nearly doubling as they wrapped around his chest. His mind was set; his words rang with finality. This wasn’t up for discussion.

The vamp army decided to keep Drexel enlisted as my personal bodyguard, until further notice. He didn’t bother me. Actually, we’ve become good friends, and when I didn’t want anyone around, he was great at blending into the background.

I pursed my lips, taking in his stance. Knowing I wasn’t going to escape his company, I agreed. “Okay.”

I had the drive, and the common sense, to be more careful, now that there was a baby inside me. Since telling Kellan, his parents, Drexel and Sanders, two days ago, they’ve all gone into overprotective mode. When I met Aunt Claire and Auggy for lunch yesterday, even they both started issuing commands about taking extra precautions... that was, after their initial shock subsided.

Just thinking about who I had to tell next, my stomach twisted tightly; I was certain I wasn't going to get a favorable response from him.

Kellan exhaled a deep breath. His eyes glittered as he gazed into mine. "Call me when you're done." He paused, giving me a once over. "Don't let him get to you. It doesn't matter what he thinks, okay?"

I nodded my head. I knew he was right. Regardless of what was said, I couldn't take it personally; I couldn't allow it to eat away at me.

Kellan leaned in to kiss me, his lips soothing away my anxiety for a brief moment. "I love you."

"I love you too." I smiled up at him.

"Let's go, Baby Cakes," Drexel said. He grabbed the car keys off the island and headed for the door.

"Baby Cakes?" I smirked.

He shrugged. "You're pregnant and you bake cakes."

"I hope that one doesn't stick."

"We'll see." He ushered me out the door. Shutting and locking the door behind us, he took the time to ensure the lock was secure.

We walked to the elevator side by side. My heart thumped loudly with each step. Mindlessly, I placed a hand over my lower stomach at the same time I pressed the call button. Catching my move, I shoved my hands in the pockets of my jean shorts.

Pregnancy was already affecting my temperature. It was summertime, but it felt more unbearable than usual. I was wearing a comfortable, silky, black cotton tank top with

my faded, rolled-up, blue jean shorts and a pair of grass green Ked tennis shoes. Flip-flops were always my preference, but they weren't exactly practical, if I needed to run in an emergency. I tossed my hair up off my neck as high as I could manage to get it.

I stared at the elevator doors. "Why don't we take the stairs?" In all the time I'd lived here, I've never once taken the stairs.

"Too many attack points, and only one escape route."

I considered his words, picturing the single doors on each level that would allow anyone access to the stairwell... and ultimately us. Having so many access points would make it easy for someone to corner us, unless we could get to the bottom before our attackers reached us. A chill ran down my spine, thinking about this horrific possibility.

I shuddered, shaking off the mental images. I never realized what a tactical nightmare stairs were. "Makes sense," I simply stated.

The sideways look Drexel was giving me indicated he knew my inner thoughts and knew I'd envisioned the entire idea.

The elevator dinged, the doors opened and we boarded. Pressing the button for the first floor, the doors closed in front of us.

Drexel fidgeted beside me, the rustling of his clothes drew my attention. "I've, uh, been meaning to talk to you. Now that you're pregnant, you'll want space for a nursery. I don't mind if you need the room back." Drexel sounded so unsure of himself. Focusing forward, he stared at the stainless steel elevator door. I could see his hands fiddling inside his cargo pockets.

Placing a hand on his forearm, I reassured him. “Drex, I gave you that room. I would never take it away from you. Plus, we’re going to turn the bonus room into the nursery. It’s right beside the master bedroom, and it works out better, since I’ll want to be near the baby.”

His lips scrunched together. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

I punched his arm, and instantly, he spun around to face me. I locked eyes with him, crossing my arms over my chest in defiance. “I’m not going to change my mind, so get it out of your thick head that I will. I don’t know what happened in your past to make you think that everyone is going to walk away from you at some point, taking everything with them, but I’m not *them*. Don’t pass the same judgment onto me.”

His eyes glittered, as he tried to hold back a smile. “I believe you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why must men be so hardheaded?”

“History shows that nothing changes; everything repeats itself.”

“Yeah, well, it’s about time someone changes that.”

He couldn’t hold back his smile any longer; it lifted his cheeks, splitting his face. “The next nine months are going to be a blast.”

The elevator chimed, announcing our arrival. The doors opened, delivering us to the first floor. “I’m not going to be one of those crazy, pregnant women.”

“Marvelous!” Will exclaimed, popping up from behind the counter of the concierge desk. He was grinning from

ear to ear. "The lad actually had it in him," he murmured. He was beaming as he closed the distance between us.

I studied him for a moment, my mind mulling over his words. It took time for everything to align. "That's what you meant when you said 'we had to do what we were meant to' in the condo, right?"

"I shall plead the fifth." He winked at me.

I frowned. "This was in the prophecy?"

"Hidden beneath a million hints."

"So the people who have read it wouldn't necessarily know about this aspect, would they?" I pulled my lip between my teeth, worry gnawing at me. Kai had read the prophecy.

"Certainly not! The child is born at a climactic point; the context blurs the image. Many would assume you received merely a war injury."

"Wow... that makes me feel so much better." I tried not to think about the future, of what he was insinuating.

"Like many historical documents, much is left to interpretation, Alexa, and not everyone will interpret it alike." He gazed down at my stomach. "Do take care of yourself though. That's more than a baby; it's the symbol of unity between vampeens and vampires."

"I will." My thoughts trailed off, wandering like they do each time I speak with Will. He meant well, but... I feel like my life should be lived. I shouldn't let two strangers dictate my every move.

Will's brows furrowed, as he sighed. "What is running through that head of yours now?"

“You won’t like it.”

“I’m sure.” He stood straighter, clasping his hands together behind his back.

“It seems like everyone knows my life better than I do at times. *You* seem to know what I’m going to do before *I* do. It adds an extra layer of pressure.”

“On the contrary, I know the highlights of your life, Lexi. I don’t know the finer details that create the big picture. I have but half of the puzzle. It’s not my job to whittle away at your life experiences; it’s my job to help guide you through them. I shouldn’t be taking away from them or adding to them. I wish merely to assist you in your journey. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Will had stated something similar before. I knew he wasn’t trying to make my life more difficult, or sway my choices based on what he read and believed, but it did feel that way at times. Everything he said was drawn from his knowledge of the prophecy, when all I wanted was the true William-answer, derived from him, not his blind faith in the prophecy.

“I’ll try to remember that.” I mashed my lips together.

“Do try, Lexi.” He smirked.

I narrowed my eyes at him, finally noticing how disheveled he appeared. I cocked my head, taking in his attire. His button up shirt was wrinkled and untucked, hanging over the waistline of his khaki pants, and the top few buttons were undone. His hair was standing every which way, instead of parting off-center and lying neatly combed to the side. His eyes were bright and clear, unlike the somewhat exhausted state I typically see them in, despite his vamp vision. The final detail giving him away though was his lips; they appeared slightly fuller, as if

they'd been kissed hard and the blood was just beginning to disperse.

I gasped; I know my face was lighting up. "You've been with a lady! William!" I giggled. "I didn't know *you* had it in you."

He blushed. "Please keep your voice down. I am the owner of this building still, and those are my employees," he said in a rushed whisper. He glanced back, worriedly, at the concierge counter.

I looked towards Drexel. Even *he* was simpering.

I continued to rile him. "You didn't even try to deny it. O.M.G. You so were."

"I'm not here to discuss my personal life." He tugged on his shirt, nervously trying to straighten the creases.

"So you can read about, and study, *my* personal life all day long, but I'm not allowed to know one tiny detail about yours? I'm not even asking her name, where she is or how long you've been seeing her."

"I suppose that's fair," he conceded, continuing to avert his eyes.

"I'm going to let you stew on that for a while." I tried to keep a straight face, disguising my smile, but I was enjoying this new revelation too much. Notwithstanding, Will looked defeated. "I'm sorry, Will. I didn't mean to upset you. I'm actually happy for you. Whether you admit it or not, you need this. You already seem less uptight and less stressed. It's a much better look on you."

He sighed. "I'm sure you're right."

"I'll talk to you later. Whoever this woman is, please, give her a big 'thank you' from me."

“I will do no such thing, but I *will* be seeing her again. If things work out, I will introduce you at some point; after all, she needs to know my life’s work.” He finally met my gaze.

I shook my head. “That sounds good. Have a good day, Will.” I patted his chest playfully, before skipping off towards the door.

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Chapter Two

My heart thundered in my chest, as I approached the door. I took a long, deep breath before lifting my hand to knock.

Kai opened the door; his brown eyes widening marginally as he took me in. "Leka, hi. Come in."

Stepping over the threshold, I offered him a small smile.

"How have you been?" he asked on his way to the living room.

"Um, okay. How about you?" *Are we really making small talk?* At least it was momentarily distracting me.

"Good. Did you stop by for anything in particular?" He faced me, raising a single, expectant brow.

I couldn't blame him for his speculation. Lately, I'd only called if I needed something, which makes me a lousy friend.

"No." I shook my head.

We gazed at each other for a minute. I allowed all else to fade away; my heart's steady pumping, and our rhythmic breathing, were the only sounds I heard. The longer we stood there, the easier it was to feel his soul, a palpable presence - it seemed like it was reaching out to me. I studied the contours of his face, the slope of his nose and the curves of his lips. Staring into his eyes, I appreciated the familiar tones of honey and chocolate in their depths.

"Is everything okay, Leka?" he asked hesitantly. Pursing his lips, concern weighted down his brows as he

watched me.

I diverted my eyes and moved a few steps away from him, bringing my hands together in front of me. A knot of fear tightened my stomach. I didn't know how he was going to react.

"I, um, actually came to talk to you. I wanted to tell you something."

After hearing this, he seemed to perk up. His lips curled up in the corners, anticipating good news. "Go on."

I balled my fists against my sides, trying to gather myself. I inhaled deeply, blowing out the air slowly. Feeling shaky, yet still focused, I lifted my head to meet his gaze.

His lips slowly began to turn down, as the seconds ticked by.

"Kai, I'm pregnant."

His mouth fell open, and his eyes stared through me, rather than at me. His whole body quaked, as he stumbled backwards, bumping into the closest chair. His jaw flexed, and his features twisted. Tears quickly gathered in his eyes, and my gut tightened, feeling like it'd been punched. "He has you, doesn't he?" The pain in his voice sliced through me.

"He has my heart, Kai. I'm sorry."

He closed his eyes, working to regulate his breathing through silent sobs. He clasped his hands together, leaning his forehead into them. I watched helplessly as the tears dropped one by one to the floor. This was the first time Kai didn't hold anything back, and for the first time, I felt truly awful about my circumstances. Guilt was threatening to destroy me, shredding me from the inside out.

He looked up at me, blood staining his face. I bit my lip, trying to control the tremble working through me. He sighed. "Aw, Leka, sweetie. Don't cry," he cooed.

And just like that, the dam burst. I was no longer able to contain my remorse. "I'm sorry, Kai. I never meant to hurt you. I...I didn't want this."

He stood up, pulling me into his chest; he kissed my head repeatedly. His fingers combed through my hair and caressed my back. "Shh. It's okay, Leka. You're going to be okay. I'm not mad; I'm just shocked, and maybe a little hurt. But I love you. I've always loved you. I want you to be happy, and if Kellan's the one that makes you happy..." His words trailed off, as he continued to soothe me.

The tears began to fade, and slowly, I backed out of his embrace. He wiped the last few tears from my face and placed a kiss on each cheek. I closed my eyes, leaning in to feel his touch. When my eyes opened, I found him inspecting me closely.

Our eyes locked, and he waited until my focus was solely on him. "If he ever makes you unhappy, if he ever hurts you or endangers you, I'll kill the bastard." His tone was serious, but a smile playfully lifted his lips. "I'll always be here for you. Maybe it won't be in the way *I* want, but I will *always* be here...in whatever capacity you allow me to be."

"Kai." His name was a soft whisper on my lips. I shook my head negatively. "I don't want that. I've been honest with you. I love you, but I love Kellan more. I can't give you what you want and you shouldn't be accepting scraps from me; you should be with a woman who..." I sighed and shook my head, regrouping. "You should try to find someone else to make you happy, Kai...in *every* way. You deserve that kind of happiness with someone who..." Tears spilled,

cascading down my cheeks. My emotions overpowered me, causing my chest to tighten and forcing me to pull away. He looked so broken, like my words were stinging. How did I ever allow myself to hurt someone that I care about so deeply?

“Don’t blame yourself, Leka. I let my feelings for you grow to what they are. I’ve controlled myself, kept walls up with every other woman, but I chose to let you in...and I’ll never regret it.” He gazed down at me, determination etched in his features. As he faced me, his body visibly tensed; I could tell he was trying to punctuate his words with a deeper emotion.

“Kai-“

“Don’t.” His nostrils flared, as his lips pressed into a thin line.

I swallowed hard, surrendering with a nod of my head. I wiped away the last of my newly-fallen tears.

“How far along are you? I don’t hear a heartbeat yet.”

“I’ll be six weeks tomorrow.”

I heard his teeth grinding. He took a deep breath, expelling it in a long-drawn-out sigh. He tilted his head tenderly and stood motionless, silently studying me. Slowly the tension disappeared. He relaxed his body, as if finally coming to terms with what was happening, choosing to accept it rather than fight it. “Are you happy?”

“It’s not what I had planned, but I’m not angry. I know everything happens for a reason.”

“A baby is something to be happy about, Leka. Don’t let anyone rain on your parade.” A smile lifted his lips.

“How about we go shopping? I’ll buy you your first baby item.”

I smiled softly. “Sorry, but Beth and Aunt Claire have you beat.”

“Have they given it to you yet?”

“No.”

“Ah, then I can still be the first.” He grabbed a set of car keys from the fireplace mantel. “Let’s go.”

“Drexel is waiting out front.”

“Of course. Tell him I’ve got you *and the baby* covered. I’ll drop you off at your condo later.”

“Okay.” My heart swelled with relief and love. In this moment I loved Kai a little more. The woman he ended up with - the right woman for him - was going to be a very lucky lady.

Kai opened the front door, watching me closely as I approached Drexel, who was casually leaning against his army-issued vehicle.

Drexel turned his gaze to Kai before looking over at me. “Everything okay?”

I nodded. “He’s going to take me shopping. He said that he would protect me though.”

Drexel crossed his arms, flexing his muscles and glaring in Kai’s direction. “Do you trust him to protect you?”

I grabbed one of Drexel’s hands, pulling his attention back to me. “Yes, I do. So don’t worry about me.” I leaned in closer, lowering my voice as not to expose his secret.

“Sanders gets off work at six today. Why don’t you plan a nice, little romantic night for the two of you?”

Drexel grunted, but his eyes shimmered with amusement. “I see when I’m not wanted.”

“Oh, stop.” I laughed. “I’ll see you later.”

“Take care,” Drexel said. I turned, heading back towards the front door when, all of a sudden, he glided past me, making a beeline for Kai. I froze, unsure of what I’d do if they started fighting. “If she gets so much as a scratch on her, I’ll burn you alive.” Drexel’s voice was sickeningly sweet, but the tone he spoke in sounded more menacing than his usual gruffness.

“As much as I’d like to see you try...she’ll come back unscathed. They’ll get to her over my dead body,” Kai assured him.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Drexel walked away, shaking his head in acknowledgement.

“Have fun, Baby Cakes,” Drexel winked as he strolled back to the car.

Standing at the door, Kai lifted a brow when he heard my nickname. I shook my head, ambling towards the house and him. “Don’t ask.”

—

Baby shopping with Kai was surprisingly fun. “Are you sure you haven’t done this before?” I asked as we browsed the clothing section of a huge baby store.

“I’m sure.”

“Do you want kids?”

His expression hardened, and then, only his eyes softened as his thoughts seemed to drift away. “My life is too dangerous to bring a child into. Security precautions are just that...a precaution. You can never truly escape danger when you’re a powerful target, and as a leader, I’ll always be a powerful target.”

His words weighed heavily on my spirit; he was right. I, too, would always be a target because of my lead in the vampeen guard.

I focused on the pale yellow, one-piece outfit in front of me. Booties were built into the bottom of the piece; snaps lined the inside of the legs and up the center of the frock to the collar. I ran my fingers over the fabric. It was soft to the touch, like a chenille blanket. There was a grey and white owl stitched on the left side of the chest.

I didn’t realize I was crying until Kai reached over and brushed the moisture from my cheek. “I’m sorry.” His voice was soft.

I bit my lip, looking at the outfit. “Don’t be. It’s the truth. Unfortunately, it’s too late to change things now.”

“You and Kellan are working on that though. I may not like him, but he’s driven just like you. You’ll both make it happen.”

I swiped away the last of my tears. “I’m going to make sure of it.” Somehow, saying those words out loud reignited the fight in me.

“I know you will.” He picked up the outfit I’d been staring at. “Now let’s go look at the fun stuff.”

“What’s the fun stuff?”

“Toys.” He beamed, grabbing my hand and leading me towards the infant toys.

We spent a good hour fiddling with every toy on the shelf. Eventually we wandered over to the bouncers and swings. Kai helped me pick out a swing. The one he selected could sway in two different directions and had a built-in music player with sixteen soft melodies. Rather than something hanging down over the baby, it had a mirrored light show. What I loved most about it though, was that the white and off-white fabric draping around the swing gave the illusion that the baby was being carried by a stork for delivery, or as Kai had put it, being delivered to me by an angel.

He carried the box with the swing along with the outfit to the register. After paying, he handed me the small bag with the outfit to hold as walked to his car.

Watching him struggle to squeeze the large box into the small trunk of his sports car was comical. Apparently, there was no advantage of being a vamp when it came to fitting things into tight spaces.

I chuckled as he closed the trunk, a weary expression on his face.

He narrowed his eyes at me. I covered my mouth, but couldn't hold back my amusement. Finally, he joined in my reverie, a smile lighting his expression. His eyes shined as he gazed at me. “This is definitely not a family car.”

“I could have told you that.”

We walked around the car, together, so he could open the passenger door for me,

Before I could over think anything, I turned and hugged him tightly, burying my nose in his chest and

inhaling him. "Thank you." I mumbled, pressing a tender kiss over his dead heart.

He sighed, wrapping his arms around me. I could feel him smiling as he kissed my head. "You're welcome."

I slid into the front seat of his car while he went around to the driver's side. He started the car and backed out of the parking spot, heading towards the interstate.

"Have you told Gabi?" he asked casually.

I groaned. "I haven't told her, Mel or Kalel. I don't know if Kellan's told Craig or not. I know Gabi and Mel are going to grill me before they come around. I guess I've been avoiding it."

"Don't wait too long. The baby's heart will start beating any day now."

"I know." I stared out the window. "How are things with Kalel and Francesca?"

"Wouldn't know. I barely see him anymore. I imagine they're good if they're spending that much time together though."

I gazed wistfully at him. I felt for Kai. Everyone else had pretty much been partnered up except him. Even Will had found a woman. That couldn't be easy on him.

"You do realize that you've left your thoughts open all afternoon, right?"

I felt heat hit my cheeks. "Sorry." I promptly closed them off.

He pressed his hand to my thigh. "Don't worry about me, Leka. Either I'll find someone or you'll come around."

He winked at me, removing his hand and focusing on the road.

“I hope you do, Kai.” I truly meant it. He deserves happiness; he deserves to have everything he is so willing to give to me reciprocated.

—

Chapter Three

KAI

I escorted Leka up to her condo, carrying the swing's box in one hand and the bag with the outfit in my other. Today was wonderful, albeit heart wrenching. Shopping gave me a glimpse into what it would be like to have a baby with her; though, I hated the sadness that settled in my chest. I'd had almost two centuries to mate with someone, and experience this kind of joy, but hadn't. Somehow I knew it wouldn't have been the same even if I had. No one called to me like she did. She ignited a fire in me...a drive to be her everything. I was a bastard to a lot of people, but I'd move heaven and earth for just one shot with her, but likewise, I would also move heaven and earth *not* to feel this way towards her.

One time she'd let her guard down and shown interest, but she was a new vampeen. They were often emotional and somewhat unstable in the beginning. I should have dismissed it at that and never let my walls down. She made it clear to me on several occasions that Kellan would always be first, but with how he'd been acting lately, I couldn't understand why she would keep him on that pedestal.

I knew if I wanted her to continue coming around, and counting on me as a friend, I would have to keep my mouth shut about certain things. From what Gabi told me, it was a good thing I wasn't there when Kellan went off on Leka. I would have snapped his neck right then and there.

"I could have carried something. I'm pregnant, not handicap," Leka said, darting her eyes at me before

returning their focus to the elevator doors.

“I’ve got it.” I didn’t want to push the issue.

Vamp or not, pregnant women are more vulnerable. Their bodies are no longer their own which causes some emotional issues. I’d seen the depth of her strife in the store. I was so stupid to reveal my true feelings about having a baby under these circumstances.

The elevator doors opened and we strolled towards her door. She stopped, shuffling her feet before meeting my gaze. Her brows pulled together; her bottom lip was slightly puckered. “I’m sorry again that things didn’t work out the way you may have wanted them to. I hope you know it was never my intention to hurt you.”

I was sorry things didn’t work out for us too, but I didn’t say that. I will suffer in silence. She doesn’t deserve to be pulled down with me. I’ll just take it out on the criminals and trespassers that dare to step onto Bladang property.

“I hope he does right by you, Leka. You deserve happiness, regardless of who it ends up being with.”

I watched her swallow hard, probably trying to suppress her emotions. She pressed her lips together. I knew she felt bad, like she was at fault for the way *I* felt. I didn’t blame her though. I blamed myself. I just hope Kellan figures out what a great woman he has and starts treating her like I would.

She faced the door, punching in the code and pressing her thumb to it. We listened silently as the lock clicked open. She pushed the door open and stepped through, immediately holding it open for me.

We faced the dining room together. She gasped, her hands flying over her mouth. Her eyes immediately watered. Kellan stepped forward, holding yet another bouquet of flowers. Vases of various blue and pink flowers covered every visible surface in the home. Tears streamed down Leka's face, as she responded to the obvious baby-themed display. She giggled, looking around and taking it all in. For the first time in a while, she seemed genuinely happy.

I pushed past the pain of knowing it wasn't because of me and focused on her happiness instead. When you love someone, their happiness is most important; not your own.

Kellan met my gaze and nodded, acknowledging my presence. As much as it was like staring into the eyes of an enemy, I couldn't deny respecting him for making her smile. "You need to make this happen more often," I said, tilting my chin towards a beaming, bawling Leka.

Kellan's eyes softened as he focused on Leka. "I plan to."

"Good." My answer resounded in my chest. It was good for Leka.

She turned towards me, wiping her face. "I feel like a blubbering mess," she laughed self-consciously. She shook herself, as if refocusing. "Thank you for today, Kai. I really appreciate everything."

I set the box down on the floor, placing the bag on top of it. She immediately threw herself at me, squeezing me tightly. I pulled her into my chest, reveling in the feel of her heart beating against me. Inhaling her scent, I allowed it to fill my lungs, burning into my memory.

She kissed my cheek. "Thank you." Her words came out in a soft whisper, fluttering over my skin, warming me

and kindling my spirit.

I kissed her forehead. "Go enjoy this."

She pulled away, sadness dampening the sparkle in her eyes and guilt dampening her glow. Though, I knew I wouldn't be able to erase it.

"Thanks for the baby stuff," Kellan said. I met his gaze. He seemed sincere.

"You're welcome." I turned to Leka. "I'll be by this weekend with Kalel, Gabi and the High Authorities to discuss the vamp guard's statistics and issues."

She grimaced. "Alright. I'll bake some goodies; *that* should soften everyone up."

"You can try." I never could turn away her desserts. No one knew her secret, even after watching her bake, but everything she makes is always so delicious.

I reached for the door and glanced back over my shoulder, seeing Leka leap into Kellan's arms, wrapping herself around him. I forced myself to look away, stepping out and closing the door behind me. I took a deep breath and stared at the door - for what seemed like a very long time - before finally leaving.

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LEXI

I squeezed Kellan tightly, my emotions getting the best of me. I didn't understand why I was so emotional lately. The house was beautiful. It felt like I was outdoors, in a meadow full of flowers. The beautiful variations of blue and pink bulbs colored the subdued palette of our apartment; the fragrance made me want to take deep breaths. I

wanted to bathe myself in the delightful scents wafting through our home.

He wrapped one arm around my waist; his other hand gently caressed my cheek. Leaning into his touch, he pressed his lips to mine, softly, sensually. His lips were smooth, fitting perfectly against my own. His tongue teased the edge of my lips, allowing me to taste him...a sweet, delicious flavor that's all Kellan. I smiled against his lips.

"They're beautiful." I gazed into his emerald eyes.

"You're beautiful." He secured my hand in his, lacing our fingers together. "Come with me."

He led me into the bedroom, guiding me along the trail of flower petals pointing to the bathroom. Vases of flowers were covering every available surface in the bedroom too. It all seemed like a fairytale: every girl's dream come true. I strolled through the bedroom by his side, taking in the glory of it all. When we arrived in the bathroom, I was in awe. The lights were off; candles flickered colorful rays of light throughout the space. With no windows, the glow of the lights reflected off the tiled walls, giving it a calming, romantic ambiance.

"I drew hot bath for you right when you arrived." He pulled me in front of him, kissing the back of my neck.

"This is amazing. I don't know how you did it, but I love it." My gaze continued to travel the room. Rose petals floated atop a high pile of bubbles floating on the water. A bottle of blood and an array of food sat along the edge of the large tub. He'd attended to every meticulous detail. "Thank you."

He spun me around in his arms. "Thank *you*. Thank you for putting up with my mood swings, my outbursts and my general dickiness these last few months. I was wrong

when I said certain things to you, and I was wrong to take my anger out on you when I'm frustrated with myself. That wasn't fair. I'm sorry. The biggest thank you comes from right here though." He pressed a hand to my lower belly. "Thank you for carrying my baby. And since I was such a moody prick to you, I won't take offense if you're equally as mean to me over these next nine months."

I smiled. "Are you giving me a free pass, Mr. Bancroft?"

He took a deep breath, playfully cringing as he spoke, "Yes, I am."

I laughed. "I'm not going to be that bad. I don't think vamps react to pregnancy the same way humans do. Dr. H said that I might want human food more than blood and that it's normal to sleep longer hours, but he didn't say anything else."

His face was solemn. "Regardless, I don't want you to think that I'm ever unhappy with you, babe."

"I've never doubted your happiness with me, Kellan; I've doubted your happiness with yourself. You just need to figure out who you are and what kind of vamp you want to be." I rubbed my palms up and down his arms, leaning in to kiss the tip of his nose. "I still love you, whether you're an angry bear or a squeaking mouse."

"I know. Doesn't make it any easier to face the fact that I've been a disappointment."

"You haven't disappointed me, babe. You've disappointed yourself. There's a big difference."

He pursed his lips, considering my words. His eyes darted to the bathtub behind me. "Take your bath. Relax. Call me if you need anything."

“What if I need you to join me?” I grinned, trying to lighten the mood.

“You want to cuddle with an angry bear?”

I shrugged. “I’m a vamp. I can handle it.”

He smiled, his dimple winking at me. “Let’s go then, Miss Bear Tamer.” Kellan ripped off his shirt, tossing it aside.

—

Chapter Four

KELLAN

The feeling her soft body pressed tenderly up against the firm planes of my stomach and my chest was euphoric. I encircled my arms around her waist. Absentmindedly, I rubbed her belly, marveling at the fact that a little baby was growing inside her. My rhythmic moves seemed to have a calming effect on Lexi. She closed her eyes, nuzzling deeper into me.

I could lay here with her forever. Reality seemed a world away as I cuddled with her in the warm water. For once, I felt impenetrable; I felt like no assassins or ninjas - no enemies of any kind - could get to us in this moment. It was just her and me, and our baby.

I listened to the rhythmic beating of her heart, calm and steady. Her pulse began to slow down, the first sign she was slipping into slumber. I couldn't even imagine the exhaustion she must be feeling to be able to fall asleep so easily, and lately, so often.

I kept one hand on her lower stomach, using my other to sweep her hair away from her face. She didn't move a muscle; she was already deep asleep.

I studied her profile. Her pale complexion matched the creaminess of her eyelids. Her nose had a perfect slope, leading down to an adorable button nose. Her cheeks were contoured, the fullness angling down to her chin, creating a heart; her nose and chin were the center points, the beginning and end that bowed out to surround her full, rose-colored lips.

Through the bubbles, I watched her chest rise and fall in tempo. Her arms were flaccid, and her palms were resting on my legs. I smiled. She was beautiful. Even before her transformation, when she had more curves...I loved her. And though time has passed, I'd yet to actually define my love for her. It was indescribable; a passion - a pull - drawing me to her, forming an inseparable bond that could never be denied.

Whenever she was gone, my chest felt hollow and my gut stayed tense until the moment she fluttered back into the room. As soon as my eyes land on her, all my fears and worries disappear, and for a split second, my heart feels like it's leaping out of my chest towards her. I couldn't bear the thought of never feeling relief from seeing her every day; I couldn't imagine the bleak idea of never laying eyes on her again or never being able to touch her. In some strange way, I felt for Kai. I knew he loved her, but I would never want to endure the torture of not being able to *truly* love her...mind, body *and* soul.

Lexi rolled onto her side, pressing harder into my chest. I slid one arm under her knees; the other cradled her shoulder. I hoisted her effortlessly into me as I stood. I grabbed a towel off the counter, awkwardly wrapping it around her with one hand, trying not to jostle her too much. I carried her into the bedroom. Pulling back the comforter, I gently laid her down. Immediately, she turned into the center of the bed, cuddling up against one of the pillows.

I pressed my lips to her shoulder and a drop of water trickled over her skin, landing on my mouth. With the towel lying beneath her, I carefully lifted it up, over her body. I lightly patted her dry, as best I could, before tucking the comforter over her shoulders and under her chin.

I returned to the bathroom and blew out all of the candles. Grabbing another towel from the linen closet, I dried off before throwing on a pair of old, worn, athletic shorts and a thin, black, V-neck. I checked on Lexi one last time before heading to the living room.

I picked up my phone off the kitchen island. As soon as I saw the message on the screen, I went over to my Mac Book on the computer desk and powered it on. I logged in to Skype, immediately answering the call that came in.

“What do you have?” I asked, focusing on the silhouette staring back at me.

I couldn’t make out too much about him. He looked to be about my height with a solid build. Based on the angles of the shadows and the way his clothes were framing him, if I had to guess, I would say he was wearing a leather jacket and jeans.

“She was last spotted in Cape Town, South Africa,” his deep voice stated.

I pursed my lips. I wasn’t fond of traveling, especially in light of Lexi’s current condition. “What’s her schedule?”

“It’s encrypted; no access. You’d be going in blind.”

“How many are assigned there?”

“That’s unknown.”

I took a deep breath, my pulse skipping. “I’m lying low for now. Keep me updated.”

“Suit yourself,” the dark figure replied, immediately disconnecting the call.

I sighed and leaned back in the chair, pushing my tongue against my gums. They were aching from this new

information. The vampire in me was screaming to go; my logical side, however, was keeping me planted here with Lexi. It wouldn't do any good if I went off half-cocked. I had more than myself to think about now. I couldn't be as careless as I was before.

—

LEXI

I yawned, stretching and rolling over. A cold breeze blew over me, startling me. I glanced down and found myself naked in bed; clearly the covers had clearly been over me sometime before I'd managed to twist myself beyond their hems.

I climbed out of bed, taking the towel with me and wrapping it around myself. I still felt a bit foggy. Although I was here, physically, my brain was slow to process things. I immediately headed for the closet to get dressed.

I shrieked, leaping into the air as Kellan's lips connected with my skin.

He burst into a fit of laughter. "Sorry, babe." He pulled me back into his arms. "Did you have a good nap?"

I nodded. "How long was I asleep?"

"About four hours."

I scrunched my nose. "I'm not liking this whole sleep thing. How did I ever get anything done as a human?"

"Craig called. He and Mel wanted to see if you were free to go to the movies tonight." He gave me a pointed look. "Are you ready to tell them?"

"I know I have to." I bit my bottom lip. He ran his thumb across it, forcing me to release my hold. "I just don't

think Mel is going to take it well.”

“You’re best friends. Do you really think she’s going to turn her back on you?”

“No. I’m more worried about her giving me the third degree.”

“I’ll be there with you. I’ll be your all-mighty protector.” He pumped his biceps, making a show of kissing them.

I playfully pushed his shoulder. “Go, so I can get dressed. Tell them to pick a movie and a time.”

I turned back to the row of clothes, unable to focus on them. I swallowed several times, my mouth watering and serum rising from the vision of a bowl of cold, vanilla ice cream, draped in strawberry, blood sauce with colorful sprinkles on top. It played out in my mind like a provocative commercial, each layer falling into place in slow motion, enticing me. I frowned. It was too soon for cravings, wasn’t it? I ran my tongue along the inside of my mouth, trying to chase away the desire.

If I concentrated hard enough, I swore I could even taste it. I whimpered. I didn’t like this feeling. The need for this specific food was so intense that my stomach growled.

“What do you want?”

My head snapped in the direction of his voice. I was surprised to find Kellan smirking at me, amusement lighting his eyes as he watched me from the doorframe of the closet.

“How did you know?” I gazed at him in wonder; I knew my eyes were wide.

“Because I know my baby.” He winked.

I sighed. "I didn't think things would hit me like this... at least not this soon."

"Just tell me what you want, and I'll get it."

I looked at him through veiled lashes, feeling my cheeks flush. The tempting images replayed in my mind, igniting a new wave of longing. "Vanilla ice cream with my strawberry, blood sauce and rainbow sprinkles on top." I thought about it for another moment, the details of the images commanding my attention. Thick, gooey, sweet red jam cascading over frozen scoops of vanilla deliciousness. Delightfully, a new layer was added. I mentally watched fluffy clouds of fresh whipped cream being piled atop the layers of melting, melding goodness, and to top it off, a new layer of colorful sprinkles were scattered on top, as a final tasty embellishment. "Oh! With whipped cream too!" He grinned wide. "Please?" I flushed.

"I'm on it." He gave me a military salute, immediately heading for the kitchen.

I knew my cheeks were still red. I was embarrassed to have such a human hankering. Humans craved food; vamps were supposed to crave blood. And I was a vampeen that survived off blood, not food.

When he returned with the heaping bowl, I was still standing there, contemplating my fate for the next nine months. He kissed my cheek, passing the dish to me. I inhaled deep, closing my eyes and moaning as the scent stimulated me.

"Go eat. I'll pick an outfit out for you." He turned me towards the bedroom.

I dug in, spooning a large bite into my mouth. The cold merriment of flavors was orgasmic. I sighed in bliss, enjoying the taste of vanilla and fruit accentuated by a

creamy layer of whipped heaven. It melted down my throat, my serum disappearing with it. I munched on the sprinkles, shivering in delight.

“You are utterly adorable right now.” Kellan nestled into my neck.

He ushered me through the bedroom, as I shoveled another spoonful into my mouth. We crossed the threshold into the living room, and I saw that he had set out my clothes across the back of the sofa, although I stood in the middle of the living room, towel still swaddling me, and finished my icy treat. I licked the spoon before handing him the bowl.

He had a goofy grin on his face as he humbly accepted the dish.

I felt blushed again, finding myself in very unfamiliar territory since becoming a vamp. “It was good, thanks.”

He held up the empty bowl. “I noticed.”

I sauntered past him, dropping the towel when I was right in front of him. I quickly dressed in the outfit he’d chosen for me: a pair of white shorts with a navy blue silky cotton tank. I turned to head to the bathroom, running straight into Kellan’s hard body.

“That was not very nice.”

I stretched up and gave him a kiss. “I love you.”

“Uh huh.” He rolled his eyes.

I chuckled, pushing past him. I headed to the bathroom and found my same hair scrunchie from earlier on the bathroom counter. I brushed out my locks and pulled them back and up into a tight knot on top of my head.

Kellan changed into a pair of jeans, still wearing his black tee. He put on a pair of tennis shoes, also black, and I slid into my green Keds from earlier.

He held out an arm for me at the front door. "Let's go, babe."

I took a deep breath, sighing as I exhaled. "Let's go."

—

Chapter Five

The movie theater was busy considering it was after eleven at night. Mel and Craig met us in front of the box office.

“Hey, love,” Craig greeted me. “Hey, mate.” He and Kellan did a fancy handshake they invented when they were bored one day.

Mel yanked me into her, squeezing me tightly. “I’ve missed you,” she squealed.

“I’ve missed you too. How are things going?”

“Good. I passed the GED pre-test. Did you?” She linked our hands, drawing me towards the line with her.

I smiled. “Yup.”

“How’s business?”

“Steady. I have new orders pouring in every day, which is good, but it eats up several hours every day.” Bloody Bakes was doing incredibly well, considering I didn’t advertise. It was growing so much that I was certain I would need to hire help soon.

“Yay!” She tugged on my arm excitedly.

“How long do we have until the movie starts?” I looked to the guys for an answer.

“We’re squigglin’ in on the dopple,” Craig replied.

“I guess we’ll have to tell them after...”

Kellan nodded, flashing me a reassuring smile.

The movie lasted for two hours. It was an action flick that excited the guys in the room and kept the females perched on the edge of their seats. When you're a vamp, most action movies lose their appeal when you realize that all the impossible moves, challenging stunts and crazy antics of the celebrity cast you once idolized were not only possible, but they were easy even without the ropes and safety precautions normally required behind the scenes. Not to mention, you're essentially living an action movie all the time; at least I was.

"Is it me or did that movie have zero appeal? I mean it wasn't even fun to watch the hunky lead fight off the gang alone since I could destroy them all in half the time." Mel pouted, puckering her bottom lip.

"I totally feel you."

She sighed, before peppering up. "You wanna go to the beach?"

I looked at the guys. They shrugged nonchalantly. "Sounds good to me. I need to talk to you and that'll be as good a place as any."

She eyed me suspiciously. "Why so secretive?"

"It's not something I want to just blurt out."

She narrowed her sapphire-blue eyes at me. When I didn't immediately cave, she shrugged. "Alright, girl. I'll bite." Pursing her lips and smashing them together at the same time, she made an odd, fishy face. "But I am not happy about you teasing me here and then making me suffer the whole drive to the beach wondering what it could possibly be."

I chuckled. "It's not *that* bad."

“Uh huh. Tell that to my curiosity, because she’s a cat trying to claw her way out of a paper bag right now.”

“The beach is fifteen minutes away.”

“Do you know what kind of damage a minx can do in that amount of time?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll see you in a few.”

“Meanie.” She stuck her tongue out at me.

She jutted her chin out, turned on her heel and dramatically stomped to Craig’s car. I knew she was playing, but she was always such a convincing actress. To anyone observing, she seemed pissed and was snubbing me.

Kellan held my hand on the drive to the beach. We easily found parking along the street given the time of night it was. He kissed the back of my hand before getting out and coming around to open my door for me.

I took off my shoes, tossing them on the passenger side floorboard. “I want to feel the sand.”

After hearing my declaration, he bent over and rolled up the legs of his jeans, making them Capri-length. He removed his shoes and threw them beside mine. Standing upright, he extended a hand towards me.

We crossed a small, wooden bridge that led to the sands of Folly Beach. Craig and Mel approached us from a few crossovers down. It seemed we all had the same idea; Craig’s jeans were rolled up like Kellan’s and Mel had taken off her shoes too. Her short, cotton sundress was clinging to her as a breeze blew through.

Mel started running over to us. She grabbed my free hand between both of hers as she faced me. “Okay. I’m

ready. What do you have to tell me? Is it a wedding date? Did you finally set a date?" Her eyes widened with excitement.

"No." I looked to Kellan for a moment. He squeezed my hand, reassuring me.

"What the flopples above then?" Craig raised a brow, studying me and Kellan with keen interest.

I swallowed hard. Taking a deep breath and pushing past the tight feeling in my chest. It felt like rabbles of butterflies were flying around in my stomach as I met Mel's curious gaze. I opened and closed my mouth several times, struggling to push out those two words.

"Come on, Lex. I'm dying here!" She shook my hand.

"I'm. Pregnant."

Her eyes widened and her head snapped back, like she'd been hit. All the excitement drained from her face. "Are you for real? Please tell me you're joking." There was a harsh bite, a desperate plea, in her tone.

Kellan tensed by my side. Unease swarmed me. I nibbled on my lip, trying to hold back my upset. I knew she wouldn't be thrilled, but I didn't expect the polar opposite.

"Holy spameezle. Blastic good news to me, mate. You rilen over it yet?" Craig slapped Kellan's shoulder, flashing him a wolfish grin.

Kellan relaxed, his lips slowly lifting positively. "Yeah. It's good. I'm happy."

Mel flushed. She scrunched her forehead, considering me. "Are you happy, Lex?" Her voice was softer now.

“I am. I didn’t plan this. We were trying to be safe, but things don’t always work out the way you plan, you know?”

She dropped my hand and hugged me. “I’m sorry, Lex. If you’re okay with this, then so am I.”

I returned her embrace, appreciating her support. I needed her and I think she sensed that.

“Ooh! Do you know what this means?” She lit up, wiggling out of my arms to face me.

“What?” I hesitated, given her abrupt change in disposition.

“Shopping! Now I have a whole new reason to go shopping again.” She danced in place. “Oh my gosh. Okay, so if it’s a girl, I heard pinks and browns are in. Or we could go timeless and do a black and white theme, which would go for either gender. Then, when you find out what you’re having, we can add a pop of bright color to signifying the baby’s gender. Like, hot pink or maybe teal for a girl and lime green or red for a boy.”

Kellan patted my upper arm empathetically. I whimpered as I looked at the men. “Somebody help me rein her in.” They threw their hands up in the air and backed away. I cut my eyes at them. “Traitors.”

Mel continued on her ramble, not catching anything I said to the guys. She’d reached the self-sustaining point in her enthusiasm. Basically, as long as I stood there and nodded from time to time, she would continue to answer her own questions and babble on for a while, until she came full circle, having figured out a plan, all on her own, about something that she was never assigned in the first place...typical Mel.

She finally asked her first question - well, a series of questions really - that she left open, allowing her to take a breath for the first time in at least five minutes. "Have you told Gabi? What about Kalel? Oh! What about Kai?"

"I told Kai today. He didn't take it well at first but came around really quick. He took me baby shopping this afternoon and bought an outfit and a swing for the baby. I haven't told the others yet."

"Aww. That was actually really sweet of him. I have to admit, I'm a tad impressed." She nodded her head towards Kellan. "Has he done anything for you yet?"

I smiled, remembering the flowers and the ice cream. I told her about them both.

She laughed heartily. "Oh, this is going to be so much fun!" She started walking down the beach but spun around abruptly. "Holy sugarplums, Lex. We get to pick out a baby name!"

"Eh hem." Kellan finally decided to jump in. "I do believe it's *us* who get to pick out a baby name, since, you know, we actually made the baby."

Mel put her hands on her hips. "I'm allowed to help."

Kellan shrugged his shoulders. "Alright."

"Just don't name the pea 'Barbie.'" Craig grimaced.

"No, definitely *not* Barbie." Kellan nodded his head, giving his comrade the 'we dodged a bullet' look.

"I don't even want to know what you two are jabbering about," Mel said. She waited for us to catch up to her.

We spent the next hour traveling down memory lane and trying to imagine future moments with a baby in the

mix. It was nearly four o'clock in the morning by the time we returned to the car.

Mel clutched me firmly to her. "Congrats, Lex. You can count on me to be there for you. Anything you need, you just call me. I'll even help you bake."

"Um, I don't think I'll call you for that last bit."

She pulled back. "I'm not *that* bad at cooking."

"Mel, you can't even boil water."

"I can learn."

"Don't let her near your bussy, Lex. She'll deliver bitter bits of grut." Craig ducked back to avoid Mel's swing.

"You're not helping me," she grumbled.

Craig slid between me and Mel, embracing me briefly. "Congraddles, love. It's gonna to be a sprite bunt, this one." He rubbed his hand over my lower stomach.

"Thanks."

"Bye, Lex." Mel hugged me tight. "I'll call you soon."

"Sounds good."

They both said good-bye to Kellan and headed for their car. I turned to open the passenger door, but froze when I found a folded sheet of paper tucked between the bottom of the window and the door. Goose bumps crept across my flesh. Every hair on the back of my neck stood on end, as the nagging feeling that I was being watched washed over me.

Fear put lead in my feet, weighing me down. My hand shook, a faint blue streak lighting the back of my hand as I grabbed the sheet. Kellan was right behind me. He came

around, walking the perimeter of the car even as he scanned the horizon in every direction. His face was an unreadable mask, but there was a fire blazing in his green eyes.

“Step back in case there’s a bomb,” he ordered.

I stumbled a few feet back. My lungs fought for air, as I watched helplessly; only able to pray that nothing exploded when he opened the car door or turned the key in the ignition. After everything checked out okay, I breathed a sigh of relief.

I stared down at the paper, feeling Kellan’s presence beside me. It was a sheet of notebook paper that had been folded in half once. I lifted the top flap and gazed in horror down at the message.

You have an army to protect you and two guards at your beck and call, yet you roam carelessly in the night as if you’re not one of the world’s most wanted. Tighten up security, Alexa. I like a bit of a challenge. - CR

Kellan snarled like the supernatural animal he was. “Let’s go.” He practically shoved me into the car. I didn’t even have my seat belt on before he sped off.

Worry snaked through my veins. I breathed through it, trying to control my emotions to keep from fully illuminating.

It was different now. It wasn’t just me; it wasn’t just Kellan. It was us *and* our baby. Before, if I died in battle, I didn’t have any qualms about it. Now, I had to protect this life inside me until it could survive on the outside, survive without being attached to me, which meant I had to live until it took its first breath.

Kellan punched the dash of his car. I gasped, my heart sprinting into overdrive as my blue inner flame flickered. I gaped at the new dent he put in the otherwise pristine vehicle. Abruptly, tears started streaming down my face.

“Ah, shit. I’m sorry, babe. I –” He took in a frustrated breath. “I’m just angry that I let them get this close. If anything happened to you, I...” He shook his head, emotion passing through his eyes and twisting his face. “I don’t even want to fathom it.”

He laced his fingers with mine, kissing my hand. He was completely calm, his rage tucked away for the moment. I swiped at the tears, the remaining ones drying up in response to his calmer disposition.

I lifted my gaze towards him. He was barely focusing on the road. His brows dipped in the center; his expression was full of regret.

“I’m so sorry, babe.” His voice was barely above a whisper, so full of sentiment despite the low volume.

I swallowed hard, instinctively trying to prevent any serum from suddenly rising. I felt out of sorts. Kellan’s demons were quickly surfacing, new enemies were constantly closing in on us; I didn’t seem to have control over my own body anymore. I’d lost what little balance and stability I had in my life. I just wanted to breathe for a minute, to be able to lower my guard for one day...just one day.

I stared out the windshield, focusing on the city lights, the paved roads and the quiet of the early morning in a city I loved; I focused on *anything but* what I probably should be.

They were close. We were unguarded, undefended. They could have jumped us right then and there, but they

didn't. That speaks volumes.

As I inhaled a deep breath, I heard a faint *blip*. I cocked my head, perking my ears to listen for its origin. A moment later I heard it again. I held my breath, trying to be as quiet as I could. Another *blip*. There were a few seconds before the next *blip* was audible; this time though, it continued. Like water dripping from a faucet, like a wind tunnel being opened and closed in quick succession, a steady swish sound softly came into range.

Kellan pulled to a stop at a red light. Our eyes met, recognition hitting us at the same time. We smiled in unison. He unlinked our hands and slid one across my belly.

Our baby officially had a heartbeat.

And, in that magical moment, nothing else mattered.

—

KELLAN

Hearing the heartbeat made it real. This was happening. I was going to be a father.

That meant I had to get my shit together. I couldn't pussy around anymore. I couldn't have the same uncontrollable bursts of rage. I needed to get a tighter grip on my archaic side, on the beast within me that leads me to act on instinct rather than intellect, especially around Lexi.

My first order of business was to protect her and our baby. As soon as she fell asleep, I was going to the vamp army and the Bladangs. I was on both teams now. I was a strategist and weapons specialist for each entity. I'd earned my place, and I'd earned their respect. They would give me back up, or I would raise hell.

I would always go to whatever lengths I had to in order to keep my family safe.

—

Chapter Six

Flour dusted my clothes, as I worked steadily on my list of new orders. My baby's heartbeat had become a rhythmic melody that my body natural worked to, since first hearing it a few nights ago.

The mixer was on high in the background, as I struggled to fit another pan of brownies on the baking rack. I blew out a long breath, closing the oven door, careful not to jostle the rising pastries. That was part of the reason why this business took as many hours as it did. I needed more ovens. I didn't have enough space in my current double oven to keep up with my growing list of requests from my clientele. Today's list was longer than the day before, and likewise, yesterday's had been longer than the day before that.

The High Authority, the Bladangs and Jack were on their way. I'd already accepted the fact that I wasn't going to look presentable. I wouldn't have time to shower, change, *and* finish my work.

"Need any help?" Kellan asked, walking into the kitchen. Typically, he holed himself up in the bedroom with his laptop while I baked.

I turned off the mixer, grabbing the bowl and another baking sheet. I'd have to wait until something else came out before I could put the next order in. "I need more ovens. If you could magically make them appear, I'd love you forever."

Kellan's gaze traveled across the kitchen. "We could knock out the cabinets on the end and install another double oven there." He pointed to the area I currently used

as a pantry on the far end, next to the wall. “We could do the same with the island, though we could only squeeze a single oven there.”

“I would have to get a better storage system, or more cabinets elsewhere, if that’s the case.” I surveyed the space. There were possibilities, but I was overwhelmed by the thought of remodeling.

Kellan wrapped his arms around me, not bothering to protect his clothes from my dusted ones. “How about I go get the architectural drafts of our kitchen from Will. I’ll go talk to a designer about meeting your business’ needs while not disturbing what you have going on right now. I’ll even bring in a professional organizer if you want.”

“Really?”

“Of course. If I had an ounce of baking talent in me, I would help you fulfill every order. But, since I don’t, I’ll just have to settle on doing whatever it takes to make it easier for you.” He kissed my forehead.

“Thanks. That would be great if you could do that. I don’t want it to cost a fortune though. This is coming from my business account.”

“And if I pay for it?”

“I still don’t want it to be an expensive overhaul.”

He tilted his head back, studying me for a minute. “Alright.”

He captured my lips, giving them a nip before caressing them with his own. Tiny shivers of awareness shook through me as I leaned into him. His hands slid up to cup my face as he gently pulled back, smoothing his thumbs across my cheeks. “Drex will be back up in a

second. When he gets here, I'm going to leave before everyone arrives."

"Oh! Will you send my area managers an e-mail reminding them about the conference call in..." I broke away, looking at the clock. "Holy sugarplums. Um, in thirty minutes."

"Sure."

"Thanks." I carefully slid from his embrace, running for a pair of oven mitts to remove a tray of cupcakes. I set them down on the island before putting a new tray in the oven.

"How many more orders do you have to fill today?"

"Five. I have a few treats baking for my meeting right now, otherwise I would be done." I headed for the fridge, grabbing the container of blood to create the ooey-goey bloody center for the cupcakes.

"Okay. Need me to do anything before I go?"

"Nope. Just the e-mail," I replied, setting the ingredients and utensils on the counter beside the cooling trays of desserts.

He nodded. "You got it, babe. Call me if you need anything at all."

"I will," I assured him.

He started for the bedroom as I began to pour the blood into a mixing bowl. Seeing the thick, rich substance reminded me of Kalel, who shipped a fresh case to me each week. "Kellan?"

He stopped and faced me. "Yeah?"

I bit my bottom lip as the many possible reactions of my company passed through my mind. "Do you think they'll be okay with this?"

"Does it matter?"

I considered his question. "I guess not."

I gazed down at the blood in the bowl. As much as I wanted everyone to accept my pregnancy and accept me and Kellan being together, chances were, not everyone would. It was a play on statistics. For some it would be an issue because I wasn't married at the time of my child's conception; for others, my age will be their hang up. For a select bunch, the fact that Kellan's a vampire and I'm a vampeen would be a cardinal sin of epic racial proportion. Slowly, but surely, I was discovering that I would never be able to appease everyone. I was also gradually accepting that not everyone would agree with all my decisions, but at the end of the day, as long as I had no regrets, that's what mattered most. I couldn't live for anyone but myself, and I couldn't live anyone else's life but my own.

I jumped as Kellan's arms came around me. I'd been so lost in my thoughts that I hadn't heard him moving towards me.

He turned me to face him. A single finger slid beneath my chin, tilting my head up to face him. "Lexi, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. This is about you and me, not you, me and the world. Don't let the opinions of others dictate how you live or how you feel. The important people will never judge you; they'll never turn their back on you. If they do, then they don't deserve to be a part of your life or a part of our little miracle."

I shook my head. I knew he was right, but it still didn't erase my insecurities. I cared about everyone that I let in.

To have them reject me now, after I'd bonded with them, would tear me apart.

"I love you." I closed my eyes as his lips gently brushed against mine. His fingers drew circles on my back. "Don't let them dissect your life, babe. It's your life, your body, and your experience...not theirs."

"I love you." I smiled up at him.

"I'll be there through it all. You may lose a few people, but you'll always have me."

The prophecy came slamming into my mind, stealing my breath as his words echoed in my head. God, I hoped I would never have to suffer a loss so deep; I prayed my child was never faced with it either. I couldn't imagine a world without Kellan.

I couldn't picture my life with one less person than what I had now. Everyone added something to my crazy, spicy world.

The timer dinged, pulling me from my reverie.

Kellan released, allowing me to tend to my baked goods. "Don't worry, okay?"

I nodded, giving him a wistful smile. How I wished it was easier to let go. "Okay."

I bustled around the kitchen pulling pans from the ovens, preparing to decorate and pack them into my new company boxes until Drexel returned. Kellan gave me a kiss before he scurried out the door.

I stared at the direction of the door long after he'd left. I knew Kellan was right.

“What’s running through that pretty head of yours?” Drexel asked, coming to stand at the island.

I looked at him. He was watching me, analyzing me. His years undercover really did help him gauge people well, too well at times.

“I’m just worried about telling everyone.”

He chuckled. “Why do women over think everything?”

“Why do men *under* think everything?”

“We’re not afraid of risk.”

“Obviously.” Slowly, I felt a smile spread across my face as I considered the truth of his statement. “I guess I am worried about the risk. I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“If you lose them over this then you never really had them on your side to begin with.”

A knock sounded at the door. Drexel immediately checked the security screen. “It’s Kalel.”

I swallowed hard. “I guess it’s show time,” I said, scrubbing my hands down the front of my clothes.

My feet felt heavy, my stomach churned and my pulse quickened as I went to the door. *Just act normal, Lexi.* I took a breath, grabbing the doorknob and opening the door.

Kalel stood on the other side, dressed in a pair of black slacks, a button up black shirt and a professional jacket. His shirt was open at the top; combined with the absence of a tie, he looked slightly more casual.

“Don’t you look dapper?” I smiled.

He tucked his phone in his pants pocket and gazed at me, a searching look that left me feeling exposed.

I felt heat filling my cheeks. "I know; I'm a mess." I brushed at my clothes, but it didn't improve my appearance any.

He pursed his lips, shoving his hands in his pants pockets. "Do you have something to tell me, Leka?"

Now, I felt the color drain from my face. My hands were shaky as I met his gaze. If I had to guess, he looked disappointed. His eyes took me in, but it was the slight angle of his head and the tiny creases of tension around his lips that gave away his unease. "I think we can't both hear now, and it's obvious." I looked down at my stomach to where my baby's heart was beating, the only sound between us in that second.

I felt Drexel come up behind me. He pressed a hand to my back. "If you have a problem with this, then leave," he barked.

I watched as Kalel stiffened. "I don't have a problem with *it*; I have a problem with not being told. I thought I earned that place in your life, Leka. I think I deserve that courtesy from you and Kellan."

It was disappointment I'd seen. I took a deep breath, lifting my head to face him. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Drexel bristled beside me. "She just found out a couple days ago." His voice was low and tight, a growl of warning hidden in its depths.

I'd never been so thankful to see Gabi. She and Jack emerged from the elevators. I couldn't help but notice how great she looked. Her legs looked a mile long in her dark-wash, skinny jeans and were elongated even more by the

black pumps she was wearing. A perfectly tailored black blazer whittled her waist over a white, linen button up shirt.

Jack was dressed equally as impressive in a sharp suit. I'd never felt so underdressed.

I was just about to greet them when the timer dinged. "Excuse me."

I rushed back to the kitchen, immediately pulling a cake from the oven with one mitt and shoving another tray of brownies in its place with the other.

I sighed as I set the pan on the counter beside the stove, having run out of space on the island. I closed my eyes for a second, thankful for the brief reprieve. My emotions were all over the place.

"Shut the front door!" Gabi exclaimed.

I immediately turned towards her.

She looked incredulous. Her brows dipped in the center as her gaze bounced back and forth between my stomach and my face. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, shit. Now I owe Jack five hundred bucks. Thanks, Lex."

I frowned. "What?"

"Jack told me you were pregnant, but I didn't believe him. I trusted that my friend would have called to tell me." I heard the identical disappointment in her tone that I'd received from Kalel minutes before.

What was this? Guilt-Lexi Day? "Why don't you guys sit at the table? I tried my hand at Danish making for the first time today."

Gabi narrowed her eyes. "This isn't over."

I nodded in acknowledgement. I knew it wasn't over; I had a feeling it was *far* from over.

A few minutes later the High Authority arrived, all impeccably dressed, including Auggy. I was tired of the feeling so sloppy. I turned off the ovens to be on the safe side and excused myself. I left them all sitting around the table, chatting about who knew what.

Drexel followed me to the room, closing the door behind him. "Are you okay?"

I glanced at him. He was gnawing on the inside of his cheek, hinting at his concern. "Yeah. I'm just a little tired and overwhelmed. Thanks, though."

He nodded and came to sit on my bed, as I slipped into my closet.

I grabbed a black maxi dress, a fresh pair of panties and a bra and carried them into the bathroom. I stared in the mirror at myself. I was a mess. Flour and sugar dotted my jeans and tee. A glob of icing was cresting on the stomach of my shirt; drops of blood speckled my whole outfit.

I disrobed. Wetting a washcloth, I cleaned off the excess mess covering my body. I dressed as quickly as possible and pulled my hair into a pristine, tight knot atop my head. My ring from Kellan was the perfect accessory with my stud earrings and a simple necklace.

I stepped out of the bathroom, entering the closet again. I slid into a pair of gold ballet flats before rushing back to where Drexel was waiting.

“You look great.” He smiled, but there was something in his eyes that kept it from radiating.

“Thanks.” I opened the bedroom door and rejoined the group.

I frowned as I looked around the table. “Where’s Kai?”

—

KAI

I raised my hand, tapping on the timber with my knuckles. The door swung open.

“Kai.” It was a cross between a question and a statement.

“Can I talk to you, Will?”

The Brit stared at me for a moment. His mind was locked up tight, but his expression was discernible. He was trying to figure out what would bring me here. Finally, he stepped back, allowing me to enter.

I strolled into Will’s private study. Stained pine bookshelves ran floor to ceiling and lined parallel walls, creating flanks that beautifully framed the wall of windows.

He closed the door and came around in front of me. “Ah, yes. Come have a seat,” he muttered, sounding unsure. It was difficult to catch Will off-guard, so I considered this a small victory.

I sat in one of the leather, club chairs on the opposite side of his oversized, mahogany desk. There wasn’t a single visible part of the intricately carved desktop. Papers and books alike were piled high.

He shifted some items, creating a makeshift pass-through to speak with me. “To what do I owe the pleasure

of your visit, Kai?”

“I’ve read the prophecy. I’ve studied its pages probably as much as you have.”

“Why?” He fussed with the buttons of his shirt, his distress breaking the surface.

I gazed at the uptight man, waiting until I had his full, undivided attention. “Because I love Leka.”

We sat in silence for a minute, the magnitude of my confession bubbling in my chest. I’d never spoken the truth out loud to anyone but her.

“What do you want to know? You’ve obviously come here for a reason.” He reached out and pulled one of the many notebooks from the clutter on his desk. He grabbed a pen and opened the journal to a blank page.

“What are your theories on who takes care of Leka after?” I hitched a brow, flashing him a sly smile.

His eyes opened marginally wider as he studied me, a smug smile dividing his face. “You think it’s you.”

“Let’s compare notes.”

—

Chapter Seven

The High Authorities took turns glancing at their watches as we all sat silently around the table. I received awkward glances on multiple occasions. Everyone had figured out the truth of my situation, but now I knew they were analyzing me, determining whether I could handle all of my jobs in my *condition*. I hated that they questioned my ability to juggle my responsibilities, but I couldn't blame them. Even I could admit I'd stretched myself a bit thin lately as my business has been growing exponentially.

"I made some new desserts that I would love your opinions on," I stated, standing to get the cherry-infused blood and cream cheese Danishes and the chocolate chip cupcakes with chocolate pudding fillings and blood red frosted peaks.

I picked up both trays from the island. As I turned, Kalel and Drexel took them from me. I know it's some misguided idea, thinking I should be resting, that's motivating them to help. Yesterday, I saw a logbook that apparently Drex and Kellan have been keeping together; using it to record how often and how long I sleep. I didn't bother calling them out on it. I knew the best way to handle them was with action. I had to prove to all of them that I was still capable of balancing everything. My appointment with Dr. H was tomorrow, and I was certain he would confirm my abilities to them.

They all watched me as I sat back down in my chair. I glared back at them. "I'm fine!" I snapped.

"Are you even aware of how rare this is, Lex?" Gabi's forehead wrinkled as she stared at me.

“Vamps have babies all the time.” I shrugged.

“No, *vampeens* have babies. Vampeens mated with other vampeens have, on average, two children. Vampeens mated with humans have, on average, one child. While vampeens mated with vampires rarely have any,” she stated.

“Kellan’s parents did.”

“You ought to consider what Beth endured to deliver Kellan.” Laurence’s words were spoken low; there was a delicate touch to his delivery.

“Can we move on?” I frowned. They were taking the joy out of this. They were ruining what I’d come to accept and love.

“We want you prepared, not scared,” Auggy said. His expression was hard, but his eyes were soft, reflecting his concern.

“The division between vampires and vampeens extends beyond just actions. It’s embedded in us. Even our bodies recognize that we’re not meant to be together.” Felipe spoke up for the first time. It wasn’t until now that I realized he wasn’t comfortable with Kellan and mine’s relationship.

I openly stared at him. He sat demurely at the table, with a pompous air to him. I always knew he and Laurence held themselves highly, but this was a new edge.

I thought back to when Kellan and Auggy went a few rounds at my house and Felipe walked with me outside. That conversation felt so different now. He’d indicated that the world would never be perfect. He’d said that if I wanted change, I would have to create it. I never knew he had doubts, that he had personal conflicts with me.

“You are over analyzing me, Alexa. I was merely making a statement, not stating my own beliefs.”

I felt my mind block securely in place, meaning that while I was openly staring at him, I was also making all my conspiracies open knowledge. Heat flooded my cheeks. “Sorry, but you have to understand how it sounded.”

“Why don’t we eat?” Gabi interrupted, giving me an apologetic look.

“I agree.” Kalel seemed weary from the discussion, despite not saying much.

“Dig in.” I smiled, happy for the reprieve.

I sat back and watched with glee as they all enthusiastically consumed my baked treats. I loved the way food influenced emotion. I’ve never seen anyone angrily eat dessert; by the time they’re done, any anger or sadness is gone. Food, despite how different the cuisine may be for each species, will *always* be regarded as a peacemaker to me.

When they were halfway through the oversized trays, no longer piled high, I glanced at the clock in the kitchen. Kai was fifteen minutes late. That wasn’t like him. I tried to keep the fear at bay as I focused on those in front of me.

“This is so good,” Gabi stated around a mouth full of Danish.

They all murmured agreements.

“Thanks.” I wanted to enjoy another baking success, but my mind was stuck on Kai.

I let down my guard to project my concern to Kalel. “*Where is he?*”

Kalel pulled out his phone. With a few taps he was able to pull up Kai's location. "He's in the building." Kalel's tone wasn't right. His brows furrowed as he stared at the device. Suddenly, he stood, pushing back his chair. "Excuse me."

I immediately followed. "I'm going with you."

"Absolutely not," Auggy growled, forcefully shoving his chair back as he rose. "Let the military men handle this. Drexel, move your ass." Auggy stopped and looked around the table. "I'm assuming the rest of you could defend her if you had to."

"Oh, shut up and go," Gabi snapped, glaring darts at Auggy.

The three men moved towards the front door. My heart accelerated with every step they took.

"Never mind. He's moving," Kalel announced, the slight edge in his voice revealing that his fear had morphed into frustration.

Auggy gave an exaggerated sigh as he ambled back to the table and plopped back into his seat.

Drexel grabbed one of each dessert and winked at me. I gave him a warm smile. He tipped his head to everyone at the table before disappearing into his bedroom.

Before Kai could knock, Kalel opened the door for him. "You're late," Kalel stated.

"So I am," Kai agreed as he rounded the corner. His gaze immediately searched for me. "I was tending to personal business."

There was something in his eyes that caused me to sit up and take notice. He was trying to tell me something, but

I couldn't figure out what.

"Let's start, shall we?" Laurence said.

Auggy pulled out his cell phone and set it in the center of the table.

I stood and grabbed my notebook, which I'd set on the coffee table between batches earlier. Flipping to the back page, I retrieved the phone numbers for my army contacts. These are the men I'd appointed to keep watch over different sections of the world which also included watching over all the vampeen army members roaming in them.

I dialed them all individually, requesting a detailed general status report. We'd reached the eighth and final manager when it everything came tumbling down.

"Rashik, what is your status?"

"I'm active in South Africa."

Suddenly there was a loud crash in the background, metal smacking into cement walls. Rashik's breathing became labored.

"Rashik? What's going on?" My heart raced, as I listened carefully. The others sitting with me were silently evaluating all the background noise.

I heard Rashik struggling, though I couldn't decide if it was to get away or not. "Rashik?" His name was a hard bite on my tongue.

"I'm afraid he can't come to the phone right now." The female voice sent chills down my spine.

"Who are you?" I demanded. I snagged my phone off the kitchen island and immediately began recording the

call.

“Cecilia sends her love. She really is enjoying this, Lexi.”

I silenced the table with a single hand gesture to keep the female on the other end from knowing I wasn't alone.

“Don't you dare hurt him. If you have a problem with me, you take it up with me. Don't hide behind my army.” My stomach churned as I challenged her. I didn't know if I was ready to take on Cecilia and her army, but I wasn't about to let Rashik take the fall for me.

“Don't worry. We'll treat him as our honored guest.”

“You better.” My voice was low, a rough growl, awakening every nerve ending in my body.

The moment she hung up, the serum erupted into my mouth, coating my tongue. The new gag reflex I'd developed in the past week had me swallowing hard to keep down everything I'd eaten. I abruptly pushed away from the table. Gabi, Kai, Kalel and Auggy all stood, watching me closely.

I sheepishly waved my hands. “I'm fine.”

The moment the words left my mouth, an acidic burn rose up into my throat, mixing with my serum. I dashed to my bathroom in time for it all to come spewing out. I didn't know what I was heaving up, but it was scorching my insides.

I stared down in shock at the red liquid filling the bowl. *Was I vomiting blood? I'm a vamp. We use every ounce of blood we consume. Nothing is wasted...or nothing was...*

A damp cloth was tenderly pressed to my forehead. "Are you okay, Leka?"

Kai had squatted down behind me, his legs bowing out, encasing my back, as his hands wiped the damp cloth over my face and neck.

"Um, yeah." My voice was groggy; reminiscent of a human's in the morning, prior to moistening their throat. My mouth, throat and chest burned, a fire flaring deep and rising higher with each passing second. A delayed reaction, I suppose.

I promptly stood, closed the toilet lid, and flushed, not wanting to linger in this awkward position any longer. I turned and smacked right into him; he was a hard wall of muscle.

He slit his eyes, watching me like a hawk. "Are you sure you're okay?" There was doubt in his tone.

I averted my gaze, not wanting to obligate him further. "I'm okay." I moved past him, grabbing my toothbrush.

Kai stood close by. He didn't say anything further, but he made it obvious that he didn't believe me.

I rinsed my mouth with warm water before standing to face him. "Let's go." I jerked my head to the side, towards the door, to emphasize my point.

His face was solemn as he gestured for me to walk ahead of him.

I sighed, heading out first. Whispered conversations ceased the second I entered the living room.

I focused on keeping my head held high as I approached them. "Okay, I'm leaving this meeting early. I'm taking Drexel and heading to my grandfather's compound.

He has voice recognition software that can hopefully tell me which vampire has my employee." I picked up my phone from the table.

"Please sit, Alexa," Laurence requested.

My gaze traveled around the table. When Auggy and Gabi, both, averted their gazes, I knew something was going on.

"No. I'm not compromising my position. I'm perfectly fine. I can handle this. I'm not signing anything over so you'd have to pry it from my hands." I left them sitting there, stupefied. I knocked briefly on Drex's door before barging in. "Suit up and let's go."

He looked up from his book, noticing the determination set in my jaw and the slight dip of my brow. Immediately, he set the book down and sprang to his feet. Opening the closet, he took off his shirt and tossed it into a hamper. Grabbing several holsters, he clipped them around his chest, shoulders and waist. He shoved varying kinds of weapons into the openings before pulling a clean black t-shirt over everything. Somehow, despite the tightness of the tee, his bulky muscles seemed to provide the perfect grooves to conceal the weapons between the material and his skin.

Closing the closet doors and turning in my direction, he gave me a small smile. "Let's go, Baby Cakes."

I couldn't contain my smile. I loved that he didn't question me...he *never* doubted me. "Let's go."

As we walked through the dining room, everyone was still sitting around the table probably discussing me - though, I'd already tuned them out. Gabi and Jack hastily stood.

“We’re going with you,” Gabi announced.

I stopped and glanced back at them.

“Jack can help with any software issues you have, and I can call in a few Bladang contacts on the continent to search for the *pendeja* the moment we have a name.” Her words were rushed, as if she knew my patience was short, and I might walk away if she didn’t make her case quick.

I nodded, knowing a good deal when I heard it.
“Alright. You can follow us.”

“I’m going too. I can help with the computer stuff too,” Kai interjected.

“Fine. Whoever wants to come, who isn’t going to challenge my every move or question my ability to function, just follow me and Drex.” I turned and walked out the door.

I frowned, realizing the other army leaders didn’t have a way to lock the door behind them. “Is Sanders here?” I asked Drexel, never stopping as we arrived at the elevators.

“I’ll have him come by to lock up.”

I met his gaze. “Thanks.”

—

Chapter Eight

Walking through the door of my grandfather's home sent chills racing down my spine. I couldn't stop myself from picturing his death. I shuddered as a flash of his head hitting the floor popped into the forefront of my mind.

"You okay, *chica*?" Gabi asked.

I opened my eyes, shaking myself. "Yeah." I swallowed hard as I looked around his home. It was untouched. I made sure that no one came in or out. It was one of the few places that I stationed a guard at all times.

Fernando was the guard on duty when we arrived. I couldn't explain how happy I was to see him in position, ready for anything, including a group of attackers. He'd radioed for back-up before choosing a high point in a tree above the porch, where he could see everything and also have a fighting advantage.

I quickly called him off. His dedication earned him respect in my eyes. I promised him a bonus for his diligence before pushing through the front door. The only indication that he was appreciative was the sparkle in his eyes and the slight upturn of his lips; then, he nodded and resumed his previous surveillance position.

"Jack, do you mind leading us down?"

"Certainly." He stepped forward, moving past the group.

We followed him through the dining room, into the kitchen and down the steps that seemed to lead to a basement. Past the concrete hall, we arrived at the office space.

My eyes immediately sought the conference room in the corner. I knew it split in half, dropping unsuspecting victims, mainly vamps, down the hatch. I easily pictured a business meeting gone bad. How simple would it be to send your new enemy down the chute, falling through a maze of dungeons and traps?

My grandfather was smart. He really was a great strategist. I didn't understand the layout of his home before. I couldn't conceive his play, his mindset. Now I got it.

He needed the control room to be another level down, because anyone could find his office space. It didn't matter if it was on a blueprint or not. No one would ever guess that an office floor, no less a boardroom, could split in half and open up the gates of hell.

Everyone on my grandfather's team knew about the control room. They also knew the traps that had been laid out and knew better than to get caught in them. They still needed a safe haven in the event that someone was clever enough to outsmart them. Should a team member shut themselves in the control room, they would be able to control everything in the dungeons below: every acid shower, every blaze of fire, every drop or rise in temperature. They'd also control the doors, the access points below and the cameras monitoring them. They could call for back up and know exactly where they were en route. My grandfather had thought of as much as possible when designing his home...including how to defeat his own granddaughter within it.

"Leka." Kai placed a hand on my shoulder, pulling me out of my trance.

I mentally shook myself. "Sorry. Um, we can use any of the computers in the perimeter offices. They're the only

ones with access to the software.”

I headed for a corner office far away from the conference room, not wanting to be any closer to the memories.

I breezed into the space and pressed the power button on the computer, praying that it turned on after being untouched for several months. I squealed inside when I heard the telltale beep that signaled it was booting.

I set my phone down on the desk and focused on logging into the back office of the computer, where I could access the voice recognition software.

As I waited for the program to load, I couldn't help but praise my grandfather. He really did know what he was doing in this field. He was old school, yet open to all that modern technology had to offer. He took advantage of his historical wisdom and the plethora of technological advances over the centuries. He'd amassed a ton of electronics, software, weapons and more. I was slightly shaken when I realized that it all belonged to me now.

The moment the program was open and ready, I played back the conversation between myself and the unknown vampire.

“Two matches had been found,” the computer relayed.

The group gathered around, waiting with me.

“Alexa Lorryne Jackson, daughter of Sharon and Stewart Jackson. Date of birth is confirmed and available. Birth city is confirmed and available. Three-hundred sixty-two relatives are identified and available. Current location is unknown.”

I gaped at the screen. Here I thought I only had Aunt Claire left. I guess Cesar wasn't exaggerating when he said he'd built an army.

"Wow, Lex. That's a big family reunion," Gabi stared at the screen with me.

My picture was visible in the top left corner. My stats spread from left to right beside the photo. The three-columned list of my relatives all blurred together. A first and last name as well as a city and state or country was provided.

I cleared my throat, clicking 'Next' to obtain what we'd really come for. I would have to go climbing into my family tree another time.

"Kalia Lexus Constancia, daughter of Sheeba and Arrameo Constancia. Date of birth is confirmed and available. Birth city is currently unavailable. One relative is identified and available. Current location is Cape Town, South Africa."

I enlarged the picture of Kalia. It was a grainy photo that was probably snapped by a traffic camera based on her movements. Even without perfect pixilation, the girl's attitude came across in the picture perfectly.

She was dressed in black skinny jeans tucked into combat boots. A sleeveless hot pink shirt poked out beneath a black tank top. Oversized metal stud earrings gave her a hard edge, but the pile of tight curls falling around her face softened it. Her mother's African American ethnicity shined beautifully in her curls while her father's Hispanic heritage gave her smooth, olive skin. Her lashes covered her eyes, but from the tiny visible slits, it appeared she had green-grey eyes, a unique coloring given that both of her parent's eyes were most likely brown.

I clicked several links and pulled up as much information as possible on the girl. From what I gathered, her father was a vampire; her one confirmed living relative.

I frowned as I continued reading. "This can't be possible." I highlighted the information and stepped back. "How can she be one-hundred percent vampire but have a human mother and full-blood vampire father? Shouldn't she be a vampeen?"

"Shit," Kai murmured.

Shit wasn't good.

I butted my way back to the computer, pulling up her photo again. I knew my features were scrunched as I pondered her status.

I pressed my bottom lip between my teeth as I examined her image. She looked young. Her cheeks were still slightly rounded with baby fat. Her chest didn't extend very far, indicating that either she wasn't blessed in the bosom department or she possibly never got the chance to develop. She appeared short. Taking into account the downward angle of the photograph, I would guess she was just five feet tall.

I firmly pressed my lips together, considering the pint-sized pistol of spunk. If I had to guess, she looked about fourteen. "Is it possible for a vampire to bite a vampeen before she changes, overriding her DNA and changing her early; essentially wiping out her human-vamp mix?"

"All armies have forbidden feeding upon children," Kai stated.

My mind was busy working, tossing around all the facts. "Do you think her dad could have bitten her ahead of time, because he wanted her to be on his side? If she'd

changed, she would have technically been a vampeen with fifty-percent vampire.”

“You never know,” Gabi offered.

I sighed. Something about the situation didn’t sit well with me. Of course, that could have been because she had one of my men. I pulled out my cord and downloaded the information on the girl into my phone. I immediately sent it out to the High Authorities, the Bladangs, Jack and all of my primary vampeen army contacts. Bad past or not, Kalia was now on my hit list.

“Let’s go. I’ll follow up with everyone on the road.”

“Lexi, would you mind terribly if I obtained a copy of this software? I’ve seen hundreds of voice recognition programs on the market, but none with a complete log of all vamps.” Jack stared at the screen with fascination.

I knew it was wrong to judge a man based on his past; people change. I was apprehensive to give him access to this program because of what he’d put us all through. If he had access to software like this, I could only imagine how much the ante would have increased.

His expression slipped, revealing his hurt. “Forget I asked.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. Of course you can have a copy of it. My only requirement is that you encode it so that it’s impossible to hack on your system. I’m trusting that you won’t abuse it.”

He gave me a small smile. “I am a changed man, Lexi.”

Gabi wrapped her arms around him, hanging onto his side. She smiled proudly. “He really is, Lex.”

“Alright.” I knew this was a good way to mend our rocky past. Jack could never prove himself, unless I took a leap of faith.

Humanity involved risk. We lived off an honor system. The risk came into play when someone destroyed his or her honor. I was a firm believer in second chances, but that’s what they were: chances...risks. I was choosing the side of humanity, and humility, with Jack. All of us must grovel for redemption at some point; so it was always best to *give* the forgiveness you’d be seeking...the second chance you’d be hoping for.

—

Chapter Nine

Kai, Gabi and Jack left, going to attend to some Bladang business, leaving Drexel and me to drive home alone.

I immediately called my managers, my primary contacts for the vampeen army. I ordered them to deploy our best operatives to the general area that Rashik was taken from. I sent up a silent prayer that they wouldn't get hurt in the process. I knew I was going to have to face Cecilia and Kalia eventually, but for now, I'd send in the experts.

My heart was heavy as I called the High Authorities and relayed everything. I sent them out a profile. Auggy agreed to send in a team to back up my men. My gut twisted at the knowledge that I was launching a war against the vampire army in doing this. I was against war, but I wouldn't be walked all over, not when it involved others.

Cecilia crossed the line when she sent in Kalia. Taking my people, doing God only knows what to them, infuriated me - perhaps that's exactly what she was aiming for. She wanted to evoke a reaction from me. She wanted my attention, beyond a little note of presence...and she got it.

I breathed through the constriction around my chest. My baby's heartbeat was steady in the background, a soothing melody keeping me calm when I wanted to act out, when I wanted to whip into action with my vampeen employees. I never thought it was fair for one man, for one person, to delegate the fate of others from behind a big desk. It was so easy to lose touch with reality when you were secluded in a large office for too long. I never wanted

to lose my perception...my humanity...my humility. These men and women were risking their life to handle business that was mine, not theirs. I would feel never-ending guilt if anything happens to them.

“Calm down, Baby Cakes.” Drexel took my hand, securing it in his. His touch was a reminder of where I was, of my present. “Listen to that baby’s heartbeat and remember why you’re sitting back. You’re not lazy. You’re not a heartless leader sending others to die. You’re doing your best to protect everyone, especially that little one inside you who can’t protect itself. Plus, I was one of those guys. We fucking live for that shit.”

I nodded, giving him a meek small smile. He was right. Right wasn’t always easy though.

I sat back in the seat, keeping my phone in my free hand in case anything happened.

I gazed out the window, watching the scenery fly by. The sun was already beginning to set. Trees flew by as Drexel sped down the highway. The closer we got to home, more buildings, dwellings and proof of life became visible. It was vastly different from the secluded lifestyle my grandfather created out in the middle of nowhere.

“I can’t believe I have so many relatives,” I mused.

I knew I would never meet most of them, but just knowing that they were out there was comforting. Family was the ones who had your back no matter what. Knowing that they were the product of my grandfather though, I knew there was a chance that many of them wanted nothing to do with me.

“You know you probably employ a good many of them,” Drexel stated.

“Hmm. I hadn’t thought of that.” I frowned as I mentally reviewed my employees. I’d met many of them, but there were still left thousands I’d yet to introduce myself to. “I have six thousand eight-hundred sixty-two vamps on payroll. I’ve wanted to scale back. It feels like a dinosaur to gaze at, but I know many of them rely on me for income.”

“You have time to think that one through.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

My mind was racing, turning over thoughts about the business and life in general. I spaced out for the remainder of the drive. Drexel held my hand, keeping me cognizant of where I was...keeping me from completely losing myself in my head.

Drex opened the apartment door for me. I slowed as I walked in. Two men, both tan with nearly black hair, dark-brown eyes and unimpressive statures stood beside Kellan. One seemed slightly older than the other based off the wrinkles beginning to line his forehead and cheeks. Kellan was holding a double oven in his arms. He was hovering it over a set of cabinets that had been removed.

“Um, what’s going on?” I asked, finally gaining my wits and venturing forward at a steady pace.

“*Buenos Dias,*” one of the men smiled and nodded.

“*Bueno,*” the other added, again smiling and nodding in my direction.

“*Buenos Dias. Perdon, pero, que tu haces aqui?*”

“*Estamos remodelando su concina con su esposo,*” the first one, the older one, answered. He was dressed in dirty, paint-splattered jeans and a worn blue t-shirt. He had a fit,

athletic build that was obviously gained from hard work. His skin was leathered, a sign of hours spent outside, beneath the sun.

The second one eyed me shyly. He merely continued to smile at me.

I gave him an awkward smile in return: at least it felt that way. I wasn't quite sure what he was looking at. It wasn't completely unnerving, but I wasn't comfortable either.

Noticing, the first smacked him on the back of the head. "*Dejar de mirar, cabron.*"

"*Su esposo le dijo que estaba embarazada, pero yo no lo veo,*" he explained.

I glanced down at my stomach. I wasn't showing, so that made sense. "*Cual es su nombre, señors?*"

"*Me llamo, Pedro.*" The older man's eyes creased in the corners as he smiled. He smoothed his hand down the front of his blue shirt before extending it towards me.

"*Es un placer conocerte. Soy Lexi.*" I shook his hand before turning to the other man.

The other man took my hand. "Gamo."

"*Un placer, Gamo.*" I smiled, withdrawing my hand. Kellan turned back to me, having officially installed the oven in place. He gave me sexy smile, his eyes sparkling with something untouchable. "*Tiene familia aqui?*" I asked, focusing on the men again.

"*Mi esposa y tres niños,*" Gamo said with pride.

"*Mismo, pero tengo cuatro niños,*" Pedro stated.

"*Que bueno.*" I smiled warmly.

No wonder Gamo was looking at my stomach, with them having wives and three and four children each. I didn't want to assume anything, but I had to wonder, judging by the work they did, why they're here rather than working for a major company.

I scanned the kitchen. They'd worked quickly. I had two more double ovens installed. They'd added another set of vertical cabinets to the left of the kitchen, extending into the dining room, for extra storage. Coming around the island, I noticed they'd also installed a single oven in the island.

"They're all ready to use right away?" I studied Kellan.

"Of course. Pedro knows how to wire houses. Gamo is good with carpentry."

I opened my mind in case the men understood more English than they let on. "*Where did you get them?*"

"Outside Home Depot."

I frowned. "*How did you get them?*"

"They had a guy there who spoke English. He translated and delegated who went where."

"So, what you're telling me is they're probably illegal."

Kellan shrugged. "*Doesn't matter to me. They did good work and didn't steal anything."*

I glanced back at the men. They had made themselves busy wiping down the floors and the counters around us. That nagging feeling settled in my stomach. These men were standing outside a Home Depot waiting for work that probably didn't come every day. And somehow, they had to support their families with that income.

"How much did they ask for?"

"Seven dollars an hour."

"That's not even minimum wage!"

Kellan's eyes softened as he pulled me into his arms.
"You can't save the world, babe."

I wrapped my arms around him. *"I know, but this isn't right. They're hard working men just trying to make a better life for their families."*

"I'll give them more."

"Good. We have plenty, so give them a lot more."

"I don't have a lot of cash on me."

I gazed up at him, chewing on the inside of my lip as I thought. *"You have to take them home, right?"*

He nodded, eyeing me closely. *"What's going through that pretty little head of yours?"* He smirked.

"Stop by the bank, please. There's an ATM withdrawal limit of a thousand dollars a day on each of our cards. At least give them each that."

He brushed his lips against mine. *"If that's what'll make you happy."* His eyes displayed his amusement.

"It is." I got lost in his emerald eyes for a moment, reveling in the feel of him around me. Abruptly, my mouth started to water and serum rose in the back of my throat. *"And, maybe a strawberry milkshake on your way back?"*

He laughed. *"Weren't you just out?"*

"Yeah, but I didn't think about it then."

He kissed the side of my neck. "One large strawberry milkshake will be in my hands when I return."

"Thanks." I shrieked when Kellan's hands ventured down and squeezed my rear. "Hey!" I felt my face redden as I looked at the guys.

To their credit, they turned away, feigning unnecessary tasks.

"Let's go." Kellan released me and nodded his head towards the door as he spoke to the men.

"*Gracias por todo.*" I smiled and waved at each of them.

"*Tenga un buen noche,*" Pedro nodded, following Kellan towards the door.

"*Igual.*" Gamo lingered, gazing at me for a moment. There was something in the depths of his eyes. A part of me wondered if he sensed something different about me. Maybe he was sensitive to the supernatural, but then again, he didn't pay any mind to Drexel on the sofa or Kellan, whom he worked with all afternoon.

"*Tu 'ta bien?*" My brows dipped as I took him in. His pulse was normal; his heartbeat was only slightly elevated.

His eyes twinkled as he analyzed me. His hand shook slightly as he extended it towards me. I placed my palm against his, wrapping my fingers to shake his hand, but he immediately clutched his other hand on the opposite side, enclosing my hand in his. His eyes widened; his irises darkened as he appraised me. I felt a strange, warm current run through me. He was no longer looking at me, but into me. "*Tu eres especial, nena.*" His tone was reverent; his voice awed.

My lips curled up as I met his gaze. “*Si, Gamo. Soy especial.*” I nodded my head, confirming his knowing words.

A wide smile lit up his face. “*Tener cuidado, Lexi.*”

“I will.”

He released me. My entire body felt an energetic slap, as if my aura was smacking against me. I watched in amazement as he strolled towards the door, closing it behind him, as if nothing had happened. It was only the glint of his eyes that said he’d experienced something he’d been longing for.

You didn’t always know why people crossed your path, but little moments like this confirmed it was always for a reason. I wasn’t sure if this experience was for Gamo or me, but I felt like we both took a little something away from it, at the very least a mutual respect for one another.

“*Èl lo sabía,*” Drexel casually stated from the sofa, dropping the magazine he’d been flipping through on the coffee table. It made a loud thud as it connected with another magazine.

“*Tu habla español?*” I knew my brows were close to my hairline.

“I have all sorts of hidden talents.” He winked.

“Watch out Sanders.” I chuckled, dropping down beside him. No sooner had my rear hit the cushion than I was back up checking my cell phone on the island. I frowned as I gazed at it. “Nothing yet,” I sighed. “How long typically until they make contact?”

“Depends on the mission, the location. Usually we’d announce that we’d arrived at the property and relay any

signs of life. If they ran into trouble the moment they got there, they wouldn't have time to though."

My gut tightened. I swallowed hard, pushing down the serum as I reclaimed my spot next to him, phone in hand. "I hope that's not the case."

"Worrying won't change anything. You should know that by now."

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks, *Dad*."

He cut his eyes at me, but they quickly softened. "I guess I *am* old enough to be."

"Think there'll be children in your future, Drex?"

He got a far off look. I knew that look. It was a one of longing...and of hope. "I'd like that."

—

Chapter Ten

One month later...

I rubbed my cheek as I studied the men and women around my conference table. This was the team my managers had sent in. Drexel sat beside me, helping me lead the meeting.

“How do you keep missing them? How do they keep slipping away from you? Do you realize it’s been a month since Rashik was taken? Do you know what his family is going through right now?” I couldn’t keep the anger from my tone. Every time I thought about it my blood pressure escalated, and a faint blue tint touched my skin.

Drexel put a firm hand on my forearm, calming me. “She wants you to relay what’s happening in the field. Something is off. You’ve stated that you’ve seen them but can’t describe them. You’ve stated that you’ve been on their tails, yet you haven’t come close enough to fire. Fill us in.”

“They’re quick. I wouldn’t be surprised if they had spies throughout the entire city. You’re right when you said something was off, but the accusation is unnecessary. We’re doing our jobs. We’re doing the best we can out in that fucking mine field.” Jarrod’s entire body tensed, his hands fisting on the table. The frustration he was displaying told me this was eating away at him.

The fight left me. “Does it bother you to not have caught them?”

“Damn straight,” Jarrod clipped. The other nine murmured something along the same lines.

“Alright. Let’s take a step back. Let’s re-strategize. You feel that Cape Town is rigged with spies. We’ve been playing on their turf for over a month with nothing to show for it. So the new question is - how can we lure them away from the city, with Rashik? What would it take to move their entire team?”

Janet smiled wide, her brown eyes glinting with mischief and joy. “I like the way you think, boss.” She was tall, athletic and lithe. She was our silent approach: no one ever heard her. She was an awesome stealth attacker, even in zones where her white skin didn’t blend in well.

“Hell yeah.” Bobby slapped the table. He was the anxious newbie. He’d been with the squad for a few months before being deployed for this mission.

“I need ideas, guys,” I said.

Jarrood was the leader of the team. He’d headed the mission, and therefore shouldered most of the responsibility. He had the most experience. “The only way to convince them to move is if they felt endangered.”

“Alright, so how do we propose to do that?”

He puckered his full lips. His tan skin hinted at his American Indian heritage. His dark eyes gazed off; I could tell his mind was working. “With or without extra manpower?”

“I’d like to avoid an all out war. We’re doing battle, but to send in more troops would imply we’re looking for something more.”

He nodded his head in understanding. “Then we’ll need to make them feel threatened from afar.”

“Hm. We could work within her own network if we discovered who her allies were around the city. Possibly if we turned one of the local gangs against her that would be enough heat to encourage them to think about moving,” I mused.

“But it wouldn’t be enough to get them moving.” He glanced around the table at the eager faces.

“What about a nuclear threat?” Anthony asked. He was the extremist of the group.

“We’d be launching an attack on the entire area then,” Germia said. She stroked a hand over her rich, coffee-color forearm.

“Don’t even think about it,” Drex growled. He glared at me, emphasizing his words.

“She wants *me*. That’s what all this is about. You and I both know it. She wants to flush me out, away from my protectors.”

“That’s out of the question!” His tone rang with finality. There would be no arguing with him. The conviction in his voice hinted that he’d do whatever he had to.

“We can use satellites.” Jarrod folded his hands together on the table in front of him.

“How so?”

“They have to communicate somehow. My guess would be radio or cell. Those both run off satellites. If we had tech intercept their signals, blinding them, then they’d have to move, because they’d have no assurance that anyone was closing in on them.”

“I like it. What’s our contingency though?”

“They might be operating off computers.”

“So we’ll need a backup man who can hack comps?” I checked.

Jarrood nodded.

“Are we even sure they’re using technology? The people in that town don’t communicate with words. It’s either a flash of their weapons or some sort of look,” Germia interjected.

“We’re not sure,” I conceded. “We’re taking a chance.” I met their gazes one by one. “I’ve searched for Cecilia, but she’s hidden away somewhere. My guess is she’s not even in the same country. My gut tells me she’s stowed away somewhere relaying orders to Kalia, via some sort of phone, radio or computer.

“Obviously South Africa is one of their territories. They have vamps throughout the city that have kept you all on the go, but that’s all it does. It keeps you running...keeps you guessing. That’s their job: to fuck with your mind; to make you think you’re close and then disappear again,

“A lot of time and resources have been wasted playing their game. It’s time we take over. I don’t know about you, but just because I’m a vampeen doesn’t mean I’m inferior to them. It doesn’t mean they deserve or should have the upper hand. Perhaps we can’t dominate the game, but we can at least even the playing field this way.”

My heart sped up, beating harder as I thought about deploying them back to the danger zone. I knew it would be for me more than for them, to prove Drexel’s words right rather than my own guilt. “If any of you want out, you’ll still have your position. I just need you to tell me now so I can replace you on this mission.” I waited, gazing around the

table at the two women and seven men risking their lives to save another.

This past month had been hell. My phone was attached to my hip. I hadn't been able to enjoy anything; the fear overran me. I was constantly worrying that I'd receive *the* call; the call that revealed one of the vampeens I'd sent to war had died. I truly didn't understand how world leaders did this. Perhaps it showed that I had a bit more humanity than them. My people weren't just a number; they were brothers and sisters, husbands and wives. They were vampeens, but their loss would still have an impact, even if it was just on me.

"We're all in, Jackson," Rodney, the second in command, said.

"Alright. I'll book the plane. You'll deploy as close to 7 a.m. as I'm able to arrange. Until then, I suggest you rest up. Jarrod and Rodney, you guys hang back. I want you to meet your contacts on this end. They'll be the ones relaying satellite feeds before they're intercepted, this way you can move in and hopefully catch them. We can possibly do a preliminary scan tonight if you want."

"Sounds good." Jarrod nodded.

"Works for me," Rodney agreed.

"Thanks, everyone."

I watched as they stood, high-fiving each other and bantering wildly. Their attitudes screamed excitement. I guess Drexel was right. They really did live for this stuff.

"You ready for this, newbie?" Anthony clapped Bobby's shoulder as they all piled out of the conference room.

“Hell yeah.” Bobby’s reply was a faint echo in the distance, but it was my final confirmation.

I looked up at the men across from me. “Do you have any concerns before we continue?”

“One.” Jarrod’s shoulders visibly tensed. “Cecilia is old school. There’s a chance that she might avoid technology for this very reason. If you think about it, the only way she contacted you was through a letter.”

“Wouldn’t that mean she was closer to her contacts than we thought though? What leader would go weeks between feedback?”

“We can’t fathom it because we’re clouded with technology, but she’s rejected it around every turn from what I gather. She’s embraced military weapons, but nothing high-tech.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I took a deep breath. “I’m bringing in another contact on this. His name is Jack. He’s dealt with Cecilia before.” My stomach rumbled, reminding me I hadn’t eaten today. “Why don’t you go down the hall and speak with the vamp army’s tech team? We’ll be using their instruments this time around, and it’ll be one of their teams backing you up again out in the field. The Bladangs have offered both of you access to their weapons room with an escort. Once we’re done here, you can head to their compound. Grab whatever you think you’ll need. You’ll be flying out private.”

“You fucking spoil us with resources.” Rodney grinned.

“Because I want you all alive.” I met his gaze.

His grin turned wistful; his eyes filled with respect. “You have our word.”

“Good. Now go. I’ll catch up with you later.”

The men moved quickly, heading for the tech room down the hall from the central offices of the vamp army headquarters.

I exhaled, slumping back in the chair the moment they were gone. “This stuff is brutal. I don’t get how people can do this all their lives.”

“You grow immune to it. It’s still fresh for you. You haven’t emotionally removed yourself yet.” He patted my back. “You also haven’t eaten. You finished your bakery orders and then rushed over here. You can’t do that in your condition.”

I frowned at him. “Why does everyone talk about my pregnancy like it’s a freaking disease?”

He remained silent as he met my heated gaze. When I didn’t budge, he stood, shoving his chair against the table and walked out.

“Ugh. Men!”

I got up and closed the door. Grabbing my phone, I dialed Jack. Since I’d let him take the software, he’d proven every bit the changed man he said he was. He’d partnered with the Bladangs on their technological innovations. He’d come over several times and checked up on me, offering to help with the vampeen army if I needed him. Now, I planned to take him up on that offer.

—

KELLAN

I stared at the shadowy figure on the screen. “Are you sure?”

“Have I steered you wrong yet?” he quipped.

I took a deep breath, sitting back in the chair. My laptop sat on the dining room table, the silhouette on the webcam screen nagging at my conscience. I’d learned the hard way that not everyone was trustworthy. “So, you’re telling me that she doesn’t communicate with her high ranked personnel at all while they’re in the field?”

“Not a lick. She only sends those she trusts.”

I stiffened. This woman ran in circles, tight circles. She was careful, almost too careful. They said when you held the reins too tight, inevitably, they would slip a little. Eventually, she would make a mistake; at some point, she had to give away something. I was certain of it. But biding time when she was following us left me uncomfortable. I didn’t like this, especially with Lexi being pregnant.

“I assume she has safe houses around the world for them to operate out of. Can you get addresses?”

“It’ll cost ya.”

“Considering I can’t verify them in person, you should be careful how much you ask for.”

“You ought to be careful who you threaten period. I don’t have to do this.”

“Then why are you?” I snarled.

He was silent for a moment. His image didn’t move. “It’s personal.” His voice was low, tightly controlled.

I ran my fingers through my hair, tugging at the roots. It was getting entirely too long, hanging down over my ears. “Just get me as many addresses as you can. We’ll negotiate price later.”

He immediately signed off without saying a word. That was his standard though. I didn't know who he was. I still recorded every conversation though.

"I don't recognize him," my dad stated, coming around the table.

"I feel like I'm chasing a fucking ghost." I frowned, closing my computer.

"We live to be invisible. It's how we've survived this long in secrecy."

"Cecilia obviously doesn't want to be hidden away. She's made it clear she knows exactly where Lexi and I are, but she hasn't done anything. She took one of Lexi's lieutenants, but then she dropped off. Lexi deployed a team, but they haven't gotten anywhere." I sighed, exasperated. "It just doesn't make any sense. What the hell does she want?"

He squeezed my shoulder. "Sounds like she's testing you. She wants to see how you react, how you handle it all. The only part I worry about is that by not acting now, it means she's gauging your response; so she knows how you'll react later when she does something on a grander scale." I heard the fear in his voice. He was never scared; at least he never let on to it.

I couldn't talk about this anymore. "How's mom?"

He laughed lightly. "She's renovating the house."

"What for?"

"To baby proof it she said." He sat down in the chair beside me. "She relocated the office upstairs so the baby would be in the room next to us. She's waiting to find out if it's a boy or girl to paint, but she has color schemes

selected for both. I unknowingly answered the door for the furniture delivery the other day. She about steamrolled me.” He smiled, his eyes warming. “You would think *she* was having another baby.”

My heart melted; I could only imagine my mother in nesting mode. As untimely as it was, this baby seemed to be the one, bright spot in all our lives right now, and it wasn’t even here yet.

“How is Lexi? I saw her in the office the other day, but she was in a meeting with her team.”

“I think she’s doing too much, but you can’t tell her that. She never thinks she’s doing enough.”

He laughed. “That’s women in general, son.”

I sobered, fear settling inside my chest. “What happened with mom while she was pregnant?”

He averted his gaze, furrowing his brows. I could tell he was sifting through memories. I also knew him well enough to know he was deciding what to tell me and what not to tell me, and more so, how to deliver it.

“Please be straight with me. Dr. H said Lexi could do anything she felt up to doing. The problem is she doesn’t gauge herself well. She’s collapsing into bed every chance she gets.” I couldn’t hide my concern. My dad was the only one who would understand, who *could* understand, what I was going through.

“Your mother did that towards the end of her pregnancy.” He studied me, his lips mashing together as he tried to read me.

“I don’t get why it’s worse for vampeens with vampires than for humans with vamps.” I’d never understood the

science behind us. Some of it was logical, while other parts were completely illogical: more mystical and mythical.

“Because she will be giving birth to a vampire. Sure you lived humanly until sixteen when you transformed, but you were very much a vampire the entire time. You were always stronger, especially in the womb. You used to kick hard; you even bruised your mother a time or two. You healed immediately though growing up. You gained some weight, but it didn’t slow you down.”

I thought back over the years, trying to recall. I never played sports, so I couldn’t say for sure if I was physically stronger. PE consisted of obstacle courses, flag football and track. We didn’t play contact sports, but whatever we played, I excelled at every time.

“Your DNA showed the vampire gene from the beginning whereas with humans and vamps, their child is born human. The vampiric DNA doesn’t show up until they’re two, and even then, it’s merely a few cells. Those few cells multiply over the years. Yours showed from the beginning and continued to grow,” he explained.

I suddenly knew how Lexi felt, always overanalyzing everything. It was exhausting. “Ours will technically be a vampeen because I’m seventy-five percent and she’s twenty-five or less.”

“It won’t. Vampeens and vampires procreating are far different than vampeens making vampeens. There’s an above average level of vampiric DNA in the female carrier, more than she’s used to, which is why it’s harder on her.”

“Oh yeah. Vampires can’t get pregnant. Why is that?” I shook my head in dismay. Our boys still produce, but their bodies stop ovulating.

“Because they’ve lost their human cells. Vampire cells are set in stone; human cells are pliable, malleable cells. It’s why stem cell research is so prominent in the human world. Humans have the ability to manipulate their DNA, their entire bodies really; we don’t. It’s also why only vampeens or humans can carry a child. Their human cells allow their wombs to stretch without immediately crushing the baby to return to a normal size in the healing process; the human part of them that can still be manipulated is what allows their bodies to be shared and shaken up for a hormonal nine months.”

I rubbed my forehead, scrunching my features. “So it’s the overload of my vampire DNA that overwhelms her body? Why doesn’t this happen with humans and vampires?”

“She’s giving birth to a vampire, someone who is stronger than her, someone who requires more than her vampeen body can give. Humans with vampires are still giving birth to a human who will eventually turn into a vampeen. They don’t require as much; they’re not as taxing on the body.” He frowned. “Okay, think of it this way. Even though humans are sixty-percent water, they can kill themselves by drinking too much of it.”

When I didn’t respond, he continued. “Actually, consider this. Humans have white blood cells in their system present at all times, but too many white blood cells can actually cause disease. Lexi had vampire DNA inside her, but the spike in its presence induced something similar to toxic shock syndrome for humans. Sometimes she may vomit and is extremely fatigued and overwhelmed by the

sudden increase in vampire cells in her system. Humans don't experience this because no vampire DNA is introduced to them; it's built within their baby to be unleashed over a predetermined timeline."

That made sense to me. It didn't sit well with me, but it was comprehensible. I sighed, sitting forward against the table. "We were so careful, Dad."

"At some point, you're going to have to accept that the Maker will always find a way, even when you don't give him one."

My chest constricted; my gut twisted as I thought about all Lexi had endured and all that my mom had gone through. "I'm worried about her."

"We'll get through this. Your mother and I promise to be there every step of the way." He rested a hand on my shoulder.

I looked long and hard at my father. He'd been there through everything, even when I was an awful twerp in the midst of my rebellion. I didn't doubt him. He'd proven his loyalty to me. I knew time would never weaken our bond.

And soon, I'd be doing the same for my own child.

—

Chapter Eleven

LEXI

One month later...

“Damn it!” I huffed, slamming down the headset. I stared at the monitor in dismay.

We’d been endlessly searching every tower across the world, every satellite on and above the Earth for any signals, any sign of Cecilia and her team. Kellan told me though - refusing to share his source - that she didn’t talk to her teams in the field. She sent them out and remained blind while they were on their missions.

I rubbed the swell of my stomach. I was no longer able to hide my pregnancy from vamps, if not by the extra heartbeat, then by my protruding belly. Humans still did a double take, unable to decide if I was fat or pregnant, especially since all my pants were now skin-tight, even the stretchy ones.

The baby fluttered within my belly. Dr. H said it was normal for me to feel the baby’s movements early considering I was carrying a vampire, who is much stronger than a human baby.

“Sorry, dear.” Jack closed down the panel of readings, signaling it was time for a break.

“Thanks, Jack. Thanks, Frank.” Frank had been the primary tech guy assigned to my team’s mission by the vamp army.

I picked up my cell and made the call.

“Yeah?” Jarrod answered.

“Pull out. Be back in twenty-four.”

He hesitated before delivering a frustrated, “Got it.”

I rolled my chair away from the desk that was pressed against a wall of monitors and screens. Each one displayed something different: from charts and graphs to security feeds and street cams.

I adjusted my black leggings as I stood, pulling them up at the waist and immediately tugged on my teal tank dress. I’d reverted to plus size fashions, wearing a one-inch thick belt around the smaller part of my waist, trying to minimize my middle, especially since the material clung tightly to my bulging belly and hips.

I sighed. At least my feet weren’t swollen...much. Thankfully, they still fit into my silver ballet flats, which went so perfectly with this outfit.

I scuttled out of the office and nearly ran into Laurence. “Sorry. I guess I’m a bit distracted.”

His face turned down, slightly thoughtful. “Are you certain you can handle this, Alexa? We don’t mind stepping in.”

“I appreciate the offer, but this is my problem, not yours. Plus, you’re already lending me your resources.”

He pressed his lips together, their pale pink color nearly blending into the fairness of his complexion. “Do let us know if you change your mind.”

“I will, thanks.”

He nodded, moving on to the conference room where Auggy and Felipe already sat with a few other vamps.

Drexel popped his head out of an office across the way. "You ready, Baby Cakes?"

"I guess."

He closed the distance between us in a few quick strides. "Let's go. You've got a GED test to ace."

"Hopefully." He cut his eyes at me. "Uh, yes. I have a test to ace?" I lifted a single brow.

"That's more like it." He smiled, escorting me to the car.

—

Mel smiled, leaping through the doors of the local high school.

Drexel leaned against the front of the SUV. He immediately straightened at the sight of us coming towards him. "Well?" He tilted his head, waiting expectantly for our response.

"We passed!" I laughed, my heart soaring. "We don't know our scores, but both of us definitely passed."

"Congratulations, Baby Cakes. And you too, Blondie." He smirked, knowing his pet name for Mel really irritated her.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

I shrieked as she whisked past me at vamp speed and circled the car.

She stopped and threw her arms in the air. "Yes! Yes! Yes! Screw you high school! I'm done with you!" She flicked an obscene gesture towards the building.

I shook my head in dismay. “Um, Drex, we don’t know her. Let’s go.”

“Aren’t you excited? I mean, holy sugarplums, Lex. Our entire high school career is over...done...finite. We never have to step back inside those doors again. No more petty drama, no more classrooms, no more social segregation.” She was smiling wide, her eyes alight with joy.

I gave her a smile that I knew didn’t reach my eyes because I was clouded with regret. I was never big on high school, but I was fully aware of all I’d given up to be a vampire, and now all I’d given up to be a teen mother. I was done. There was no going back. It’s not like I could take my GED, and then decide I wanted the prom memory and the cap and gown experience and suddenly re-enroll. This was final.

In many ways, it was the last thing left of my childhood. I was an adult in every way now: house, car, bills, a career, an army to lead, a baby... and finally, I’d completed school, at least at the primary level. I had nothing left, not even my parents, to give me that youthful edge. The only had one advantage over the vamps: my age.

“Let’s go celebrate.” Mel looped her arm around mine and dragged me towards the SUV. She discarded me at the front passenger door before moving to the back.

I climbed in and buckled up.

“You okay?” Drexel’s voice was low, discreet.

I gave a small shake of my head, acknowledging that I was okay for the moment.

“O.M.G. Lex. I can’t believe we’re really done. Ugh. It only felt like forever. How do people go all twelve years and

then on to college? Borrrriing! I mean, if you want to be a lawyer or doctor, okay, I get it, but why do I have to go to college to be an elementary school teacher when I already aced well beyond that? It's a really twisted system if you think about it.

"I mean, when has anyone ever used algebra or geometry in real life? Unless you want to be an engineer - which would require too much school for my sanity - you're not going to use it. Scientists use advanced chemical compounds and research compositions, but again, most people aren't going to do that."

She finally took a breath, but continued right after. "I mean, how sad is it to go to college for four years only to come out making less than your part-time high school job? I wanted to go to fashion school, which is a complete crock. When I came out, I'd either have to intern for next to nothing or for free or find a major wad of cash to start my own line. It's either you have it or you don't. School won't change your fashion sense. I guess maybe a business course or two couldn't hurt, but that's just a class, not an entire degree. I mean, who needs college level math, English and social studies for a single course education?"

I saw her gaze out the window from the side mirror. She grew pensive. "I mean, you're doing it Lex. You've surpassed us all with a sophomore level education. What does that say about the school system?"

"I think it's about more than studying through high school. It's about learning and experiencing things: it's about life. Then, you graduate at an age when you should have reached a certain level of maturity. And college is about more than learning a single subject. Most people want to be well-rounded in case their plan A falls through. Not everyone can secure jobs in their field of study. If they

hadn't taken those math courses, they wouldn't have a shot at being a bookkeeper. If they hadn't studied college level English, they couldn't secure a position as a copy editor." I shrugged. "I see where you're coming from, but I also see the point in all the extra fluff. It's about ensuring more opportunities for yourself rather than being pigeon-holed."

"Well then. Way to knock me off my soap box." She harrumphed, crossing her arms over her chest. She wasn't truly miffed but playing dramatically, as always.

I chuckled. That's my best friend in a nutshell. She meant well, had solid points, but was a tad too impulsive with her explanations, not thinking ahead.

Drexel put the car in park in front of the restaurant. I saw several recognizable vehicles in the parking lot. It looked like everyone was already inside waiting.

Mel was out of the car and yanking open my door before I could even unbuckle. She practically dragged me out of the SUV, wrapping an arm around me and pushing me towards the restaurant's entrance.

Drex held the door for us. Mel pushed past me, grabbing my hand on the way and pulling me along beside her. I knew my eyes flew open.

The entire front of the steakhouse was a blur. Mel didn't even stop at the hostess stand. She blazed a trail straight towards the back of the main floor where we found everyone sitting around the table waiting for us.

The moment she released me, I teetered. Kellan took me in his arms the second Mel exclaimed, "I passed!"

"You okay?" Kellan pushed my hair back.

"Yeah. She's just Mel-On-Wheels today."

“Good.” He captured my lips. His mouth was soft and graceful against mine.

But something was wrong: different. His mind didn’t immediately open up to me. I pulled back, my features firmly turned down.

I stared at him, trying to gauge where he was mentally. He was unreadable. For the first time, there was a clear distance between us.

He moved his mouth near my ear. “We’ll talk later, okay?”

I swallowed hard, trying to push past the flood of discomfort settling in my gut. My chest compressed slightly under the weight of possibilities...under the stress of my overactive mind already off on a whirlwind of conspiracies.

He pulled me in front of him, facing the crowded table. Mel’s dad was busy congratulating her while Craig waited eagerly for his turn. Kellan’s parents sat beside Aunt Claire and Auggy, all watching me closely...too closely.

I plastered a smile on my face that felt fake, even to me. The baby chose that moment to flip-flop about. Instinctively, I placed my hand on my lower stomach trying to calm the sensation. It wasn’t large enough to feel outside, but had enough power to let me know it was alive and kicking on the inside. The baby’s heartbeat quickened a few beats with the movement.

Gabi and Jack angled their heads simultaneously, as if they were of one mind. Kai lifted a brow towards me. The tension visible around his lips told me he knew something was bothering me, but he respected me too much to bring it up in public.

“Well?” Aunt Claire’s voice was high, anxious. “Don’t keep us in the dark.”

My features finally relaxed. “I passed.”

“Woohoo!” she screamed. “I knew you could do it!”

Auggy flashed an annoyed look, but was quick to congratulate me along with everyone else.

“Thanks.”

Kellan pulled out a chair for me. I was just about to sit when my phone went off. My heart skipped a beat. Looking around, anyone it could be - or anyone it *would* be - was already here.

I slowly backed away from the table and checked the screen. It was Jarrod. “What’s wrong?”

“We’re under attack. The town’s people turned against us. We can’t back out now without exposing ourselves if you catch my drift.”

I froze, my heart beating fast and hard, matching a nearly normal human pace. “I care about you; I don’t care about human theories or politics. Do what you have to do. Call me if you need back up, and I’ll have it there within the hour.”

He hung up, but not before I heard shouting in the background. I didn’t understand the language, but easily picked up on the aggressiveness of their tones. If I had to guess, they were probably lurking around the hotel.

I worried my bottom lip, fear coursing through me. Maybe some people could push away these thoughts. Maybe the president could read to children in a classroom while his nation was under attack, but *I* couldn’t pretend

that nothing was wrong. I couldn't let go of the fact that my soldiers were in danger.

I turned back to the table, stopping short at the open stares. No one spoke; they were all listening.

Serum rose in my throat. I swallowed hard, but it didn't help. "My men may need your team's help, Auggy." I kept my tone as casual and robotic as possible. I slipped into my chair and set the phone on the table beside the rolled silverware.

"You got it, sweetie." His tone was soft, consoling, and not full of the gruff edge it usually held.

"Why don't we order, Lex? Maybe some yummy in your tummy will make you and the baby feel better," Mel suggested.

I met her gaze. There was a keen knowledge in her eyes. She was far more perceptive than others gave her credit for...far more than she let on. I nodded. "That sounds good."

—

Chapter Twelve

One week later...

This was déjà vu. I sat at the head of the conference table, minus Drexel, and gazed out at all nine members of my extraction team. I was glad that all of them had returned safely, regardless of the bumps along the way.

“What are your theories?” I looked specifically at Jarrod.

“I have several.”

“Let’s knock them out.” I grabbed my pen and pulled the legal pad closer to me.

“They could have been using the ambush as a distraction so they could move.”

I wrote the theory down beside the number one.
“That’s a good one. Next.”

“They were trying to drive us away before we could get to them, meaning we were a hell of a lot closer than we thought.”

“Okay.” I continued to jot down his ideas, numbering them in the order he gave them.

“The town’s people were merely acting on their own suspicions. They’re an extremely...sensitive melting pot of cultures down there - reminds me of New Orleans with its dark magic.”

“That’s an interesting one. You did conceal your weapons in the street, right?” I glanced up at him across the way, lifting a single brow.

His annoyance was palpable. "Of course." His features were taut, forming hard lines of anger.

I dropped my pen and sat up straight, crossing my arms over my chest. "Spit it out. You know I have an open-door policy."

His hands pounded on the table in front of him; his muscles flexed beneath his shirt. His eyes seemed to darken impossibly further. A storm was brewing within him.

Everyone looked up, hearing the knock on the door. Kalel, Auggy and Kellan all walked in as if they had been invited to the meeting. They took the remaining three seats around the table.

I pressure around my lips intensified, forcing them together; I was trying to control my own upset. "Can I help you?" I didn't withhold my sass.

"We're sitting in. It was our men backing you up," Auggy said. He crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair, silently challenging me.

"Your men never had to move in. My team handled it just fine, so don't go there."

"Relax, babe. We're just sitting in so you don't have to relay anything. We'll be quiet." Kellan was trying to pacifying me, which didn't sit well. He'd been distant lately, running his own agenda and never cross-referencing it with mine. There were too many nights that I was alone with Drex and Sanders while he was out. He was giving me too much time to think.

This wasn't the time or place to open fire on him. I stuffed my pain deep down inside to confront another time.

"And you?" I met Kalel's gaze.

His lips curled up in the corners, their fullness creating a sexy lure. His eyes beaming with delight. "I'm good." He winked.

I sighed, shaking my head in dismay. "Alright, Jarrod. Please continue as if these..." I huffed. "Just continue."

My team gave them a once-over, analyzing them. It didn't matter that I knew Auggy, Kalel and Kellan well. My team didn't. They were black ops. They didn't trust anyone outside their circle.

Jarrood narrowed his eyes at Kellan, scrutinizing him. He'd obviously heard the endearment was able to piece together our association.

Deeming them safe to hear this discussion, Jarrod faced me again. "I think we're being played big time. She's running us in circles, biding time. They have to be working on something; I just don't know what. It's been two months though, so it must be on a major scale. No small attack takes this level of coordination."

We'd come to the same conclusion, although I hated to admit it. I despised the notion of walking around on eggshells. "I agree. Jack and I came to that conclusion already. We don't know what she's planning. Until something comes to fruition, we're just going to have to up the ante. No solo missions until Cecelia and Kalia are in custody. I'll issue the order for all vampeen soldiers to pair up until further notice. If it's possible to unite into groups of larger numbers, then I'll push for that. We have safe houses across the world. I'll notify each zone manager of the addresses in their area.

"For now, I want you all to work with me on the home front. Let's try to access any personal records related to Cecilia. I don't care if it's a hundred years old. Fact-check

it; follow up on it. It's far better for *us* to have the jump on her than the other way around. Our focus should be on properties. She's probably smart enough not to have any in her name, so we'll need to sift through all the properties owned by any member of her army."

I glanced down at my paper. I'd scribbled a few notes earlier that were no longer relevant. I looked back up at my team. "Do any of you have something to add? Any questions or concerns?"

"Are we grounded?" Anthony asked. He rubbed his hands together. He was always on the go. He hated deskwork. He preferred the action of the front lines.

I considered him. "No. But you can't travel alone. I don't care if you confirm the addresses electronically or in person. If you decide to go, make sure you let us know where and what gear you sign out for the trip."

"I'm down to go with you." Bobby was eager. He still had the innocence and vigor of being new.

"Hell yeah. Double-trouble bustin' down doors." Anthony high-fived him.

"Don't bust down doors," I barked. "Try to keep the damage to a minimum. I do have a cap on our repair budget. Anything above and beyond comes out of your pay."

"Ooh, that's a bit harsh." Anthony's whole face scrunched as if he was dodging an attack.

"Sounds damn fair to me. If we didn't put a cap on your ass you'd leave a never-ending trail of destruction wherever you went." Germia rolled her eyes, shaking her head negatively.

"Jealous much, baby?" Anthony wagged his brows.

“Guys. Let’s focus.” I checked my phone. “You’ve been going for eighteen hours on the home front so take a break. Report back in eight hours. No funny stuff between now and then. This isn’t the time to party or get careless.” They began to stand, officially dismissed. “No wandering off alone!”

“Yes ma’am.” Anthony saluted, shoving back his chair and heading for the door.

Jarrold hung back, remaining in his seat. His face was solemn. He kept stealing glances at Auggy, Kalel and Kellan, who were still sitting as well.

“It pains me to admit this, but you’ve got good leadership skills, Lex.” Auggy’s lips tweaked, like he wanted to smile.

And like that, the tension in the room was gone. I laughed. “Admit it. You’re proud.” I couldn’t resist teasing him.

“You’re not getting anything more. Just because you’re pregnant doesn’t mean you can get away with that crap.” He snarled his lips, but his eyes softened around the edges. He really was a big teddy bear. I knew there was some humanity beneath his gruff exterior.

“So, how can I help you men? You obviously crashed for a reason.”

“We want to take this over,” Kalel stated.

“Come again?” I felt my features pull as I stared them down.

“I’m not working for you,” Jarrod said, his tone rougher than normal.

“That’s not your decision, now is it?” Kellan eyed Jarrod warily.

What was wrong with him? Jarrod had never done anything to him. And there again, I felt the distance between us. He didn’t even consult me on this. He’s just storming in and laying down the law.

A wave of nausea rolled over me. I heard my pulse quicken as my head began to spin. Perspiration dotted my skin.

“Leka!” Kaleb was at my side in a split-second.

I placed my forehead in my palm, trying to breathe through the sickness threatening to overtake me. It happened every once in a while. Sometimes I would lose my stomach, other times I didn’t. I closed my eyes, concentrating on pushing past the bile sloshing around. My serum rose high up, scorching my throat, a warning flare.

In the distance, I heard movement, but it required too much energy to focus on what was going on around me.

The serum coated my tongue, burning it and dulling my taste buds at first. The moment I tasted the blood though, I knew. I leapt up and dashed for the trash can, nearly diving in; I squatted down in front of it. My breathing was labored as I attempted to clear my mind; I tried not to fight it, but every part of me wanted to avoid it. I didn’t want to give my body free reign or to have it expel anything.

I groaned, choking as the mixture of blood and serum blistered its way up from my stomach, erupting into the trash bag. I felt a cold rag press against the back of my neck. Thankfully, my hair was already secured on top of my head in a tight knot.

I shuddered as I moved back and sat down on the floor. The cold, wet cloth moved with me. When I saw Kalel and Jarrod watching me with the same stark expressions on their faces, I knew it was Kellan behind me.

“You heard me! Move it!” Auggy shouted. He was outside the door yelling at someone.

“You okay?” Kellan stroked my back.

I didn’t trust myself to speak. The fire that blazed a trail up my esophagus was still smoldering. I meekly nodded my head once, signaling to them that it was over.

“How often does this happen?” Kalel’s brows furrowed. His eyes were full of compassion.

I shrugged, averting my gaze to dismiss his question.

“It’s random. Sometimes she throws up; sometimes she doesn’t,” Kellan offered.

I hated this. I knew they were going to use this against me somehow. Human women continued to work even when they were plagued with morning sickness. I didn’t see how this was any different.

“What took you so damn long?” Auggy grumbled. A moment later he was crouching down in front of me, passing me a water bottle.

“Thanks.” My voice cracked.

He gave me a long, hard look as I opened the bottle and devoured half of it. A shiver ran through me as I pulled the bottle away from my lips and put the cap back on.

I smiled, knowing I had to convince them. “I’m fine now.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Jackson.” He stood, crossing his arms as he puffed out his chest. He let out an exaggerated sigh.

I snatched the rag from Kellan’s grip and got on my feet. I went toe-to-toe with him. “I. Said. I’m. Fine.”

“Let’s take a day off. We’ve all been pushing this hard and you need to rest.” His tone had softened, but the pushy conviction was still there in his voice.

My heartbeat kicked up as I balled my hands into fists. The baby trembled in my stomach, as if it knew I was upset. Each breath became an erratic huff as my anger worked towards the surface, as fury seeped into my veins. Within seconds I saw the blue luminance out of the corner of my eye.

“Damn it, Aug!” Kellan snapped.

“You’re not the boss of me. I’m not on a vamp army mission. I’m running the vampeen army. I’ll decide what’s best for me and my team, especially when it comes to private matters.”

He took a deep breath, forcefully exhaling. “Just calm down, okay?” At least he was willing to reason with me now rather than acting like my personal drill sergeant.

“I just wish everyone would stop coddling me. I’m a responsible vamp. I don’t cause problems; I try to solve them. And I sure as heck don’t step all over *your* territory.” I walked out before my emotions escalated and my electricity ignited.

“Lexi,” Jarrod called after me.

I stopped, turning back to face him.

He closed the gap between us. He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm just gonna follow up with the team. We'll work remotely for now."

"That works. Call me if you find anything. I'll pull what I can tonight and we can compare notes tomorrow."

He looked around before making eye contact. "Listen, I don't usually butt into other people's business, but you're a good leader. I like you as a boss. You should take a step back for a minute. There's nothing you can do that we can't do for you. You pay us. You might as well make us earn it."

I sighed. Jarrod was the worst of them because he approached me calmly from a place of pure and innocent concern. "I'll consider it."

He shook his head. "I'll check in later."

"'kay."

The last of my light show disappeared as exhaustion nestled deep in my bones. I turned, smacking into Drexel.

"Why didn't they page me?" He looked me over.

"Dang, news travels fast." I frowned.

"Will you take her home to rest?" I sensed Kellan behind me.

Drexel chewed on his lip, studying Kellan first and then me again. Finally, he nodded. "Yeah."

"I'll be home later, okay?" He placed a hand on my back, leaning in beside me and kissing my head.

Hot tears stung my eyes. I moved my head away from him. My frustration was reaching a boiling point. I'd wasted time and resources while risking my team chasing after an apparent apparition. I worked non-stop. Between the

bakery business, the vampeen army, the vamp army, meetings, orders and so much more I didn't even want to think about, I barely had a social life. Mel would even sit in on meetings just to spend time with me. As much as I hated to admit it, I guess a part of me was somewhat resentful that Kellan didn't have nearly as much on his plate... at least it felt that way.

He worked for the vamp army and the Bladangs, but lately, he'd popped into the office here or lounged at home with his laptop doing God only knows what.

I fidgeted, uneasy as Kellan pulled back. Without looking, I could sense his expression...attitude filled with dismay.

"I guess that's how it's gonna be today," he scoffed. "I'll see you later." He walked away.

God, what was wrong with me? Kellan didn't choose his workload, but I did. He had to take what they assigned him, whereas I took whatever I wanted to do. I was an utter mess.

A single tear slipped down my cheek. I immediately wiped it away, steeling my expression as I looked up at Drex. "You ready?"

He didn't say anything. He merely threw an arm around me and escorted me out.

—

Chapter Thirteen

KELLAN

Damn. I knew this pregnancy thing wasn't going to be all sunshine and roses, but...*Fuck!* I punched the air, frustration tightening my muscles, really amping me up.

I strolled back into the conference room. Kalel and Auggy immediately focused on me.

"She can't keep going at this pace," Kalel said.

"Tell me about it. But you know her. She's hard-headed." I threw my hands up.

"You need to do better." He didn't beat around the bush.

"I'm doing what I can." I started grinding my teeth. It seemed like everything funneled back to me lately.

"Check yourself, Bancroft," Auggy sneered.

"Let's just focus on business. What's our next step?"

Auggy and Kalel exchanged glances. *Damn it.* They were speaking mentally, having another private conversation.

"This'll be here tomorrow. You need to go take care of her." Auggy nodded his head towards the door.

"Buy her flowers. Buy whatever she's been craving. Do something to take her mind off everything for a bit," Kalel suggested.

Instantly, the fight left me. God, I was so fucking selfish. I could only imagine what she was going through

with how high her plate was filled. Toss in an incompatible pregnancy and I was surprised she was still going.

I smiled to myself. I knew why she was still going: for everyone else. She was so selfless; too selfless at times. She gave all she had and then some, day in and day out. She never asked for anything aside from the occasional milkshake or pint of ice cream, which had been her only food obsession thus far.

My heart warmed as I thought of her growing belly. It was just starting to round out. The doctor said within the next month I should be able to feel the baby move. I was looking so forward to that.

I frowned, rubbing my forehead. I didn't know how she did it. I was drowning, unable to balance anything well. I barely spent time with her anymore. When she wasn't working, she was sleeping. Our relationship wasn't what it used to be. Reality had set in. We weren't carefree teenagers living at home with mom and dad anymore. We were working adults with responsibilities and impossible to coordinate schedules.

They were right. I needed to do something to show that I still cared. If my mom was right, then pregnant women wanted reassurance. Even if she was wrong, I never wanted Lexi to doubt me again.

I extended a hand towards Kalel. He promptly took it. "Thanks. I'll put something together for her."

He smiled. I knew his respect for me had grown. "Good choice. We'll catch up with you later."

I turned to Auggy, extending the same hand. He shook it. "For Christ's sake, bite your tongue. Don't piss her off anymore."

I harrumphed, but knew his advice was solid. I hadn't been as sensitive in my approach lately. "I'll try."

Damn. I didn't know what was wrong with me. I had been a bit of an ass lately in retrospect. Hopefully, I could make it up to her. Hopefully, she was in a forgiving mood.

—

LEXI

I flipped through the channels, strumming my fingers on the arm of the sofa. My feet were kicked up on the coffee table, my body was cushioned by the overstuffed couch, yet I couldn't relax.

I frowned, looking around the apartment. I was too anxious. An itch traveled through my veins, an unidentifiable need clamped down on my sore muscles, a nervous twitch had my legs bouncing. I tossed the remote aside, clenching and unclenching my hands. I couldn't stop fidgeting. The nagging feeling that I ought to be doing something haunted me.

I jumped off the couch as if it'd been lit on fire and began pacing.

Drexel leapt up right behind me. "You're working yourself up even more."

I shook out my hands before intertwining my fingers. "I know. I..." I sighed.

Tears welled as my emotions choked me. "I know I have a lot more than most. I know I should be grateful for all the opportunities I've been afforded. I can't help but somewhat resent my lot right now. It just feels like it's never enough. I try and try, but it's never enough...it's never good enough."

I turned my head up towards the ceiling, fighting back the tears, hoping gravity would help contain them.

“No one has a perfect life, human or paranormal.”

I eyed him. “I know. I...I don’t know anymore. It just seems like everything is spiraling out of control. I have no leverage in my life right now. There is very little I do have control over, one of them being my relationships. But I can’t even handle that apparently.” I ran my palm across my forehead. I closed my eyes, focusing on aligning my thoughts, moving away from the overwhelming cluster of crap crammed into a tight spot: in the forefront of my mind.

Slowly, my body began to relax as I let go. Tears chased each other down my face, but at least I could form a complete thought again. “Sorry, Drex.” I brushed the tears aside. “Told you I was a mess.” I laughed humorlessly.

He tenderly pulled me into his arms, tucking me within the protection they offered...comforting me.

As a teen, you think you understand all there is to life. You think by seeing it, watching others fall apart from it, that you could do a better job handling it. You can’t. Reality is so much harsher than you can imagine. I wished I could go back to my freshman year, back when life was so much more uncomplicated compared to now, back to when waking up for school in the morning was the worst part of my day and demanding teachers were the closest thing to assassins I knew.

One year. That’s all it took for everything to completely flip upside down. One week. That’s the time in which I lost both of my parents. One time. That’s all it took for me to conceive the baby I was carrying. *One* always seemed to lead to so much more.

I hugged Drex. The ache inside me flared. I wished I was hugging Kellan instead. I wanted things to go back to the way they were before. I needed him. I felt so weak admitting that, but I missed him. I missed the good times.

The front door opened and closed. I loosened my grip on Drex enough to look towards the door. A moment later, Kellan was standing beside the dining room table holding an impressive bouquet of colorful flowers and a large milkshake.

He smiled, communicating everything I needed. It was an 'I'm sorry, forgive me, let's make up' and a promise for more wrapped into a single expression.

"I'll leave you two alone for a while." Drex moved away, grabbing his keys and heading out.

Kellan's eyes never left mine. "Come here, babe."

Without thinking, I found myself moving towards him. He set the flowers and milkshake down on the table just in time to scoop me up into his arms.

Unexpectedly, the floodgates opened, and I began to bawl uncontrollably. I threw my arms around his neck and secured my legs around his waist. I burrowed my head into his neck, breathing in his cologne.

"I'm sorry, babe." He hugged me tight. "We're strong. We'll get through this, all of this, together. I'm not going anywhere. I swear to you. I'll always be here. I love you."

Tears soaked my face, his neck and his shirt. I didn't trust myself to talk though. I could barely breathe, let alone speak. My chest heaved as I gasped between sobs.

He didn't push me to speak. He didn't relay any of his previous frustrations. He just held me, patiently, until the

last tear fell...until I was limp in his arms. His support was the only thing keeping me from falling, as it always was.

I swallowed past the tightness in my throat and fought to relieve the pressure in my chest. I tilted my head back, gazing into his crystalline, emerald eyes, deep and rich like the man himself. "I love you too."

Removing one hand, he held my face. He claimed my lips in a soft, sweet, sensual kiss. There was no urgency; he kindled the original spark between us that had become buried beneath the clutter of life, having been dwindled by the outside world. "You're my forever-girl." He smiled dreamily as he pulled back.

—

Chapter Fourteen

One month later...

The past month had been trying for all of us. Tensions ran high as Cecilia remained hidden away, Rashik had yet to turn up and Kalia had dropped off the planet with him. Kellan had been increasingly distant lately, fielding phone calls in the middle of the night. Though not irregular for a vamp, his secrecy regarding them was. He'd purchased a Mac desktop recently that he was utilizing often. Each time I approached him though, he minimized all programs and windows.

Approaching my apartment, my hand shook as I reached for the note protruding from between the door and the frame. My stomach churned; my pulse sped up.

The letters had started up again two days ago. This time though, it had risen to a creepy stalker level. Everywhere I went, around every turn, a new message appeared on the same kind of lined notebook paper.

Drexel moved in right behind me as Sanders swept the perimeter, even checking the stairwell before coming back to us, just as perplexed as always.

I took a deep breath, but it did nothing for my nerves. I unfolded the paper.

Watch and listen. -CR

I crumpled the note in my hands. She was always cryptic. Why weren't people direct anymore? I was tired of the games.

"Let's check the security footage." Drexel reached around to unlock the door. He immediately pulled me out of

the way. Sanders stepped in front of me, taking extra precaution. Thirty seconds later, Drex returned. "It's clear." He held the door open for me.

I'd just gotten comfortable on the couch when my phone rang. "Any luck?"

"Another dead property," Jarrod announced. "The guy hasn't lived here in over a century. It's a fucking wasteland. We did a thorough check just in case, but nothing."

"Freaking sugarplums on high!" I huffed, letting out an exasperated groan.

I sat for a moment, staring at the TV across from the sofa. "How many more properties are on your list?"

"Fifty-two."

"Alright. Be careful." I hung up, tossing my phone aside.

I'd divided my team into threes and sent them out with a list of properties. Thus far, they'd found a lot of abandoned properties, a few rented out and only one vampire actually living in his home.

"What else can we do guys? There has to be more."

They exchanged looks. "You're already doing everything strategically. You've got men in the field doing footwork and checking leads. You've got people trailing you, trying to find the ones tracking you and leaving notes. You've got Frank checking all the traffic and business cams around where the notes were left. You're doing everything right, Baby Cakes."

"I'm gonna check the footage," Sanders said, moving for Kellan's Mac. The oversized monitor-computer combo sat atop the desk in the back of the living space.

I got up and moved behind Sanders. Drex stood beside me, both of us watching closely as Sanders logged in and pulled the footage. I sighed. Just as with all the others, whoever was leaving a note for me was incredibly fast, even compared to a vamp. He, she, it was merely a blur, a blip on a single-second frame.

We'd tried slowing the feed, but couldn't make anything out. "I'm going to start calling *it* Flash. At least then I have a name." I gestured towards the screen. Sanders had frozen the image, their action appearing as a pixilated line of motion on the display.

I sighed, moving away. I gazed out the window, trying to search my mind for something. We had to be missing some avenue. No one was this good. Everyone left a clue.

"We've already checked the building's cameras. Flash is flying past the lobby and up the stairs, but never seems to slow down."

"Fingerprints!" I exclaimed, running for the stack of papers. "Maybe we could dust them for prints. I know it's a long shot, but it's something. I can't just sit here and do nothing."

Drex and Sanders hesitated, communicating through expression again.

I ignored them, giving them time to figure out if they were going to fight me on this or not. I grabbed my phone and dialed Kai's number.

"Hey, Leka."

"Hey. Where are you?"

"Condo. Why?"

"Can I come over?"

Only a second passed before he spoke. "Of course."

"Thanks. I'll see you in a bit." I picked up the pile of notes. "I'm going, guys." I made a beeline for the front door.

I'd just rounded the corner when Drex leapt in front of me, halting my escape. "We'll escort you."

"I would argue, but I know it would be pointless. Let's go."

He and Sanders fell into step at my side.

—

Each man flanked me as I knocked on Kai's door. My knuckles were about to strike for the second time when the door flew open.

He stood casually in a pair of basketball shorts and a thin white tee. His feet were bare; his stance was relaxed. His lips mashed together as he appraised Drex and Sanders. He stepped back and jerked his head, gesturing for us to enter.

I moved past Kai, surprised when the guys hung back.

"Make sure you protect her!" Drex asked. He crossed his arms over his chest, planting his feet shoulder-width apart.

Kai rolled his eyes. One second he was at the door, the next he had Drex pinned to the wall just beyond the threshold with his gold dagger at his throat. "Good enough?" Kai growled.

Drex didn't flinch. "I guess."

Kai backed away, tucking his blade into a hidden holster.

“I’ll be back later, Baby Cakes.” Drex smiled, winking at me.

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Bye, babes.” Sanders gave me a small wave before moving towards the elevators with Drex.

Kai closed and locked the door. “Are you dating them now too?” he smirked, his eyes filling with whimsy.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh hush.”

“What’s going on? I see papers in your hand, so I’m assuming you need help with something.”

I blushed. I really did only come to him for help. We never just hung out. We always seemed to act like business friends. “Yeah.”

I followed him into his condo. The ultra-modern design always caught me off guard after seeing him in the lake house, which had a more traditional décor.

He sat down at the dining room table; his two laptops and a pile of papers were waiting. From the looks of it, he was studying reports. He moved the papers aside and slid out the chair beside him. “Sit.”

I slipped into the seat, immediately tugging on my shirt, trying to cover my full belly. Aside from maxi dresses, nothing seemed to cover me anymore. I’d been practically living out of them lately, but changed into sweats and a tank the moment I got home from the office, though the opening was really annoying though.

I focused on the bigger issue. “I’ve been followed lately. All of the cameras we checked only show a blur of motion. We’ve tried freezing the frames, but whoever it is moves too quickly, even for a vamp. What Flash leaves

behind every time is a new note from Cecilia. With no luck at other angles, I wanted to see if we could go the human route and dust for fingerprints, maybe find a match by chance in the system.”

He eyed me for an exaggerated minute. His features slowly softened with each passing second. “You know it’s a long shot, right?” He brushed the back of his hand against my cheek.

I shook my head, my skin warming beneath his touch, my heart fluttering. “Yeah.” My voice was barely above a whisper as I gazed into his inviting brown eyes.

We were stuck in the moment. Neither one of us could move. It was like an invisible magnet was pulling us together, forcing us to stay that way. Our breathing synchronized as our eyes locked and we became lost in each other. I didn’t have the same unveiling with Kai when I kissed him, but at times like this, he volunteered his soul for me.

Suddenly he turned away, dropping his hand. “Let’s, uh, see what we can get.”

I watched as he opened the cabinets of the sleek TV console. He pulled out a few pieces of equipment, unloading them on the table. He held out his hand for a note. I passed him the latest one.

He ran a black light over it followed by some sort of handheld scanner. “Nothing on this one. Next.”

I handed him all nineteen notes one by one.

“They’re all clean. Sorry, Leka.”

I groaned, leaning back in the chair. Why couldn’t this be easier?

—

KELLAN

“Are you positive?” I studied the dark shadow on the screen.

“Ninety-nine point nine,” was the snarky reply.

My informant and I had a rocky relationship. I still hadn’t figured out why he was helping me, but he was helping, so I wasn’t going to piss him off by pushing his buttons.

I sat back in the chair, considering my options.

“Either you’re coming or you’re not.”

“Hold your pants, man. It’s not that easy.”

“Either you want to protect her or you don’t.”

“It’s not black and white,” I spat out.

“It is to me. You have twenty-four hours. I’ll text you the information.” He ended the call, as always, leaving me to stew in my thoughts alone.

I sighed, resting my head on my hand. Damn it. I hated leaving her. But he was right. If I wanted to protect Lexi and our baby, then I needed to go take out Cecilia. I didn’t want Lexi near her. Her team was close enough. The stakes had tripled in the past few days with the recent activity.

And that settled it. I guess I was going to Canada. I would give Auggy and Kalel a courtesy call, maybe let Drex and Sanders in on it too, but I wanted it handled quickly and quietly. No thunder of soldiers advancing on her. I wanted to catch her off guard, unarmed. There was only one man I could trust with this approach: my dad.

My gut twisted as I thought about getting into a plane and flying away from her. With her stomach rounded and filling out nicely, it was a daily reminder of what I was fighting for, why I was going and why the secrecy was necessary. She didn't need to be handling this. She didn't need to be doing half as much as she did. I knew if I mentioned anything, I wouldn't be able to keep her from going with me. For her protection, she couldn't know.

I pushed away from the desk. As I stood to go pack, I caught sight of the scattered pile of notes on the dining room table. My chest tightened, my stomach sank. They, he, she, whoever, was too close to all that I held dear. I didn't want to admit it. As much as it killed me, I was going to have to ask him for the favor. Drexel and Sanders made a good pair, but under the current conditions, I wanted - needed - an extra pair of eyes to watch over and protect the mother of my child.

Chapter Fifteen

LEXI

One day later...

Kellan got up from his computer. I watched as he padded towards the door without checking the security monitor; he must have been expecting this guest. I'd spent yesterday with Gabi and Mel; they'd chased me around the office, talking my ear off as I studied camera feeds and a new list of properties, so I knew the earliest they would pop up would be tomorrow.

"Thanks for coming," Kellan said.

I frowned as I listened. The second his scent hit me, I was on my feet. I watched as Kai entered the room. My heart sprinted in my chest and the baby moved inside me, reacting to my excitement.

Kellan joined Kai, standing beside him. They both looked at me as I stared at them. Kellan had finally cut his hair, making him stand out. *Wait, why were they standing there together?* My heart slowed as worry knotted my stomach. Something was going on.

"What's going on, guys?"

I turned, startled when Drexel emerged from his room.

"You okay?" he asked pointedly. His eyes swept the area before honing in on both vamps. Drexel's eyes conveyed skepticism. "Good luck, Baby Cakes." He chuckled as he closed his bedroom door.

Kellan glanced at Kai before approaching me. He placed his hands on my upper arms, rubbing them gently in

a soothing up and down motion. "I asked him to stay with you while I'm gone."

I was plagued with fear. Kellan was hiding something from me. I'd suspected as much over the past few weeks, but I hadn't seen anything when we connected. Whatever it was, he kept it locked up tight...which meant he didn't want me to know for a reason.

I wrestled free from his grip. "Where are you going?"

His features tightened. His eyes never turned away as he regarded me. "I have something I need to take care of before the baby gets here."

"We have twenty more weeks for that. Why now?" I crossed my arms over my chest.

He pursed his lips, sighing deep. "I'm not waiting until the last minute. This needs to be taken care of sooner rather than later."

I narrowed my eyes, anger rising. It pumped through my veins, burning like acid, as my pulse kicked up. He was keeping secrets. I was carrying *his* child, and he was keeping secrets from me.

"Please calm down." His voice was a rushed plea as his gaze traveled over me in anguish.

Without looking, I knew I was glowing. *Dang it, Sir Staten.*

"Leka."

Instinctively, I responded to his call, looking directly at him.

"Why don't you go change, and I'll take you out?" His tone was appeasing; the slight pressure on his lips

confirmed it.

I could tell he was trying to distract me. I could tell he was determined to get my mind off Kellan and onto something new. I could tell he was just looking out for my well-being, intending to help me let go of all that had me glowing.

I looked at Kellan. His face was solemn, his expression one of pained sorrow. Slowly, he nodded his head. "Go. I promise to be safe."

I snapped, leaning into him. "If you get yourself killed, I hope you go to hell."

Tears stung my eyes as I quickly retreated to the bedroom.

—

KELLAN

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. I couldn't fuck this up. I couldn't let her down.

An immense pressure bore down on my chest as I considered her action. There'd been an angry fire in her eyes when she delivered the final verbal blow. I couldn't help but stop and question if that was how I looked every time I blew up at her. I couldn't suppress my guilt; if the pain she'd inflicted with that one line was even a smidgen of the pain she'd felt every time I lashed out...then I did deserve to go to hell.

Damn, I was such an idiot. I saw the pain in her eyes; I heard the anger and fear in her voice. To watch her suffer, and then, become her punching bag was brutal. How the hell could I have put her through that so many times? I really am an asshole.

Damn if this wasn't a reality check for me.

"I'm going to check on her," Kai announced.

I turned towards the vamp. He was biting his tongue, but I could see the storm brewing in his eyes and the intensity of his features as he glared at me. There was a hard glint in his brown eyes that spoke volumes.

I didn't look away, accepting his silent threat. "Thanks," I muttered.

He started towards the bedroom, but stopped. He angled his head back to me, but kept his gaze down. "For her sake, don't get yourself killed."

I watched as he slipped into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. The implication of his words jarred me and left me standing there frozen.

—

LEXI

I huffed in frustration, tugging down on my tight shirt. My belly bulged out beyond the hem. Tears cascaded down my cheeks as I looked down.

Emotions swirled in my chest, landing in my stomach. It seemed like I was gaining too much weight too quickly. Because everything fit so tight, I couldn't help but panic that I'd go back to the way I was before, to the old, overweight me.

It didn't help my confidence any that Kellan had been steadily pulling back over the past couple weeks. He had become so distant. While he didn't entirely withhold affection, it was given more as an afterthought, like he'd realized he should have been doing something and then reacted obligatorily. He no longer acted on his instincts or

on his emotions, this was probably meant to protect me from his outbursts. Or hell, it could be that he was still acting on his emotions, but his feelings for me changed after seeing me start to balloon up again.

I jumped when I felt his touch. Where has my head been these days? I wasn't as aware as I was before, as alert. I was so easily lost in myself - in my warped mind - that I was missing too much, even the simplest of things.

I rapidly swiped at my tears before I looking up at Kai. I gave him a meek smile, trying to hide it all.

His eyes reflected the truth back at me though. He saw it, and he was worried. He moved his hand to cradle my head as he leaned in and kissed my forehead. "You're still beautiful."

I rolled my eyes. "You don't *have* to be nice." I gazed down at my protruding stomach. It wasn't a perfectly round shape yet. Kellan argued that it was, but my belly weight sat more like an egg, heavier on the bottom half. I was waiting for it to start jiggling any day now.

"Look at me," he ordered.

I bit my lower lip, lifting my eyes to meet his.

"I've never lied to you, have I?"

I couldn't fault him there. He'd always been truthful with me, opting not to speak at all when he didn't feel like he could be brutally honest. "Sorry," I muttered.

I focused on my closet. It was full of clothes...that didn't fit.

"Put on some shoes, and I'll take you shopping."

"But my belly is hanging out."

I gave a tough yank on the bottom of my shirt again, but the black tank refused to stretch anymore to meet my capris, especially since my lower belly was now hogging the length of them and typically they sat just over the largest part of my hips. There was a good four inches of my belly exposed, and it wasn't sexy or cute.

Kai stepped back and removed his shirt, revealing a plain white tee beneath that looked nice with his dark jeans. He passed me the pale blue shirt he'd been wearing. "For the record, I think you're beautiful just the way you are. If it was up to me, I wouldn't cover up any part of you."

I turned my back to him, slipping off my tank and replacing it with his shirt. His shirt hung off of me. It was comfortable and smelled deliciously of him. "Thanks," I said, facing him again.

He chuckled, his eyes sparkling. "It looks cute on you."

I felt color filling my cheeks. I moved away, slipping on a pair of flip-flops. My hair was already off of my neck. My very casual ensemble was complete.

Kai slipped his arm around me, escorting me out to the living room.

Kellan's features tightened at the sight of us. He glowered at Kai, but to his credit, he didn't say anything. My bra hadn't revealed anything a bikini wouldn't have shown when I changed. Regardless, I was still a little ticked at Kellan for not telling me anything about his mission. If I'd done the same to him, he would have flipped out.

"How long will you be gone?" I asked, remaining at Kai's side.

He swallowed hard as he faced me. "I'm not sure."

Rage began rising within me. I rubbed my stomach. How could he leave us? My rambling thoughts hit me hard, jabbing between bouts of frustration. I wasn't angry because he was leaving; I was scared that he might not come back. Why would he risk that? Why would he walk right into the arms of chance?

I ground my teeth. Why was he doing this? I scowled at him. "Well, I'm not sure if I'll be here when you get back then," I barked, stomping off towards the door.

I heard Kellan growl, clearly he was annoyed.

It became more and more difficult to breathe the closer I got to the front door. Distress pitted in my stomach, barring my body from working right. I closed my eyes and pressed my forehead against the door. As angry and hurt as I was, I couldn't walk away from him. This wasn't the way to get my point across. I would feel awful if something did happen to him while he was away, wherever he was going, with whomever he would be with. It would destroy me if my last words to him were that I might not be waiting for him when he returned - if he returned - implying that I could, and would, walk away from him. Two wrongs didn't make a right, and sometimes you had to think ahead rather than remain stagnant in the moment.

I turned back around and met him at the corner. We stared long and hard into each other's eyes. So many emotions passed through me, undulating over me in heavy waves. It was like I was being buried beneath them, unable to escape their powerful hold.

"You'll come back to me?" I asked, lost in the depths of his emerald eyes.

"Of course." He held my face. "I'll always come back to you."

Tears stung my eyes again. I blinked them away.

He ran his thumbs across my cheeks. He smiled wistfully. "I love you."

He lips captured mine, and our souls instantly intertwined. His lips were soft, telling me all he didn't say. They were things I knew but irrationally dismissed. His caress was gentle; sweet yet potent.

In his arms, my lungs worked evenly, in his arms, I felt safe and protected. His arms would *always* be my home.

I slid my tongue along the inside of his lips, tasting him. I tried to memorize the feel of him so I could easily recall it whenever I missed him, whenever I longed for him while he was away.

After a last brush of his lips against mine, he pulled back. He pressed a kiss to my forehead, my temples, my cheeks and then the tip of my nose. He smiled wide at me. "Take care." He kissed my lips again, a quick, fleeting touch. "I'll be back soon."

"I hope so."

Kellan squatted down in front of me. "And you." He lifted Kai's shirt that I was wearing, exposing my belly. "Behave and stay safe." He pressed a kiss to my belly for the first time.

The baby rumbled inside me. It pressed outwards, like it was trying to get closer to him, but it simultaneously pushed on my organs, sending a tinge of pain shooting through me.

I scrunched my face; breathing through the sharp blow of what I was sure was a leg to my ribs. Absentmindedly, I

rubbed my belly, as if it would soothe where I was hurt inside.

Kellan chuckled, rising to his full height. "Figures. I told it to behave and it does the exact opposite."

"Well, it *is* yours." I smirked.

He rolled his eyes sarcastically. "Have fun." He yanked me into a tight hug, squishing me against him.

"Please be careful," I pleaded, as I wrapped my arms around him. "I love you."

"I'll be back in no time." He kissed my head as he retreated. He faced Kai. "Thanks for coming. Don't make me regret it though." He extended a hand to the vamp.

Kai shook his hand. "I'd do anything for *her*." He looked towards me.

Drexel came out of his room. "You ready?" he asked Kellan.

"Almost." He strolled to the bedroom.

"You going out?" Drex looked at me and Kai.

"Yeah. Need anything?"

"Nothing *you* can give me." He winked.

"And on that note, we're leaving." I grabbed Kai's arm, tugging him towards the door.

Drex laughed. "Have fun."

—

Chapter Sixteen

The mall was crowded for a Sunday afternoon. Kai kept a protective arm around me as we weaved through the throngs of people. The voices echoed off the tiled floor, their cadences blending into a single, voluminous hum. Scents overwhelmed my nose, occasionally sending my stomach whirling. On the flip side, the food court was completely intoxicating.

“Kai?” I bit my lower lip as we neared the source of the appetizing aroma. My stomach chose that moment to growl, and the baby’s movement seemed to echo demand.

His eyes twinkled, knowingly. “Come on.”

I ordered from a popular fast food chain specializing in chicken. I took the time to mix two packets of blood Kai had brought into the ketchup, before I dug in.

I ate with gusto, the meal satisfying me in every way. As I looked up from my nearly empty tray, I stopped short. There was something in the depths of Kai’s eyes, a seemingly untouchable emotion that I couldn’t identify. It sent a chill down my spine, spearing my chest and halting my stomach.

I swallowed hard, unable to stop staring, unable to control my desire to unveil that emotion. There was so much power in it; it’d grabbed hold of me, and wouldn’t let go.

“Holy shit! Look who it is,” a male cried.

I was instantly snapped back to reality - a reality I suddenly wanted to run from. I clasped my hands in my lap as I turned to face Jason.

He came up short, his eyes widening a bit as he looked me up and down. "I see you're packing on the pounds again."

Kai shoved out of his seat, his face drawn tight. His hands fisted at his side as he glared down at our intruder.

Jason, ignorant to what he didn't want to see, gave Kai a once-over. "What happened to the other dude? Did he run when you started putting on the L-Bs?"

I stood up, suddenly losing my appetite. I just wanted to get away. I didn't want to look at him, I didn't want to speak to him...I wanted him gone. Since I couldn't physically remove him without hurting him, I had to be the one to walk away.

I picked up the tray, strolled to the trash and dumped it, placing the tray in its place when I was done.

"What's wrong? Cat got your tongue, Lexi?" Jason called out.

I closed my eyes, wrapping my arms around myself. I took a deep breath, trying to keep my thoughts and emotions from getting the best of me.

Inadvertently, Jason had just confirmed what I was afraid of earlier. I *was* gaining too much weight. I didn't know what to do about it though. I didn't know how to stop it. My body didn't respond to diet and exercise like a human's.

"Hey, dude, back off," Jason fussed.

I looked back over my shoulder. Kai had Jason's collar in his fist as he hovered mere inches from his face. Jason squirmed in Kai's grasp, pushing on his chest. Kai waited until Jason eyes locked with his.

“You didn’t see us today. You never approached us; you never spoke to Lexi. You’re going to turn around, be confused as to why you were in this part of the mall, and then you’re going to walk away and not look back.” Kai spoke clearly and concisely as he zoned in on Jason’s eyes.

I couldn’t take anymore though. I focused ahead of me. I strolled out into the crowd, wanting to be lost among the people for once. I didn’t want to be seen or found. I just wanted to be...to merely exist.

—

KAI

I released the twerp, watching to make sure he followed through with my command, before I went after Leka. I followed her scent through the busy walkways of the mall.

Anger coursed through me every time I thought about that asshole. I could tell she was having problems adjusting to her expanding waistline. As vamps, we were accustomed to our bodies being one specific way, one specific size and measurement. Any change in those dimensions was certain to mess with the psyche. Fear had to be a player, too; fear that your body would not snap back, that it would never be the same again.

Kellan wasn’t any help either. I could tell he loved her, but he didn’t have the maturity yet. He was too busy trying to get a handle on himself to recognize what Leka needed. She needed reassurance; she needed a boost to her confidence. She didn’t need him running off; she didn’t need him keeping secrets at her most vulnerable time, when her insecurity would certainly twist his destination.

My heart splintered when I caught up to her. She stood outside a maternity store, staring blankly at the clothes

inside. Her hands were firmly resting over her burgeoning belly. Fear and anger knotted her brows.

I approached her cautiously, mindful of her lack of mental presence lately. She'd been distant, not as cognizant of what was happening around her.

I slid my arms around her, cradling her back into my chest. I bent down into her. "You don't have to buy maternity clothes. You're small enough to buy one size up in a regular store."

She stood, quietly, in my embrace, but continued to stare vacantly into the store. I knew she'd heard me. I knew she was just thinking deeply, trying to deal with all the emotions and mental trip ups.

After several minutes, she finally turned away from the shop. "I want a new pair of sweats," she stated.

I smiled down at her. She really didn't know how pretty she was. I think that was one of the things I loved about her. So often, vamps were conceited. We'd had too much time to accept and fall in love with ourselves; we had too many years to build up our confidence, to raise our egos by taunting our power over humans. Leka was a breath of fresh air - beautiful air - she was so exhilarating.

She'd blushed profusely one day when she showed me an old picture of herself. I knew she thought it would turn me off to her, the way her hips were nearly double the size and her face was quite a bit rounder back then. She thought it would change the way I looked at her now. Instead, I found myself even more drawn to her. She had so many layers. While I wouldn't have traditionally been attracted to her larger size, had I given her a chance and gotten to know her, I didn't doubt my view would have been turned upside down.

“Let’s go get you a new pair of sweats then.” I pushed a loose strand of hair away from her face, caressing her silky skin along the way.

She gave me a shy grin. I could tell she was slightly embarrassed by her request because her cheeks became rosy, but she was feeling too brazen to take it back now. She slipped her hand into mine and led us towards Victoria’s Secret.

—

KELLAN

I scanned the crowd in the hotel’s restaurant. It’d been a long flight to British Columbia. I’d barely had time to drop my bag in my hotel room before jetting downstairs to meet my informant.

He’d been a steady contact for the past six months. I’d yet to see him in person though. Essentially, I was meeting a ghost, following a ghost’s whispers.

I checked my watch. It was two minutes until eleven. The sky outside was dark, yet the city was still alive and bustling with activity.

“Excuse me, sir?” I turned towards the voice, heavy with a French accent. A male, dressed in a full dress service uniform, extended an envelope towards me. “This is for you.”

My eyes scanned the area again. I inhaled deep, but came up empty. There were no vamps, at least not in the restaurant.

I took the envelope.

The man immediately turned and walked away.

I glanced around nervously before I studying the object in my hands.

The envelope was a thick, white envelope. It was blank, no inscription. The envelope had been sealed with a heavy imprint, holding the flap down securely. Focusing on the image that had been imprinted, it took me a moment to recognize...it was the vamp army's crest.

I tore open the envelope. A small piece of lined paper fell into my hand.

Outside. Right side of the hotel. Alley. Five minutes.

I glanced around once more. Not finding anything or anyone suspicious, I tucked the message inside my bomber jacket. I stood, threw down a couple bills, and headed for the door, for the alley on the right side of the hotel. It was time to meet my informant.

—

LEXI

Kai held the front door open to condo. I ambled past him to where Drexel was waiting.

The burly bodyguard studied me, a smirk teasing his lips. "I see you got a few things," he ribbed, gazing at all the bags Kai set on the table.

"Not much." I replied casually.

The rest of our day went much smoother. Kai insisted on buying me sweats in every color and style as well as shirts to match. Then, we somehow went from casual attire to business wear for the office. I also grabbed a couple more maxi dresses that were on clearance. It was the end of September and still unbearably warm, but I knew the temperature would continue to drop. In the end, I caved

and got a pair of maternity jeans. Everything else, from tanks to fancy tops, was from the regular section of the stores, just one size larger.

“I’m going to shower and change,” I announced.

I padded towards the kitchen table. Reaching into a bag, I grabbed a new pair of VS Capri sweats and a tank. I began gathering up the bags to take to my closet.

Kai swooped in, taking them from me. “Where do you want them?”

I frowned. “I was just going to put them in my closet to put away later.”

“Stop pouting and go shower.” He kissed my cheek as a send off.

I looked to Drexel.

He pointed at Kai. “What he said.” Mischief danced in his eyes. He was in a playful mood. I’d only seen fleeting glimpses of his fun side lately.

I darted my eyes at him.

He lifted a single brow. “Is that another mood swing I detect?”

I gasped, indignantly. I threw my clothes at him.

He laughed. “Yup. Look out, Kai. We’re losing her to the hormone monster.”

To Kai’s credit, he remained silent.

At vamp speed, I moved to Drex and slapped his chest. “Take that back!”

His laugh grew heartier. “You can’t fault me for speaking the truth.”

I lunged at him.

He caught me midair and pulled me to him, wrapping his arms securely around me to keep me from hitting him.

I fought to free myself from his grip, but he was too strong.

“Promise you’ll be nice if I let you go?”

“I promise to bite the hell out you if you let me go,” I snapped haughtily.

Kai cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t suggest you continue to antagonize the pregnant woman.”

“Yeah. What he said.” I stuck my nose up in the air.

Drex poked at the tip of my nose. “Where’s the fun in that?”

I decided standing my own ground wasn’t going to work. Drex was too much like the older brother I never had, and you could never reason with older brothers. You had to bribe them. “I’ll bake you whatever you want if you let me go.”

He suspiciously narrowed his eyes. “Cherry pie with homemade whipped cream and a scoop of vanilla ice cream?”

“Sure.” I attempted to shrug my shoulders, but couldn’t move my arms.

“You’re forgiven.” He promptly set me down and handed my clothes back to me. “It’s good to see you laughing again, Baby Cakes.”

“Sucker.” I snickered. He yanked me back into him. I laughed. “I was kidding. I’ll make it, *after* I finish showering.”

“You better. Sanders is coming up in a bit, and he’ll want some too.”

“Well, for *him*, I guess I will.”

Drexel smiled wide, his face lighting up; the tension from the past week had left him. In moments like these, he seemed so freed from his past, from the weight he carried on his shoulders. It was one of the reasons I liked to rile him, why I indulged his teasing. He deserved to be able to let go sometimes. I felt blessed to be one of the people he felt comfortable doing that with; Sanders being the only other one.

Drex was more than a bodyguard to me - more than a friend - he truly was like the older brother I never had. I didn’t doubt that he would take a bullet for me. He was brave, loyal and determined. He was resolute that nothing would happen to me under his watch. He was also a constant companion, a steady friend. I loved having him here with me. As much as it helped him to let go with me, it equally helped me to let go with him. We could be free with each other.

Gabi and Mel were amazing friends, but they didn’t indulge in immature play; they didn’t cater to the childlike release I needed from time to time, especially in the midst of stress. Drexel gave me something no one else did, something no one else could.

He set my feet on the floor again and turned me in the direction of my bedroom. He smacked my ass before giving me a tiny shove in the right direction.

“Hey!” I covered my rear, glaring at him over my shoulder.

“Go!” He pointed towards my room.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m going.” I rolled my eyes.

“See what I have to put up with?” Drex chided me by asking Kai.

I turned towards Kai. “He’s suffering. Homemade cherry pie, whipped cream and ice cream regularly, oh but he’s suffering.”

“You can torture *me* any time then.” Kai winked.

I rolled my eyes again, skipping off to the room to shower and change.

—

Chapter Seventeen

It felt great to finally be wearing clothes that fit me. I had no annoying gaps, no flesh on display.

The moment I opened the bathroom door, Kai was there. He sat on my bed; his head immediately lifted, his eyes seeking mine. He smiled softly. "Feel better?"

"Much." I pointed to my stomach. "No more peep shows."

He chuckled. "I don't know if that's what I would call it."

I shrugged, moving to the closet. I opened the door and stopped short at the sight before me. I walked back out and looked at Kai. He gave me a mischievous grin. I pursed my lips, walking back into my closet.

Kai had pushed all my old clothes to the back and hung everything that we'd just purchased in the front. He'd also moved the few dresses that still fit to the front with the good clothes. He saved me the heartbreaking trouble of segregating everything I couldn't wear anymore. He probably saved me a few tears too.

I tossed my dirty clothes in the hamper, closing the door behind me. I immediately went to him, throwing my arms around him. He didn't hesitate hugging me back. I kissed his cheek. "Thanks. I really, really appreciate it."

"You can repay me with dessert." The sparkle in his eyes and curve of his lips told me his words were left up to my interpretation, that he wouldn't mind either dessert.

I smacked his arm, jerking back. "Way to ruin the moment."

He laughed. "Mood swings *and* abuse. Maybe I'm not so envious of Kellan anymore."

"I'm not moody!" I stomped off towards the kitchen.

Sanders yanked me into his arms, planting a kiss on my forehead. "Stop picking on my girl," he barked at the other guys.

"Yeah!" I said.

"How are you, sweetie?" he asked, releasing me in front of him.

"Good."

He sobered. "You had another note on your door. It said something like the same thing: another riddled warning."

My stomach tensed. My brows dipped together as I looked up at him. "Should we be taking them more seriously?"

"We're doing all we can. I was just letting you know, that's all." He brushed back my wet hair. "Call me when my plate is ready?"

"Okay." I nodded, giving him a less than enthusiastic smile.

He slinked towards Drexel. Both men walked towards Drex's bedroom with their hands stuffed in their pockets. The way they snuck sideways glances at each other, you could tell they wouldn't be able to keep their hands to themselves otherwise. There was an obvious connection between the two of them. While they'd relaxed about showing their affection for each other in front of Kellan and me, they were careful to conceal it in front of the others, even the ones who knew the truth about their relationship.

The moment I stepped into the kitchen, there was a knock on the door. I immediately looked at the security monitor on the wall. From the looks of it, Auggy and Aunt Claire were going back and forth about something.

“I’ll get it.” Kai started for the door.

“Thanks.”

I began pulling out my baking supplies while Kai answered the door.

“I’m damn near family. I should have the code to get in any time I want!” Auggy grumbled.

“I don’t even have the code,” Aunt Claire countered.

“Well we should,” Auggy responded. “With what’s been going on lately plus her condition, an emergency could happen at any time.”

“Don’t even start with that. My head can’t handle any more nightmare scenarios.” I heard Aunt Claire’s heels clacking against the floor, as they drew closer.

The front door closed and suddenly they were all there, watching me.

“Hi.” I gave them an inviting smile as I set down the final necessary ingredient on the island.

“How are you, honey? How are you feeling?” Aunt Claire closed the distance between us, swiftly, feeling my face with the back of her hand.

“I’m fine.” I tried to assure her, but she didn’t listen.

“You look like you’re not gaining enough. Have you been eating? Kai, has she been eating good?” She looked at the counter and back at me. “Don’t tell me you’re still doing all this cooking. Why haven’t you hired anyone yet?”

Oh, no, no, no. You're doing too much." She started pushing me towards the living room. "I told you Augustine! That damn army of yours has her running all over the place. Meanwhile she's managing her own army of vamps, struggling to keep up with orders for her business, and who knows what else. Throw in a social life and a needy man - because Lord knows you're all needy in some way - and I'm surprised she can still stand. It's not good, Lex." She pushed me down onto the sofa, shoving aside several items on the coffee table before pulling it towards me. "Feet up, now," she ordered.

"Will someone please turn her off?" I frowned.

Drexel and Sanders came out of the room, probably to see what the ruckus was all about.

"I'm fine, Aunt Claire. You can ask Drex." I began sliding the coffee table away, but she stood in front of it to block my move. When she turned to face Drex and Sanders, I rose up on the sofa and climbed over the arm. Running past Auggy, I maneuvered behind Kai before poking my head around his side to watch her. She really was hell in heels, even though I knew she meant well.

"Lexi, I'm just trying to help. With Kellan being gone, I can only imagine what these men have you doing." She eyed Drex then Kai, suspiciously.

Kai bristled in front of me, clearly taking offense to her insinuation. I couldn't blame him. He'd been the total opposite of everything she was accusing him of. He'd been amazing.

"Oh leave the boys alone, Claire. Lexi has a mouth of her own: boy does she." Auggy looked at me pointedly before continuing. "If this is too much for her, I'm sure she'll let us know."

“Yes, well, I also know that she’s refused to ask for help in the past.” She focused her attention on me. “I hope you understand it’s not just you anymore, honey. You have to think about the well-being of that baby too. Stress isn’t good...for either of you.” Aunt Claire’s expression softened a tad.

I sighed, stepping out from behind Kai. “I know that, Aunt Claire. I know you mean well too, but I think I can judge for myself what is and isn’t too much. I’ll admit it, my business *is* overwhelming. I do need help with it, but I haven’t found anyone yet.”

She studied me for a minute. “I’ll make you a deal. If you hire someone to help you with the bakery, then I’ll back off. I won’t stop worrying, but I’ll stop pestering you.”

“Deal.”

She stretched her arms out expectantly. I went to her, falling into her embrace. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I just hate to see you run yourself ragged. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve stopped by and you’ve been sleeping.”

I jerked back, frowning. “When did this happen?”

“Oh no you don’t. You’re not going to work yourself up over something that you can’t change.” Her tone suggested there would be no arguing.

“I’m not upset that I missed you, I’m upset that Kellan never told me.” I looked at Drexel. He looked away. Unease slithered through my stomach. My chest tightened as I tried to figure out one possible reason to justify him not telling me. When I came up empty, my soul lost a bit of its flare. *How could he? Why would he?*

The room was silent; no one would look me in the eye, as if they all knew something I didn’t. “Spill it,” I

demanded, crossing my arms over my chest and taking a step away from Aunt Claire.

At their continued silence, I was incensed. I had to force my lungs to expand and my mind not to wonder, yet, even concentrated effort didn't work this time. My lungs struggled to work as my mind traveled, many hurtful scenarios passing through it.

Rage shot through me, heating my flesh. I felt my features pull as the baby moved, its heartbeat picking up. They were keeping the truth from me. They knew; they had to know based off their reactions. I saw the telltale blue out of the corner of my eye and hot tears began to sting my eyes.

Auggy cleared his throat. "I, uh, don't know for sure what the nature of their relationship was or is, but Kellan has been corresponding with a secret informant. That's where he went. He went to meet whoever it is."

"Augustine!" His name was a rushed whisper, a hushed scold, rolling off Aunt Claire's lips. "I wouldn't worry, honey. Kellan loves you; you know that. This is work related. Nothing more."

"Both of the people he works with, and for, are here," I bluntly stated.

My heart raced. For the first time ever, it felt like my spirit was caged. I wanted so badly to escape my body, to leave this reality, yet I was stuck...I was stuck facing the possibilities while my *supposed* friends and family made excuses and tried to bat away my sensibility.

The blue must have faded, despite my emotions being revved up, because I felt firm arms wrap around me. Through my bleary consciousness, I smelled him. Kai pulled me into his chest, rubbing gentle circles on my back.

“I think you all should leave,” Kai said, not bothering to look at them.

I slid my arms around his waist, nestling my face into his chest. I was thankful he was there, grateful for the refuge he provided. He was the barrier, my protector from the world right now.

I felt Aunt Claire’s hand rest upon my shoulder. “I’m sorry, honey. I’ll call you later.” Her voice laced with regret.

Sobs erupted from me. My chest ached as I thought of who or what Kellan was doing. I was over here getting fat and he was Gods knows where doing God knows what. I was losing him, or maybe I’d already lost him.

A dark abyss opened at my core, sucking the life out of me. Tumultuous emotions fogged my mind, draining my body as tears streaked down my face onto Kai’s white T-shirt.

He hugged me tight, never rushing me, never interrupting me. He let me cry it out; he let me know he was there, but didn’t try to change my mind or justify anything.

How had this happened? Slowly, Kai was becoming the man I needed and Kellan was slipping away, no longer even being the man I wanted. If Kellan didn’t want me, then I didn’t want him. If he couldn’t love me in spite of my baby weight, then I didn’t need him.

A new wave of despair washed through me. The earth felt like it cracked at its center, my whole world shattered at the thought of walking away. *Damn it! Why was it so hard? Why did I have to love him so much? Why did this have to hurt so bad?*

KAI

Leka trembled in my arms, her entire body shaking from the force of her sobs. My heart broke, my soul ripped to shreds at her anguish.

I wanted to rip Kellan's fucking head off! I told him not to hurt her, yet here he was destroying her. She didn't deserve this. I didn't care what his reason was for going away, if she was his equal, as he claimed, then she deserved the truth, even if it hurt.

I could only imagine what she was going through. It seemed like everything was crumbling around her. Everything she'd loved was being taken from her; questions, the unknown, being dangled in its place.

I lost track of time. I didn't know how long I'd been standing there holding her before she began to calm down. Too long. My mind had traveled in the circles; my emotions swam the same repetitive lap as I comforted her. I was pissed off at him, I was disappointed in the people she trusted, and I was sad for her. It was hard to love someone who didn't love you back.

That was the thing though. As much as I wanted to hurt Kellan, I couldn't, because that would certainly damage her too. She loved him. It was obvious with every tender look she gave him. In every touch she shared with him was a delicate passion, and in every thought she had of him was a lingering bliss. He was a jerk, but she loved him anyways. He didn't deserve her, but she wanted him in spite of what she could get, what she could have.

I thought back over my conversation with Will. After tonight, I will be looking forward to fate.

LEXI

A numbing pain spread through me as my tears dried. I wiggled out of Kai's strong arms, staring forward, at his shirt. Pink watermarks marred his once white shirt.

"Sorry. If you take it off, I'll wash it." My voice cracked. Damn it.

He lifted his shirt off over his head and tossed it aside. He wiped away my stray tears with the backs of his fingers.

Slowly, I lifted my eyes, marveling up the solid plains of his muscled body to his heavy gaze. There was so much to face in the depths of his brown eyes.

I stared into him, falling deeper and deeper into his warmth as each second passed. Our souls didn't collide the way mine and Kellan's did, but it didn't stop me from loving him. It didn't stop him from loving me with unyielding devotion.

I placed my hand on his chest. He was like smooth stone beneath my palms.

He remained still, his chest rising and falling under my touch. His eyes seemed to look straight through me, as awareness alerted every cell in my body. He didn't bother to hide his desire. His pupils dilated as his breathing picked up, as his muscles flexed with anticipation.

My stomach twisted, my pulse raced as I lowered my attention to his lips, full and soft; tempting. Before I realized what I was doing, I leaned in closer to him. I moved my other hand to grab his side.

His arms remained at his sides. He watched me like a hawk, so keen and observant.

I shifted to stand on my tiptoes, bracing myself on him as I stretched up towards him. He bent his head slightly to meet me. I gently brushed my lips across his. Warm pleasure filled me, gathering in my womb.

His breath hitched, yet he didn't move. He let me make the moves, allowed me to decide what I wanted.

In this moment, while my soul wanted Kellan, while my heart was torn, my head clearly shouted for Kai, propelling me to kiss him.

I pressed my lips against his, more confident this time. He met the demands of my mouth, never hesitating to return the caress of my lips.

I ran my tongue along his lips before tasting him. His flavor exploded on my tongue as his arms slowly wrapped me against him. He lifted me into his arms, making it easier for me to reach him.

I moved my hands up and ran my fingers through his hair, resting my forearms on his shoulders.

My pulse began to race as he surrounded me. I inhaled him: tasting him, feeling him...taking in his scent. I felt his every desperate gasp for air between touching my lips to his. Every brush of his bare upper body against my flesh sent chills through me; awakening an excitement - a desire for more - that sparred through me. Sparring because I knew I *shouldn't* want this. I'd fought my feelings for Kai for so long, yet I couldn't challenge them anymore.

It wasn't because I didn't love Kellan; it wasn't because I didn't want my relationship with Kellan; it was simply because Kai treated me better. It was because Kai made me feel valued while Kellan dismissed me. It came down to feeling, not conscience. It was rooting in despair, not faith.

Our kiss intensified as passion began to surge between us. This was the turning point. This was the critical decision everyone had to consciously make. My body was alive, my nerves sizzling with sensation. I wrapped my legs around his middle, feeling the hard length of him beneath me. *Could I really stop now?*

Every breath I took was filled with him. His hands moved over me with eagerness, with need. I felt so safe, so loved in his arms. But would that love last if I went any further with him? When a resounding 'yes' echoed in my mind, I knew I was in too deep. I knew my heart - my emotions - was too entangled with his.

My conscience was blocked by my physical drive, hiding beneath Kai's expert lips as they teased and tasted me. In his arms, I felt like a schoolgirl, anxious and ready for her first time. I knew my wants were safe; I knew he would take care of me.

I pulled back. "Bedroom," I said, immediately capturing his lips again.

He carried me to the bedroom. I heard him kick the door shut behind us. He never lost rhythm; his lips never veered.

He climbed on the bed with his arms still wrapped snugly around me. He gently laid me down, carefully positioning my body between him and the bed. He ran his hand along my side, stroking his tongue against mine.

Abruptly, his hand steadied, and he pulled back.

My eyes shot open. His eyes were squeezed shut; his lips were smashed together. Creases lined his forehead as his brows crowded inward. His expression conveyed anger mixing with frustration. Each labored breath was a huff. Watching him closely, I saw his jaw begin to quiver. My

heart shook, killing every ounce of desire within me to focus on a more substantial need. Kai wasn't angry or frustrated. He was in pain.

The need to comfort him settled within me. I swept his hair away from his face, tucking it behind his ears. I smoothed my hands over his cheeks. I didn't want to rush him. I didn't want to hurt him anymore.

The baby chose this intense moment to move.

Kai's eyes flew open. They were glossy as they regarded me. He offered a weak smile. "Leka."

I dropped my legs, freeing him. He slipped his hand between us, soothing it over my rustling baby.

His eyes were lit with emotion...and then he frowned. He moved his hand away, shaking his head negatively. "I can't." The pained expression returned. "Fuck! I want to so bad. I crave you so intensely that my entire body feels like it's going to split at the seams, but I can't. You want this now because you're upset. And as much as I want you in that way, if we did it now, it would be ruined with your regret later. I can't love you now only to have it hurt you later."

I shook my head. "I won't." The words sounded feeble, even to me. I closed my eyes, sighing. I opened them to face him again. "I'm sorry I dragged you down with me."

He smiled. "I'm not. I love you, Leka. I'll cherish every bit of affection you give me within these boundaries." His tone was reverent, confirming his words.

Tears welled. Why couldn't Kellan feel the same way? Why couldn't he treasure me like Kai? I knew comparing the two was wrong; they were two completely different people. But this moment highlighted how wrong my choice

was logically. My soul may have declared one single victor, but if fate had any sense, she would change that detail.

Kai tenderly kissed my lips one last time. “When you let him go, when he’s gone, I’ll be here. I’ll be waiting. I won’t hesitate then. I’ll sweep you off your feet and make you forget every wound he left behind. I’ll kiss away your tears and love you into a better tomorrow.”

I held Kai’s face, my hands shaking under the power of my emotions, the depth of my hurt. “You deserve so much more, Kai.”

He chuckled lightly. “Most women would argue that I deserve much less based on my past.” He sobered. “I’m not an angel, Leka. I’ve been a complete ass to many women before you.”

“Anyone can change.”

“You’re the only one I was ever willing to change for.”

The magnitude of his confession punched me - hard; it devastated my defenses and destroyed the ground beneath me. It sent me falling from an intimidating height, fear and excitement flooding me, irrationally swaying my heart.

Kai moved to the side, lying on the bed beside me and pulling me into him.

I kissed his chest; unease wrecked my soul. “I love you, Kai. In case you didn’t know, I do love you.”

He stiffened. “*But?*”

“No buts. I love you. There’s nothing anyone can do to change that.”

His body didn’t relax the way I thought it would. I peered up at him. The pained expression had returned.

“That only makes me hate him more,” he stated.

I didn't know what else to do. I hugged him tightly, snuggling deeper into him. Maybe I couldn't love him freely, but I still loved him. He deserved to know that love; and he deserved to know that he was loved.

—

Chapter Eighteen

I opened my eyes; exhaustion still settled in my bones. He ran his fingers through my hair, coaxing me to relax further.

I looked up at him.

He smiled. "Good morning, sleepy head."

I stretched, rolling over to look around the room. It was still night, but I had a feeling quite a few hours had passed. I looked at the clock on the nightstand. I was shocked to see it was already 5:31 AM.

I turned back to him. His head rested in his palm, the weight of his upper body was settled on his elbow.

"Want me to get you breakfast?"

I tilted my head. "You cook?"

"No, but I could get you something."

I laughed. "That's okay."

I moved away, getting out of bed. I stood and looked at him from this angle. He was devilishly sexy lying in my bed, his muscled upper body on display.

"Like what you see?" He wagged his brows.

"Talk about cocky." My brows waved back at him.

I frowned as everything from last night tumbled back to the forefront of my mind. "Did Drex come back?"

Kai shook his head negatively. "No, sorry."

Guilt strangled me. It wasn't Drexel's place to be put in the middle of me and Kellan's relationship. It wasn't anyone's place. This was all Kellan, not Drexel, Sanders, Auggy or Aunt Claire. I owed them all an apology. It wasn't their fault my fiancé neglected his duties. It wasn't their fault my relationship was falling apart, or so it seemed.

"I'll be in the kitchen if you need me." I headed for my refuge.

I sensed him right behind me, watching me closely. I could almost feel the intensity of the concern in his scrutiny.

I found the ingredients I'd taken out last night still sitting on the island. Luckily, none of it was perishable. Even though I wouldn't use the blood, it wasn't rotten. I grabbed the butter and stuffed it back into the fridge, pulling out a fresh block along with a new container of blood.

I was going to bake each of them a cherry pie. I'd write that I was sorry on top of each one in whipped cream and give it to them. It was the least I could do.

Kai sat on a barstool. He silently observed everything that I did.

As soon as I put the final pie in the oven, I grabbed my laptop and powered it up. Within a minute, I was in my back office log, pulling my orders for the day. I nearly cried when I saw three full pages of requests.

That settled it. I was placing an ad today. I already had a delivery company. Now, I needed someone to help me bake the deliveries.

I called Sanders. Drexel wouldn't answer my calls. He was hurt, and rightfully so. I'd done exactly what I said I never would. I kicked him out, asked him to leave. God, I was an awful friend. It seemed like I couldn't do anything right lately.

"Are you alright?" Sanders' gruff voice had a soft edge.

"Yeah." I sighed. "Is he there?"

"Yeah."

"Will you two please come up? I promise not to be mean or cry. I'll be a good pregnant vamp." I bit my bottom lip, anxiety flooding my veins. The baby turned in my belly. I winced as it hit a sensitive spot low in my stomach.

Kai was at my side in a second. I held up my hand, holding him off. I was waiting on pins and needles to see if the guys would actually come to me or if I would have to go hunt them down.

I didn't hear whispers, but Sanders and Drexel had always been able to communicate with merely a look.

"We'll be up in a bit," Sanders finally responded.

I immediately felt the weight lifted off of me. "See you soon."

We both hung up.

"What exactly does that thing do in there?" Kai smirked, eying my stomach with curiosity.

I shrugged. "It moves around, which is usually fine. Sometimes, though, it hits a spot that's oversensitive, or one of my organs, and I feel a stab of pain. It doesn't last; it's just a bit shocking at first."

Kai nodded, accepting my response. He may have accepted it, but I knew he didn't fully understand it. No man ever would; not even every woman would.

I moved back, grabbing a pie off the counter and handing it to him.

He smiled. "What's the 'I'm sorry' for?"

"For crying all over your shirt and for all the other stuff after that." I felt shame spread across my cheeks just thinking about our short, heated exchange.

"Never be sorry for that, Leka. Never regret loving me, please." His voice was endearing, but there was a desperate edge to it, a hard plea that rounded out the final word.

"I'll never regret loving you, Kai. I regret not having a better hold on my emotions. I wished I was more stable and level headed rather than a spastic, bi-polar..."

The door opened; Drex and Sanders entered. Sanders shoved at Drexel, sending him away from the entry, where it seemed like the big man wanted to cower.

My heart broke at the apprehension in his steps, at the ache in his eyes. Oh, he tried to steel himself against it, he tried to hide it, but I knew him too well.

I quickly moved to him. "Please forgive me."

He stood, quietly staring down at me. He wasn't looking at me though, he was looking through me. Talk about guilt. I'd never felt so small.

"Drex, please look at me." I stood on my tiptoes and covered his cheeks with my hands, waiting until I had his attention. "I'm sorry. I had a bad moment and I took it out on the wrong people. It's not your fault. It never was. It's

not your responsibility to be in the middle of me and Kellan. It's definitely not your responsibility to report anything to me. Your loyalty isn't being questioned. I'm sorry you got caught in the middle, and I'm sorry you were inadvertently pushed away."

He slowly nodded his head. His brows relaxed as his eyes drifted. "It's not my place to say anything, but I will say that you deserve more than he gave you. If my fiancé was pregnant, I wouldn't leave her in the hands of others to run off on some secret mission."

My hands began to shake as I listened to his words, prompting me to move them. "Thanks for your honesty."

"Hey." It was his turn to capture me; his hand cupped the back of my head as his thumb brushed against my cheek. "I'm not saying he doesn't love you. I'm saying he doesn't know how to handle himself. Your love is more mature than his. In time, that will change."

Wanting to move away from the subject of Kellan - and the fact that he hadn't bothered to call me since he left - I focused my desserts. "I baked you and Sanders each a pie." I smiled, leaving Drex's warmth.

I handed each of them an 'I'm sorry' pie. They both chuckled. "I'm really sorry, guys."

"All's forgiven if you have vanilla ice cream." Sanders offered.

My smile widened. "Homemade." I handed each of them a spoon from the silverware drawer as I retrieved the homemade ice cream from the special gadget. Grabbing a scoop from the drawer, I spooned two heaping mounds on top of each of their plates before packing away pies for Auggy and Aunt Claire, to be delivered later.

I busied myself cleaning the kitchen - which was mostly clean already - as everyone else ate. I kept trying to reel in my wondering thoughts of Kellan, as everyone else ate.

I was in the middle of wiping down the mixer, when all three guys yelled out simultaneously, "Done!"

My head shot up, and I was surprised to see three empty pie pans. I knew the shock was evident on my face. They all gave me a big, crooked grin. I narrowed my eyes suspiciously at them.

"You three are too in sync. It's a tad creepy."

That's when their faces changed. Sanders turned serious, as usual, appearing preoccupied. Drexel's grin widened as his eyes flashed with enjoyment. Kai lifted a single brow, his lips full of unspoken questions.

I shook my head, studying them. "I really do need more female friends."

"Um, speaking of females..." Drex pulled out a piece of notebook paper from his pants pocket and set it on the counter in front of me. "The note is different this time."

I snatched it off the counter and flipped it open.

Look out, Lex. - CR

—

KELLAN

He leaned against the side of the building; his ankles were crossed out in front of him and his arms were folded on his chest. He was about my height with a similar frame. His ash-blond hair spiked up in a stylish fade. He wore dark jeans and a white tee with a leather jacket. His body

language oozed confidence, the leather combined with the deep glint of his brown eyes gave him a rough edge; adding unpredictability.

I came to a stop in front of him, stuffing my hands in my pockets.

He pushed off the wall, giving me a once over. I didn't let him rattle me.

"What's the deal?" I decided direct was the best approach with him.

"Not here," he clipped.

He took off at vamp speed down the street, around the corner and into a high-rise apartment building. He didn't look back until he reached the elevators.

I was quick to observe my surroundings. There was nothing suspicious or out of the ordinary about this place. It was just another fancy, overpriced building in my opinion.

The elevator dinged and we boarded. The moment the door closed, he pressed the number nine and held down the button. Instead of going up, I realized we were going down. My gums began to ache as anxiety washed over within me like a tidal wave.

When the elevator stopped, we walked out into a concrete basement of sorts. One end was visible from the other, illuminated by fluorescent lights scattered across the ceiling. Metal poles jutted up from the floor, dotting the room, acting as the only definition to the cold box.

In the far left corner of the space was a bed, a floor lamp and a few duffle bags. To the right, several yards from the bed, was a complete office set up. Dual monitors

dominated the desk's top while several towers fed into them.

"You live here?" I asked.

"This is just my work space."

My eyes traveled the massive perimeter.

I watched as he sat down in the executive chair. I collapsed in the only other seat; a wood dining chair that looked like it'd been pulled from a dumpster or used as a weapon.

He started tapping on the keys in quick succession. He broke through several encryptions before he pulling up a map. He clicked for a street view, enlarging the image. "This is where we're going."

"We?" That was a surprise.

"Before your pride is bruised, this is personal for me. Although she's never met me, I'm Lexi's cousin. My father was her mother's brother from, you guessed it, Cesar." He hunched towards me, pressing his elbows against his knees. "I didn't know my grandfather, but I'm familiar with his mission."

"And you alone want to carry it out?" I scoffed.

He frowned, his brows being dragged down. "No. I want to fucking destroy it. I don't give a shit about vampeens versus vampires. I do give a crap about big C fucking up my business deals and messing with the innocents in my family, what few there are." His eyes glowed with rage. Apparently Cecilia wasn't just messing with me.

I sat back, crossing my arms as I mulled over his words. *Family*. Damn. Lexi had mentioned a whole page of

names a while back, but she hadn't brought it up since. And, to be honest, I didn't bother asking either. I was too damn busy focusing on a female vampire who I was on the verge of believing was merely a myth.

He turned back to the computer, motioning to the screen. "This is where we're going tomorrow."

I stared at the two-story colonial home. It was on an expansive plot of land. I couldn't accurately gauge the distance between the home and the forest that encircled the property, but I knew it was at least half a mile. No trees or bushes cluttered the lawn. It was wide open space.

Damn it. She can see anyone who approaches. "Looks like there'll be no surprise attacks here."

"Nope. We'll have to go in with our guns blazing." The sneer on his face curdled my blood. There was something sinister about this guy.

"What's your name?"

He glanced over at me. "Derek."

—

Chapter Nineteen

LEXI

I walked into the conference room with a stack of new properties in my arms. I stopped short at the women sitting around the circular table. Mel, Gabi, Aunt Claire and Beth all sat, staring at me.

“Um, can I help you, ladies?” I set the stack on the tabletop.

“Yes, you can.” Gabi stood, shut the door and gently shoved me into a chair.

“We’ve been brainstorming, honey.” Aunt Claire searched me.

Absentmindedly, I rubbed my belly. “Okay. What does that mean for me?”

“You can’t do all of this while you’re carrying a baby, sweetie.” Beth tried to be gentle in her approach, but it still ruffled my feathers.

I sighed.

“Uh-huh. You are so not going to get all depressed and dejected over this, Lex. We’re your friends. We’re looking out for you even when you don’t seem to care.” Mel crossed her arms, narrowing her blue eyes at me. “Beth told us what she went through to have Kellan.”

I met Beth’s gaze. Her eyes were soft, full of compassion and understanding. She gave me a small, hollow smile that told me she wasn’t trying to bulldoze me, but rather, was looking out for me based on her own experience.

“Listen, y’all, I appreciate your concern. I have been taking it easier lately. I do more office work than fieldwork. Drexel and Auggy make sure I eat regularly.”

“Finally that man is using his brain,” Aunt Claire stated.

“I’m good, I promise. But I can’t stop or slow it down any more than I already have. My baking fills my mornings and working behind the scenes to locate Cecilia and Kalia has been my central focus.”

“Fine, then put us to work.” Gabi mashed her lips together, challenging me.

I studied each of them. Mel was the most casual of the bunch, dressed in skinny jeans that were tucked into her Uggs and a slim-fit tee. Her blonde hair was pulled tight on top of her head, not a loose hair in sight. She gave me an amused smile. She knew I was mulling it over. She knew me well enough to know I was already considering every angle and how I would best use them if I agreed.

Gabi was dressed in black skinny jeans, killer grey heels, and a lacy black tank with a cropped cream sweater over it. Her dark brown hair fell in waves around her smooth face. Her brown eyes met mine. Her lips were working, she was biting her tongue.

Aunt Claire adjusted her jacket. She wore a sharp, navy blue, women’s business suit with a pencil skirt that hugged her curves. A plum camisole peeked through beneath her overcoat. Shiny neutral heels gave her a polished, yet stylish, look. Her hair tucked into a loose bun just above her neck.

Beth sat primly in a dark teal, A-line dress that touched just below her knees. It had a fifties-housewife flare to it, a classic detail in the fit and design that

reminded me of Lucille Ball's fashion during her 'I Love Lucy' years. Her dark auburn curls cascaded around her heart-shaped face; although, it was her eyes that stole me. There was so much knowledge in their depths. She...

Suddenly, my stomach twisted - tight. The baby flipped, sending me on overload. I swallowed the rush of serum that hit my mouth. I gazed down at my stack of papers, trying to collect myself before I faced her again. "You know where he is."

—

KELLAN

The home looked just as it had on the computer screen. The red brick structure consisted of four walls made of windows framed in white. A blue front door was the only pop of color. Two brick steps led to the front door. Cecilia had a view in every direction.

"You ready for this, Dad?" I asked, glancing at him.

"Let's do it."

"We should go one by one. Three vamps running towards her would be a hell of a lot more obvious. We should split up. Each of us runs from a different side of the house." Derek stopped, eyeing us. "The only thing is we don't know which one of us she'll see first and focus her efforts on. You guys willing to take that chance?"

Something about him rubbed me the wrong way. He was conniving. I knew there was probably a story to explain it, but I didn't care. I was focused on the mission.

"Let's go," I snarled.

Derek chuckled, tapping my cheek with his palm. "I knew I liked you."

“I’ll take the back of the house,” Al said.

“We should take the sides and avoid the front. That’s the place she’s most likely to monitor first,” I stated.

“Alright men. Ready your weapons and let’s get into position.” Derek took off for the right side of the home.

“Be careful, son. If anything happens to me, don’t hang back. You run like hell. You’ve got a baby to be there for.” His eyes were dark spears, ensuring his message was received.

My gaze swept his black army uniform. With the gun in his hands, he looked every part the soldier he was. I refocused on his face. “I promise. I’ll see you on the other side.”

He shook his head, a scared, wistful emotion in his eyes. His brows furrowed as he glanced at me one last time before taking off for the back of the house.

I maneuvered my way through the trees and stopped just short of exiting the forest’s line of protection. My pulse pounded. I took a deep breath. *For my baby.*

My father breached the yard and I took off at full speed for the house, just as he was and I knew Derek was too.

Something whistled through the air. A heavy object thudded against the ground.

Al was still going. A small object flew right towards him. Panic rose in my chest. “Dad!”

I deviated from my course, running towards him when the dart hit the center of his chest. My breathing became labored as I skidded to a halt; fear crushing my lungs.

He collapsed on the grass. His gun fell to the side.

My body shook with rage. The only thing keeping me from losing it was the fact that he was still breathing. His chest maintained a steady rhythm, rising and falling.

“You! Get your ass inside.”

My eyes darted towards a female voice. I was too slow though. The window coverings swayed in her absence. Maybe she really was a ghost.

—

LEXI

I glared at Beth. She refused to speak, refused to give anything away.

“Don’t get mad at her, Lex. We all know,” Mel stated.

“What?” I shook my head in dismay. I couldn’t have heard her right. “Why would he tell all of you, but not me?”

“He didn’t technically tell us, honey. He told our men, who may have mentioned it to us.” Aunt Claire looked away, feigning interest in her manicure.

“Mother...” My phone went off. I huffed, yanking the source of the shrilling noise from a pile of papers. “Yeah?” I barked, still angry from the news I’d just discovered.

“We caught the little-“

“Language, Anthony!” I was exasperated. I leapt from the chair and left them sitting there. I moved into the office beside the conference room. Charles would just have to forgive me for using his space. I closed the door. “Talk to me. Who did you catch?”

“We got her, boss.”

“Who, Anthony?” My patience was thin. I shuddered, clenching my hand at my side.

“Kalia.” Her name was an antagonizing song rolling off his lips. “We caught the little daisy crossing the border into Namibia with none other than our good friend Rashik. She didn’t even have back up with her. Can you believe that?”

“You’re a sorry son of a bitch. You’re going to get it buddy. You better hope I don’t break free because I’ll catch you, and you better believe I’m going to torture your ass,” she growled in the background.

“She’s got a mouth on her too. You think I’m foul.” He harrumphed.

“Is Rashik okay?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. She held up her end. Didn’t hurt him, just annoyed the hell out of him apparently.”

“Good. Bring them both back as soon as possible. Use the company card and book the first flight out.”

“Damn. I was hoping to have a little fun with her first.”

“No! Just get home, Anthony.” I ended the call, slamming my phone down on the desk.

I rubbed my face, warily. Even though that was one major thing to check off the list, my heart was too heavy with the other items still remaining. My stomach roiled; the serum was still active in the back of my throat, bobbing up and down.

A wave of nausea hit me. I swallowed hard; my stomach muscles cramped, sending a sharp ache through my belly. “Ah!” I cried out as I slipped out of the chair, hunched over towards the floor. Pain stabbed my core as a burning fire engulfed my chest.

The door swung open with a vengeance, and Kai was down on the floor beside me, Drexel right behind him. Others piled in, but I couldn't see or concentrate on them.

I shoved a hand outwards trying to hold them off as I tried to breathe through it. I turned my head away from them, staring over my shoulder towards the wall. The throbbing weakened, but the heat burning my chest increased. The serum kept rising. "No, no, no, no, no, please, God, no." My words came out in a rushed whisper as I tried to swallow profusely. It didn't work. The searing serum continued to rise until it overflowed in my mouth.

I sat back on my heels, closing my eyes. I leaned my head back, gasping between swallows. *Damn it!* Tears stung my eyes as I felt the fluid about to surge.

"Move!" Drexel roared. His voice bellowed through the confined room. I'd never been so grateful for him.

I pushed myself upwards. Kai immediately helped steady me before I jerked away from him and ran for the trashcan. My body trembled as the bloody liquid hit the basket. Tears poured from me as I sat back, clutching my belly.

I faintly heard them around me, the people who were here cared. That's the part that hurt the most. *He* wasn't here. And I couldn't face anyone right now. I couldn't look at them while I was like this. This screamed weakness. I'd been fighting so hard to be strong, but my body refused to comply. While my power could help me withstand a high voltage electrical shock, it did nothing to help with my pregnancy sickness.

Someone closed the door, meaning to block the curious stares I was sure. It surprised me when Mel squatted down in front of me.

“I’m your best friend. I said I’d be there through everything.” She grabbed my hand and placed a water bottle in it. “This is part of everything.”

I bit my bottom lip, hard, trying to fight back the emergence of fresh tears.

“Drink some water, pull yourself together and then we’ll go back to your place.”

—

Chapter Twenty

KELLAN

My head was pounding, my hands shaking as I twisted the doorknob. The house was eerily quiet. Though, it didn't necessarily mean there weren't a lot of vamps inside.

I lifted my gun, holding it arms-length out in front of me. Guns didn't kill vamps, but it would slow them down, which was enough for right now. I used my foot to kick the door open a little more.

I crossed the threshold onto the wood floors. I sniffed the air, but didn't smell any vamps; they must be able to mask their scent somehow. Of course, I was finding that was much easier than I originally assumed. Many things were easier as a vamp than I originally thought.

I scanned the foyer, boasting a grand two-story entrance with traditional furniture decorating the space. I didn't doubt that it was purchased at the time the house was built.

She caressed the banister at the top of the stairs. "You're much cuter in person." She smiled, but her eyes filled with mischief.

She had a long, lean figure she'd covered in a blue silk one-piece that cinched at the waist. A long strand of pearls was her only accessory. She trailed her fingers along the railing as she began to descend the steps. Her short black heels clacked against the hardwood.

I immediately lifted my gun towards her.

She laughed, sending her short, dark brown hair bouncing with the effort. "Oh, dear, you are cute. That little thing wouldn't do anything to me." She stopped walking; her dark eyes narrowed on me. "But my darling, Jewel would."

Jewel, I assumed it was her, stepped out from behind the wall that separated the foyer from the sitting room, with a grenade launcher in hand. It didn't take a genius to know that shooting it from this close of an angle would send it straight into me, where it would explode.

I mashed my lips together, lowering my weapon.

She snickered. "Good boy."

My eyes danced between Cecilia and Jewel. While Cecilia was tall and thin, Jewel was curvy. Her ample hourglass figure added to her exotic features. I couldn't quite make out what nationality she was. Dark brown hair reached down to the center of her back. Big grey eyes pierced me, but they didn't look balanced with her thin lips. Her tan complexion was similar to Cecilia's, but without the hint of olive. She looked like a prim and proper spitfire, considering she was dressed in her Sunday best and holding a military weapon with authority.

With catlike reflexes, Cecilia reached around me and pushed the front door closed. "By the way, in case you haven't figured it out, I'm Cecilia." She leaned into my personal space, hovering centimeters in front of my face. "It's a pleasure, my dear."

I fidgeted, balling my hands into fists. I felt my brows crease as I glared at her.

She leaned back, a hand going to her chest as she chuckled. "Oh, how cute are you when you're mad?"

“Can I go back to the fun stuff now?” Jewel asked, lowering the grenade launcher.

Cecilia’s eyes sparkled when she gazed at her counterpart. Her face softened as she smiled at the girl, who couldn’t be older than me. She ran her fingertips across Jewel’s jaw line as she leaned in, kissing her head. “I’ll see you later.”

I frowned at their intimate display. I couldn’t tell if Jewel was like a daughter to Cecilia or if their relationship was on the opposite end of the love spectrum, but it was definitely clear that she meant a lot to her. If things got ugly, I knew she would be the best leverage to use against Cecilia.

“Come sit, Kellan Bancroft.”

“What did you do to my dad?” I demanded, not budging an inch.

“Silly Derek forgot about his beating heart. He was a dead giveaway for you guys. I shot him first, and then your father.”

I snarled.

“Oh, relax,” she huffed. “It was just a tranquilizer.” She turned back towards the sitting room. “Now, come along.”

Against my better judgment, I followed her into the room. Perhaps it was her charm. She had a certain flirtatiousness about her that caused my preconceived notions of her being an evil dictator to crumble.

She sat in one of the high back chairs and immediately crossed her legs. A silver cart sat beside her with a

glistening silver pitcher and two teacups on saucers. “Care for some warm blood?”

I was fighting my own common sense, and it was screaming: run like hell, get out of dodge. Yet, I still stood there, like an idiot, just staring at her. I'm sure I looked dumbfounded.

She poured herself a cup, stopping to look at me. The question was in her gaze.

"Uh, no thanks." I frowned. *Thanks? What the hell is wrong with me? This isn't tea time; I'm not in the House of Parliament.*

"Do you plan to stand the whole time?" she asked, holding her plate with one hand. She lifted her cup with the other towards her lips, taking a dainty sip. "Mm. I do love a cup of fresh blood." Her lips curled up, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

Why did I suddenly feel like I was in some sort of alternate reality?

"How long do you plan on staying?"

"Excuse me?" My features pulled down, scowling.

"Yes, darling. I'm cooking a blood-stewed pot roast for supper. I need to know if I'm setting an extra plate at the table."

"What is your fucking deal, lady?" I snapped. My pulse became erratic, as adrenaline coursed through me. I'd almost rather her burn me alive than drown me with niceties. I scrubbed my face, tossing my gun on a chair nearby.

She set her plate back on the tray, clasping her hands in her lap. "You want answers. Sit and I'll give them to you."

I plopped into the chair across from her. I pursed my lips, grinding my teeth as my right leg bounced in place. Hell yeah I was worked up. She put Lexi and me through hell only to turn around and act like the queen bee of politeness.

“Very well. What would you like to know?”

“*Really?*” I scoffed, unable to hold back my anger.

She leaned forward, her smile faltering. “Listen, *honey*, you can either be a good boy and act like your mother taught you some manners or I can chain your ass in the cellar downstairs and let Jewel have a little fun with you. That’s where she’s at now, in case you were wondering.” She made it a point to take a sip from her cup again before turning her focus back to me.

I tried to swallow down my rage. It wasn’t easy considering what this...Uh. I couldn’t even think straight I was so enraged by her.

“Now, dear, what is your first question?”

I wracked my brain, trying to think of the most important thing to ask. “Why do you have your men on our tails twenty-four-seven?”

“Our?” She raised a single brow and laced her fingers together.

“Yes. Your people have been following us for a while now, but they’ve made themselves very well known lately. Well, at least one has.”

She smiled. “It’s good to know Javier is doing his job.”

I glared at her. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Because your question is wrong.”

One big fucking riddle. That's all she was. I should have known better. "How was my question wrong? It's not a matter of right or wrong. It's a question," I growled, my muscles flexing and bulging beneath my clothes. She was rubbing me the wrong way, just as every one of her notes had.

"Perhaps I should clarify for you then. I'm not having *you and* her followed. She's the only one I care about."

I felt the color drain from my face. "Why?" The word was like glue on my tongue.

"She's the epitome of all I hate. She's trying to bring democracy into a world that arose from the legislature of ancient Europe. Not to mention, she's an abomination. Humans were never meant to procreate with our kind. We were to choose who we spawned, not leave it up to chance. All vampeens are a risk. They enter with world with expectation rather than humility."

"Oh, that's brilliant. You really think vampires are humble creatures, then why the hell do we drain bodies?"

"Hmph. You are twisting my words. You are acting entitled rather than grateful for my mercy." Her eyes narrowed, as a frown turned her features hard as stone.

"Fine. Enlighten me. Why don't you communicate with your team when they're away?"

"Because I created them all. I am their maker. Because of that, they will forever be loyal to me. The ones who prove rebellious are killed, the same way it ought to be for those 'oops' babies vampeens create."

"You're hitting a little too close to home, *honey*," I snarled between tight lips.

“I see you have questions, but can’t actually comprehend my answers. Allow me to explain it to you, Kellan. I’m not out to abolish every vampeen, only the ones who disrespect us vampires. Had it not been for us, they wouldn’t have a smidgen of the power they have. With power comes responsibilities, and a sense of duty is required.

“None of the vampires I create are made in vein. They all serve a purpose.”

“You turned Kalia before her time?”

Her eyes grew distant. “No. Unfortunately, that was her father. He needed a punching bag that would survive his abuse and heal quickly. Kalia is the exception because of her spirit and tenacity. She has all the wonderful qualities of an admirable vampire.” She began to lick her lips. “You, on the other hand, do not. I’d be willing to train you though. I’ve sensed your promise since I first bumped into years ago.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, yes. You were drunk in a bar with a rowdy group of thugs and prostitutes. You were in such a haze; you would never recall the beautiful woman who paid for all those rounds that evening. It took several bottles of liquor before you were buzzed enough to forget that you were a vamp for an hour.”

I averted my gaze. I didn’t recall much from those days. I think I’d blocked them out on purpose, and rightly so.

“Listen, Kellan. I’m giving you a choice. You can stay here with me and Jewel and have me personally train you, or you can walk out that door. I’ll graciously give you a five minute head start before I send a team after you.”

“So that’s the politics of ancient Europe?” My brows lifted towards my hairline.

Her lips tightened. “No. The rulers of ancient Europe didn’t offer choices. They merely decapitated you.”

“I have a baby on the way.”

“With a vampeen!” She yelled, unleashing her fury. Her eyes blazed, a ring of red nearly appearing in their depths.

I needed leverage. *Damn it.* I was so stupid and impulsive for coming here like this. Fuck! *Jewel.* It was a shot in the dark. “You love her.”

“I love no one. That’s the first rule of living in a ruthless world.”

“No.” I shook my head. “You love Jewel. I may be ignorant on many issues, but I saw the way you looked at her, the way your features softened. You pressed your lips tenderly, reverently against her head. Vampires don’t have children, as you just confirmed. You make them, but you train them hard, you don’t handle them with kid gloves.”

Her eyes became dark pools of anger. Her wheels were spinning.

“The way I see it, I can run and get that five minute head start, which is plenty of time to call all of my military contacts and alert them of not only your location, but the precious woman you love. A loved one for a loved one, right? You want Lexi, so I’ll make sure you lose Jewel.”

She balled her hands into fists on the arms of the chair. She tightened her jaw, puckering her features. “This is the biggest form of rebellion there is. You should run.

Run hard, and run fast. But know that you'll never run fast enough to be by her side in time."

A cell phone materialized from a hidden compartment in her outfit. She pressed a single button. I heard the digits play out before the first ring sounded. A man answered; his accent was heavy. "Take your first shot at her."

My chest caved; my lungs refused to expand.

She closed the phone and stared directly into my eyes. "Run, Kellan. *Run.*"

—

Chapter Twenty-One

LEXI

“You feeling okay?” Kai asked, leaning against the arm of the couch as he inspected me.

“Yeah, thanks.” I smiled.

“Would you stop interrupting the movie to ask her that?” Mel griped. She shoved a handful of popcorn into her mouth, completely riveted by the romantic comedy she’d selected from Redbox on our way home.

“Why do you need to watch this? You have the real thing with Craig.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not the same. Craig doesn’t do half the things this guy does.”

“Reality will never be fiction, Mel.”

She sighed, turning off the TV. She set the popcorn on the coffee table and faced me and Kai. “Really, Lex? Because while maybe not all the plot points of your life are a fiction bestseller, I’d say you’ve had a pretty good run so far. You got the hot guy while you were chunky, got engaged on Christmas day to the same hot guy. *Then*, you went on a top-secret double-oh-seven mission and roped in another hot guy to drool over you, creating a rather interesting love triangle. *Then*, the first hot guy knocked you up, but stuck around and has surprised you with a house full of flowers, a renovated kitchen and is out there fighting for your safety right now while you’re getting even cozier with the second hot guy over here. Oh, and I forgot the other fascinating layer of awesome; you’re part vampire, which happens to be a popular paranormal twist.

Oh, and it's no big deal, but you have an army of them that you rule over too, all while successfully playing Miss Betty Crocker. So, would you like to tell me again that reality will never be fiction?" There was a storm brewing in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" I frowned.

"Oh, gee, now you ask. You get sick, are forced to take some down time and finally have enough time to notice that something's off with me. That's wonderful, Lex. *Very reassuring.*"

"I'm sorry. What do you want me to do? I have a job. I can't put everything on hold to have a personal life."

"Well, then I do feel sorry for you because one day you're going to want that time, but you won't have anyone left to spend it with." She abruptly stood. "Maybe you haven't thought about this aspect either, but is this the same excuse you're going to tell the baby every time it cries for its mother?"

"Hey!" Kai growled, getting in Mel's face. "Back off on that one."

What happened? How did everything flip so quickly? Just earlier she was talking about being there through everything. Now she was angry and snatching the words back in a round-about way. "Mel, talk to me."

"My relationship isn't all love and roses, okay, Lexi?" Tears welled in her eyes. "I want what you have, so bad. Hell, I'd even take the knocked up part. But I'm not you. I'm not lucky enough to be Lexi Jackson, Miss Perfect Life." She pressed her lips into a straight line.

"Move, Kai." I pushed him away as I got up.

I held her shoulders. “Hey. We’re best friends, through thick and thin; in good times and bad, even when the bad times mean we neglect each other. I’m sorry. I can’t change the past, but I’m here now.”

All of her anger melted into sadness. She trembled as tears streamed down her face. “We...” Her lip quivered. “We can’t...” Her face twisted. “We can’t do the deed.”

Her hands flew to her face; she sobbed into them uncontrollably.

I pulled her into my arms, hugging her tightly. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to love someone and never be able to experience their love in every way.

I held her, the way she held me when my grandmother passed. She cried hard and long; she broke down in my arms like I’d never seen her do before.

Her body shook; her cries rang out in gut-wrenching gasps. I could almost hear her screaming, *‘Why me?’*

“Hey, how about we order pizza, and we can watch as many romantic comedies as you want?”

She sniffed several times, lifting her face to peer at me. “I like the pizza part. The last part is just too depressing.”

I giggled. “Alright. We’ll order pizza and think of something else to do.”

“Truth or dare!” she popped out of my arms, her eyes suddenly drying.

“Um, okay.” I fidgeted. This was a bad idea. I was almost sure of it.

“Yay!” she squealed. “Drex and Kai have to play too; otherwise, it won’t be as much fun.”

I looked at Kai. He shrugged. Apparently he was in. “Drex!”

He came out of his room, narrowing his eyes on Mel. “You’re going to pay for wrangling me into this game.”

She laughed. “Bring it on, tough guy.” She bounced up and down dragging me over to the dining table. “I volunteer Lexi to go first!”

“Gee, thanks,” I droned.

Kai gave me a slick smile, winking.

“Truth or dare, Lex?” she asked. She seemed ready to burst; her eyes were wide with excitement.

I bit my lower lip. I’d never been a fan of this game. The truth questions were ultra personal and the dares were ridiculous stunts that no one should perform. “Um, truth.”

“Ooh!” She nibbled her lip, looking devilishly around the table. “If you weren’t with Kellan, would you be with Kai?”

I’d never wanted to smack her more. She buried the knife deep in my back with that one. That was the one subject I’d wanted to avoid.

My embarrassment began to show, as I averted my gaze. “Yes.”

“I knew it!” she yelled.

I chanced a peek at Kai. He had a goofy grin on his face; his eyes were sparkling with a strong emotion, unidentifiable at the moment.

“My turn!” Mel was like an energy bomb tonight.

I shook my head, snapping myself out of it. “Truth or dare?”

“Hmm...Dare!”

“Uh...I kind of always sucked at this game, especially with making up dares. Plus, there isn’t much a vamp can’t do.”

“Make her kiss my bare behind for making me play this game,” Drex offered.

I laughed; just the thought alone was good enough.

Mel sobered quickly, crossing her arms over her chest. She gave Drex what I called her Popeye face, one eye squinting while the other just glowered daringly. “That is *so* not cool.”

“Sounds good to me.” I smiled. “That’s your dare.”

She frowned. “I am *so* disowning you.” She stormed out of her chair and went over to Drex. “Stand up and bare it,” she ordered.

“You have to record this, Baby Cakes.” Drex passed me his iPhone.

I stood up, moving over to the side to capture the whole thing on video.

“Eww! Uh! Gah! Bleh!” Mel swiped at her lips. “I can’t believe I just kissed his ass *literally*.”

“Just one cheek,” I said.

“At least it wasn’t hairy - or worse - I could have been human: and farted on you.”

That got a reaction from her. “Uh! Gross!”

Kai snickered, amusement flickering in his eyes.

“You think it’s funny?” Mel turned to him.

“Yeah.” He didn’t flinch. “I do.”

“Fine. Truth or Dare, Kai?” She crossed her arms, standing beside the table so she was a tad taller than him as he sat.

“Dare.” He bravely faced her, not budging an inch at her challenge.

“I dare you...to *lick* Lexi’s swollen pregger feet.”

“What?” I shrieked. “I cannot believe you.”

She smiled proudly. “I can’t believe myself either, but it’s a frickin’ frackin’ brilliant dare.”

I eyed her sideways. “You’ve been hanging out with Craig too long.”

“Get moving, Kai. I am *so* uploading this.” She pulled her phone out of her pocket, moving to get a better view.

Kai swished me sideways in the chair, his eyes boring into me. He knelt down in front of me and lifted my foot upwards so my leg was straight.

I squirmed, steeling myself.

His expression was playful, but there was something just beyond, something just beneath his surface that had my heart beating a little faster.

He bent his head backwards and placed his tongue against the back of my heel. Lightly pressing, the warmth of his mouth left a trail as he made his way to the tips of my toes.

It tickled, but more than anything, he was sending shivers throughout my entire body. A tremor touched my core as his kisses gently slid from toe to toe. Thank God they were clean.

I knew my face was red when he gently released me. "I can't believe you did that." I laughed.

"And I got it all on video," Mel announced.

I pouted my bottom lip. "Come to think of it I don't have any pictures of any of you guys. Well, I have an old one of us, Mel."

"Oh! We should take pics. Come on." She yanked me from the chair and pulled me towards the kitchen island. "Kai, come snap a pic of me and the momma-to-be."

Kai obligingly took pictures of me and Mel; some goofy, some sweet.

"Come on over, Drex. I want one of us," I said. He meant a lot to me. I wanted to have at least one photo of us, even if I'd be bloated in it.

I squealed as he lifted me into his arms. I hugged his neck, turning to Kai and Mel; they each snapped a photo. I leaned in and kissed his cheek.

"That one was golden," Mel said. "Now Lexi and Kai. Give me your phone, Kai."

Drex set me down and moved to take my phone from Mel so he could capture this too.

As Kai moved towards me, I suddenly grew shy. Out of all the times for me to abruptly become unnerved by him, this was the strangest.

He gave me a warm smile, but hesitated near me.

“Come on you two. You’ve *kissed* for crying out loud. Kai, put your arm around her and smile, both of you.”

Leave it to Mel to break the ice.

Kai slipped his arm around me. My heart seemed to grow heavier beside him. This almost too closely resembled a family photo. I never realized until now how easily it could have been; Kai and me with a baby on the way.

I gazed up at him. He had a beautiful profile. His hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, displaying good bone structure.

“Look forward, Lex.”

I had a warm feeling as Kai’s eyes sought mine. Without speaking, I already knew he was asking what I was looking at. I chuckled as if it was an inside joke and faced Drex and Mel.

“Got it!” Mel passed me my phone.

I’d have to print the pics later and frame them for the house. I needed one of Kellan and me too.

“It came out good,” Drex said as he handed Kai his phone.

“Thanks.” Kai gazed at the photo for a minute before shoving his phone in his pocket.

Right then, my tummy growled.

“Aw. Baby’s hungry.” Mel rubbed my belly. “Let’s order pizza.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Um, Lex. I guess I feel like I should tell you about Kellan.” Mel fidgeted as she plopped back down on the sofa beside me. She’d just put her plate in the sink as Drex retreated to his room.

For the moment, I’d forgotten about Kellan’s secretive trip, but instantly, all the anguish returned with a vengeance, suffocating me. I sucked in a breath, facing her. “That’d be nice.” I set my plate aside. I had a feeling I wasn’t going to want anymore pizza after I heard what she said.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Kai stated.

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I protested.

“I’m not doing it to spite you. I just don’t want to see you upset.” He walked towards the windows looking out, distracting himself. He clearly didn’t want any part of this.

I faced my best friend. “Please, tell me.”

She gazed back at Kai, nibbling her bottom lip. “Maybe he’s right. Maybe it is best that you don’t know.”

“Oh, no. Not you too. How would you feel if this was Craig and you were in the dark while everyone around you knew?”

“Damn. You really are good with words.” She deliberated a little longer before finally meeting my gaze. “He’s been communicating with some guy for months now. No one knows who he is.”

“Communicating how?”

“Texts, Face Time chats, e-mails.”

I sucked my lips in, rolling them between my teeth. This didn't sound good...or safe. That guy could be anyone.

"One other thing. Even though he's cammed with him, he doesn't know what he looks like. The guy knows what Kellan looks like, but he was always just a shadow." Mel's brows drew together. "Crap. That doesn't even sound smart to me, the ditz of the group."

My eyes darted in her direction. "You're not a ditz."

She shrugged, pursing her lips and considering me. "Sorry, Lex. He's gone to meet with this stranger and to go find Cecilia."

"What?" I shouted. Yup. I was definitely done eating. "Of all the stupid, ignorant moves to make. How does he know this isn't a trap? How...err! Oh my gosh. *Idiota!*"

—

KELLAN

I yanked the dart from my father's chest and lifted him against my left side. My elbow wrapped around the side of his waist as my arm splayed up, over his chest.

I quickly ran to Derek. Ordinarily, I would have been a selfish prick, and left him, but he had helped me finally find her. I tossed the dart aside and awkwardly gripped him with my other arm.

Thank God for my supernatural strength.

I took off for the forest. It was much harder to maneuver through the trees with them at my sides. It slowed me down, just enough that I knew I'd be cutting it close.

Damn. If I got caught; if we got captured...I couldn't even think about it. I'd made a big mistake in coming here. This was not how things were supposed to go. Derek had assured me that she was accessible. He didn't lie there. What he neglected to mention was that while she was accessible, she was still impenetrable.

I knew I was going to have to stop soon and make the call, to warn them...

In the distance, I heard rustling through the woods.
Shit!

—

LEXI

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. I couldn't light up. Dr. H had read me the riot act for my previous slips. The baby moved within my belly. I smiled, despite the circumstances. In a few short weeks, we'd know whether we were having a boy or a girl. Dr. H said we had to wait until my skin was stretched a bit further for their super-sono machine to get a visual on the baby.

"Okay. Let's think this through. Kellan is already gone. We can't bring him back, but..." I swallowed hard.

"What, Lex?" Mel sat on the edge of the couch.

"He hasn't called." I got up and grabbed my phone off the kitchen island. I had no missed messages except from Jarrod. He was letting me know that a few more props on the list were dead ends.

"Well, I mean, that doesn't automatically indicate he's in trouble. He...he could just be busy! Or strategizing...or...*crap!* He's probably gotten himself in a pile of horse manure." Her voice deflated the longer she spoke. She was

grasping, trying to find the positives, but there just weren't any.

"Maybe I can access the chat history on his computer," Kai offered.

"Please." I knew my eyes were wide, fully displaying the fear that was threatening to consume me. Thoughts had gripped my heart and weren't releasing it. Something could have easily happened to him. I hated thinking about it. I was ready to vomit after the first idea that popped up.

Kai sat down at the computer and started browsing through programs.

I moved to stand behind him. I clutched my stomach, as if my baby's life depended on this information being located, whatever this information happened to be.

Mel came up beside me, grabbing my right hand. "We'll get through this. Together."

I couldn't help but feel betrayed by all those not in this apartment. Kai, Drex and Mel were the only ones who trusted me. That was a painful truth to have to face.

"I have something." Kai pulled up a log on the computer. It was similar to video play software, but with notes already recorded and available to select from a list.

Kai clicked the first one and the Face Time chat popped up on the screen. The black silhouette took up most of the screen, but it still showed Kellan's upper body in a small square at the bottom right.

"We'll work on my terms. I don't work for free," the shadow stated.

"Why are you contacting me rather than her?" Kellan crossed his arms over his chest. I could see the wheels

turning as he faced the figure on the screen.

"It's personal."

"Fine. Why should I work with you?"

I heard the silhouette release a sinister laugh.
"Because you'll need me. No one's gotten closer to her than I have."

Kellan's lips formed a hard, wrinkled line. His usually bright green eyes were dark and dangerous in the image before me. *"Fine."*

"Fine. I'll contact you later." The stranger immediately signed off, followed by Kellan a few seconds later.

"That must have been the first time they chatted," I stated.

"We should run this guy through the voice recognition software. Maybe there'll be a match." Kai turned his chair around to face me.

"What if..." I clenched left hand, rubbing my fingers along my palm. I inhaled quick, trying to calm myself.
"What if he's one of them?"

"All the more reason to do it. If we don't act now, we may not have a chance at pulling him out." There was sadness in Kai's eyes. I knew he didn't care about Kellan. It must have been his feelings for me; knowing I would suffer if I ever lost Kellan. He was showing selfless compassion.

I nodded. "I can access the back office from my laptop at the vamp army headquarters."

Drex came running out of his room.

We all turned towards him.

“Get her out now!” He pointed to Mel.

“What? Why?” Mel jumped away from me. “What’s wrong?” Her voice squeaked.

“You need to leave. You’re not safe here,” he pressed.

“If I’m not safe, then she’s not safe.” Mel braced herself against the burly vamp.

“Don’t fight me. You’re not trained. Get out now while you still can.”

There was something about him that spooked me, and obviously Mel too, because she immediately backed down. She turned to me. “Um, I don’t think I told you, but Craig wants to stay with me. He said he doesn’t care. I guess that’s a bit like a fairy tale in some ways.”

“It means he loves you.”

She smiled. “I know.” She hugged me. “Sorry for going off on you earlier.”

“Sorry for ignoring you. How about I call you every morning while I’m baking? I can put you on speaker and we can talk while I work. Maybe some days you can even come over and taste some stuff.”

“Sounds perfect.” She nodded.

“Thanks for tonight.” She’d been amazing, as usual. She never ceased to surprise me.

“You really need to get out of here. And take this.” Drex pushed a dart gun into her hands, and shoved her towards the door.

Mel swallowed hard as she looked back at me. She looked at Drex and then Kai. “Make sure I don’t have to bury my best friend.”

I watched helplessly as she rushed out the door. Alarm knotted in my chest, squeezing my lungs and banging on my heart.

“What’s going on?” I asked, looking directly at Drex. Kai was in motion, racing around the apartment, checking windows. Apparently, Drex had opened his mind and let Kai in.

“It’s better if you don’t know. Leave it up to us, Baby Cakes.” His voice was lax, completely opposite of his body language.

The baby moved inside my belly, reminding me that it wasn’t only me. It was both of us. That’s the reason I plopped down on the sofa, curling on my side against the arm.

The next few hours were a blur of commotion. Sanders and a few other army and Bladang soldiers joined us. Whatever it was, I knew it was serious for them to call in back up.

—

Chapter Twenty-Three

KELLAN

Damn it. I'd royally fucked up.

I'd lost count of the miles I'd traveled with my dad and Derek still knocked out, in my arms. If Cecilia's team did catch up to us, Al was going to be angry. He'd specifically said for me to leave him behind, reminding me that I had a baby to think of.

I guess in the moment, it was easier to focus on what was in front of me rather than what was ahead of me. I thought of all the times my dad had supported me when I'd been nothing but a disgrace. He never gave up on me. Even my mother had been exasperated by me at times.

Lexi, I feared, was drawing dangerously close to the point of no return when it came to being frustrated with me. Having a baby with her wasn't changing that. I couldn't blame her. Staying together for a child would inevitably make you miserable. No child could be happy with miserable parents.

I slowed as I reached another clearing. It looked familiar. The moment I saw the snapped limb, I knew I was only a couple miles from the car. My dad had said if things got hot in the war zone, our minds would fuddle and we might need signs to assure us we were on the right track in getting back to base. He always thought of everything. Which meant...

Shit! He'd known. Looking at Cecilia's house, he knew what we'd encounter. He had too much training not to at least know there was a basement or a cellar. But he'd let

me lead. He'd allowed me to call the shots, even at the risk of losing his own life.

There's nothing like adding whip cream and a cherry on top of my heaping pile of guilt.

I sped up, running full steam towards the vehicle. I pulled the keys from my pocket, another switch my dad had insisted on despite him driving here.

I pressed the button, awkwardly shifting the men so I could launch my dad across the back seat. I slammed the door behind him, opened the trunk and did the same with Derek.

I hopped in the front seat and locked the doors. After starting the engine, I sped off. I may not know where we were going, but I knew we had to get there fast.

I whipped out my cell phone to make the necessary calls.

—

LEXI

"Hello?" His accent was thick as he answered my call.

"Hi, Jack. I have a huge favor to ask you."

"Hello, Lexi. What can I do for you?"

"If I e-mail you some files, can you run them through the voice recognition software?"

"Of course."

There was a rustling of the phone before the storm came.

"What is going on? No one is answering their phone, but I heard the freaking order for some of our men to get to

your apartment.” Gabi didn’t have patience; her tone reflected her *‘I want answers now’* attitude.

“They’ve left me in the dark, but I assume it has something to do with Kellan, because I haven’t heard from him since he left.”

“Santos ciruelas de azúcar.”

I snickered. “I’ve never heard Mel’s phrase in Spanish before.”

She was quiet, and quiet for Gabi was rare. It meant she was shocked; it meant she was overwhelmed beyond words.

“I’m going to e-mail Jack some files for him to run through the voice recognition software. The sooner you guys can get those back to us, the better chance we have at locating Kellan.”

“Of course, *chica*. We’ll call you in a bit.” Her voice was soft, solemn.

“Thanks.” I hung up my phone.

I needed to do something. They’d forbidden me from leaving the condo. They were IDing everyone at the door with badges and retina scans. It seemed like they were going overboard. If it wasn’t for my baby, I would demand that they all leave. I would force them into letting me fight my own battle.

I needed a distraction, a way to get beyond the chaos within my home. My house had become a temporary base. Meetings, briefings and huddles around the map covering my dining room table were bothersome. Men stationed at windows in every room plus a team patrolling my balcony

sent my pulse racing every time I considered the danger that must be closing in on me for security to be so tight.

I e-mailed Jack the chat files before moving into the kitchen with my laptop. I pulled up the orders that had poured in since this morning's fulfillment for Bloody Bakes. I strapped the iPod around my arm, stuffed the earbuds in place and blasted the music to drown out the pandemonium.

I spent the next several hours baking. It was very centering; it seemed to align my chakras in the same way it calmed me during stressful times.

"Holy shit. It's like the flipping C.I.A. headquarters in here."

I looked up at Gabi in surprise. I yanked the earbuds from my ears, scrubbing my hands on my apron. "What are you doing here?"

Jack moved in behind her. "We've been calling you for hours now. When we couldn't get a hold of you, Gabi panicked and demanded we come over to check on you."

"Thanks. You could have called Kai, you know."

"Hm. That someone wasn't answering his phone either. Guess I'm not important enough," she scoffed, throwing her nose up in the air.

"Did you get a positive ID?"

"Yes." Jack handed me two sheets of paper.

"Derek Lucero?" I scanned the information printed. "We're related?"

"I dug deeper. Turns out his father was Sharon's half-brother. This makes you first cousins," Jack explained.

I stared at the photo. Unlike Kalia's, this was a perfect picture, clear as a bell.

Derek stood about the same height as Kellan, around six feet. His dark blonde hair was a perfect fade into spikes atop. His brown eyes were dark, yet they had hints of honey striations, reminiscent of my own.

Even though the paper clearly said he was a vampeen, my chest tightened. Why would a vampeen, bred from my grandfather, want to help Kellan, a vampire? The fact that he was a vampeen made me feel somewhat better though, because Cecilia wouldn't hire a vampeen from what I'd learned. But, what did Derek want from Kellan? Cousin or not, Kellan was supreme. I didn't need his blood running through me to. I had something better. His baby.

—

I rolled over and hit something hard; no, not something. Someone.

My eyes flew open.

"Shh. It's just me." His voice soothed me. It made all those hours of fretting slip away.

My heart pounded as I studied Kellan. His left eye was black and swollen. "What happened to you?" I sat up in the bed. I wasn't quite sure how I'd gotten to the room, but didn't care at this point.

I traced a gentle finger along the bruised skin, frowning.

He chuckled. "Kai has quite a right hook. Socked the shit out of me for putting you through hell."

My movements faltered. "You're not mad?"

“I’m glad you have someone who would go to the ends of the earth to protect you in my absence.” He grew pensive as he rubbed my hard belly. “I don’t know if the prophecy is true or not, babe. A lot of things are lining up.”

“Don’t talk like that.” My voice was a soft plea.

God, I’d been so scared. Facing a reality without him, even a small taste of it, was almost too much, even if I was angry beyond words with him.

“A while back, I talked to Kai about stepping in if something happened to me. I don’t like him, but I respect him. He’s stepped on my territory a few times, but he’s never betrayed you. He’s been there in every battle and done all he could to keep you safe, even when I didn’t. I don’t like him, but he’s the only person I would trust you with if I was gone.”

Tears stung my eyes. I’d just gotten him back, and he was already talking about leaving me again.

He held my face in the palms of his hands. “Hey. I’m not planning on going anywhere, but I want us to be on the same page just in case.”

I swaddled by belly. Kai was a good substitute. I knew he would always love me and be there for me, perhaps better than Kellan in some instances. But he wasn’t Kellan. My soul didn’t dance freely with Kai at every embrace. My heart didn’t skip a beat *every* time I saw him.

I grabbed his shirt. “Never do that to me again. Ever,” I growled as hot tears slid down my cheeks, colliding with his hands.

“I’m sorry.” His eyes were glossy, full of repentance.

I let go, wrapping my hands around his wrists, lightly tugging his hands away. “Kellan, what’s happened to us? We were once a really strong couple. Now, I don’t even feel like I’m looking at the man I love sometimes. There’s too much distance; too much chaos and way too many secrets. I can’t even access your mind sometimes when we kiss. That’s new. It’s like...” I shrugged. “I feel like I’m losing you little by little.” More tears built as I kept eye contact with him.

He sat up in front of me, a pained expression on his face. “I was trying to pull away. Lex, I’ve been studying the prophecy with Will while you’ve been at the office so much lately. We were trying to pinpoint a window of time when...” He swallowed hard, peering down at my baby bump – our baby bump. He lifted his gaze, slowly. “When *I* would be hit.”

My heart lurched, my pulse picking up. Anxiety shot through me as fear squeezed my chest. “And?”

“It’s soon. It’s before the baby is born.” His voice was low, sorrowful.

I couldn’t hold back the tears that flooded my eyes. “I hate that stupid freaking book! I wish no one ever wrote it. We’re not meant to know our futures. I could still be enjoying the present if it wasn’t for that stupid foreshadow of prophecy.”

“I was trying to make it easier. I don’t know if I fully believe every word in there, but a lot of it has happened already, which is really compelling. The prophecy is slowly morphing from speculated truth to history.” He grabbed my hands, lacing his fingers with mine. “I thought if I pulled back, if I forced you to let go of me before anything happened, that it wouldn’t hurt as much when it came to fruition.”

“How could you decide that alone? I’d rather have more happy times, more memories to pass down to our child than to let go of you out of resentment.”

He stared at me. It seemed like he was beginning to realize the error of his ways, regardless of his good intentions, but rather than follow through, he slipped on a mask.

“Don’t do that, Kellan. Please don’t shut me out.” I jerked on his hands.

He mashed his lips together. “I got you into this mess, Lex. The reason all these people are here is because I caught up with Cecilia, and rather than take her out, like I wanted, I pissed her off. She’s issued a death order on you.”

“It’s not like we haven’t faced this before?” I yelled, exasperated. “Self pity isn’t a good enough reason to hurt me like this, Kellan, and it’s sure as hell not a good enough reason to give up on us.”

I released him, sliding off the bed and heading for the door. I glanced back over my shoulder. “Think about that, Kellan. What’s the point? Why live the last of your time punishing yourself, and me, rather than making the most of your time?”

I walked out the door, closing it behind me. I was met with bedlam. Nothing had changed in the time I had slept.

I studied the space, the men and women conversing loudly, using my home for a stake out. In the middle of the madness, he came forward, moving towards me. I’d recognize him from the picture any day.

Rage coursed through me. I was on the verge of illuminating as my serum rose. He’d taken Kellan there.

He'd dropped Kellan off right at Cecilia's door. *Pendejo!*

He gave me a meager smile, extending his hand towards me. "Hi, I'm Derek."

I glared at him. Pulling back, I sent my right fist flying into his face. I felt his bones crunch beneath my impact.

He stumbled back. "Fuck!" His hand flew to his cheek.

The entire apartment silenced. No one moved a muscle.

"Thanks for nothing, *primo*," I snarled, stomping past him towards the kitchen.

—

Chapter Twenty-Four

My pulse was jumping as I looked out from behind the island. They all watched me from a distance; no one dared move towards me. My features were still twisted; I felt the telltale tugging on my face. Shock registered deep in my chest. I'd just punched someone. Hard.

This wasn't like me. I didn't knock someone out at the first greeting. Maybe I *was* hormonal. Maybe I was a nightmare pregnant woman. Maybe Kellan was just being nice about it.

I grabbed the Lysol wipes and proceeded to scrub the counters. I needed an outlet for my aggression, and a body wasn't the optimal choice.

I lost track of how much time passed before Anthony, Bobby, Sal and Rashik showed up.

"Where's Kalia?"

"Dropped her off to Auggy at headquarters," Anthony said. "She kicked and screamed the whole way."

"His parting gift was a spit wad to the face," Bobby laughed.

I focused on Rashik. "How are you?" I looked him up and down. He seemed to be in good health. His pulse was solid; his heart beat present and strong for a vampire, but I didn't miss the darkness in his eyes.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him into the study, still empty aside from a guard on duty. "It's safe in here. You can tell me anything."

"How is my family?"

My heart broke. Fear had him fidgeting; concern wrinkling his brows. "I spoke with your wife yesterday, the moment you were found. She and your girls are doing well and anxiously waiting for your return."

His eyes glossed over, and he pressed his lips together, as if trying to control his emotions.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I want to get home to my family."

I understood that. "I'd like to change your territory if you don't mind."

His head whipped towards me.

"You can decline, but I'm thinking about you and your family's safety. Do you have any other family?"

"In India." He'd cloaked his emotions, slipping behind a mask, as if he didn't want to hope.

"Alright. Then India will be your new territory. I'll find someone else to cover South Africa."

He stood silent before me, mulling over my words I was sure.

"There's no rush to get back into things, especially after all that happened. And moving continents is a big deal. Is two months long enough if the vampeen army covers the moving expenses?"

He cocked his head. "I'm afraid I misjudged you. You are certainly not your grandfather."

"No, at least I don't want to be."

"My family will be very happy." His dark eyes seemed to light up, as if a weight had been lifted off him. "Thank

you.” He extended his hand.

I shook his outstretched hand. His warmth engulfed me. A tingle went up my arm and sent my heart soaring. He was my proof that a good leader didn’t have to be a dictator. Kindness and humility were good qualities to retain in the highest positions.

I released my grip. “I’d like for you to give a detailed report of what happened in your time with Kalia. I’m not going to rush you, but if you could have it to me by that two month deadline, that would be great. It can be a verbal recording or a written document. Just e-mail it when you’re done.”

“That is very fair.”

“Alright. Then let’s go book your ticket home.” I smiled, leading him back to the living room.

I saw Derek sitting on the couch icing the side of his face. It was already healing from what I could see around the edges of the Ziploc bag. Kindness and humility, those had been my words.

“Drex?” The guard appeared at my side in a second. “Can you please book a flight back home for Rashik? The company card is in my wallet.”

He nodded, immediately moving towards my purse. I rarely used it, but when I was home, it was a drop bag for all that I used regularly when going out.

I turned to Rashik. “Drexel will help you, okay?”

“Thank you.” He ran a hand through his shaggy black hair. He was anxious to get home, I was sure. I felt bad taking him so far away only to send him back, but I had to see that he was okay for myself.

I braced myself, moving towards the sofa. "How's the healing coming along?" I sat on the other end of the couch and angled myself towards Derek.

"It's healing." He gave me a haphazard glance. He couldn't move his face as much as he'd like yet, but I saw the hard glint in his eyes along with the slight inward dip of his brows.

"Sorry about that. Not exactly the best 'hello', I know."

"I'm sure somewhere along the lines I deserved it." He faced forward. His words were cut short and dry, with a rough edge. I'd hit a nerve.

"Hi. I'm Lexi." I offered him my hand.

He stared at me for a long minute before he gave in and took my hand. "Derek."

"It's nice to meet you."

He didn't reply. He turned back to face the TV across the room.

Guilt smacked me hard. I probably deserved his cold shoulder, but it still infuriated me. After all, he was the one who had endangered one of the people I loved. "Why did you take Kellan there?"

"Seemed like he could handle himself." His eyes locked with mine. "He was hell bent - with or without me."

I'd assumed that, but I was still trying to talk myself out of believing it. I didn't want to think of Kellan as the impulsive vamp who would get himself killed.

Once again, my tummy chose that ever-so-awkward moment to growl. The baby immediately followed the hollow roar of my belly with movement. I winced as it

rumbled around, pressing on sensitive spots, even for a vamp.

Derek suddenly relaxed, his face softening. "You should probably get something to eat."

"Yeah. Thanks." I gave him a smile, but it wasn't sincere; more along the lines of a disheartened whimsy.

He sighed, his eyes traveling the room before landing back on me. "Sorry to have pissed you off."

"Sorry for socking you." This time my smile was genuine. We'd reached a mutual understanding, a compromise.

"I'll be sticking around the area for a while if you need anything. Kellan has my number."

"Thanks." I got up to go search for food.

Vamps were everywhere it seemed. Some I recognized, some I knew well, others were merely faces in a crowd. I hated not having a retreat. I didn't like not having a place of solitude.

I was moving towards the kitchen when there was a knock at the door. I could have sworn they had guards checking each person before they let them inside. I glanced around; no one was making a move for the door. I took a quick look at the security monitor, but saw that Kai was running some sort of update on it. It only showed a loading bar.

I went for the door. I unlocked it before stepping aside to open it. My body shuddered as I came face to face with a man, standing a few inches taller than me. He had a dark essence about him. The hairs on my body stood up.

He leered, a broad grin on his face.

Instinctively, I took a step back. I caught sight of the guards on the ground in my peripheral vision. My heart sped up; serum swarmed my mouth.

Without warning, he sent something flying towards me, faster than a bullet. It sliced through the air, before cutting my cheek. I cried out, my hand lifting to my face as the pain spread.

A stampede was coming up from behind me, but in a blink, he was gone. That was him; that was the one who'd been chasing me.

"What happened?" Drexel whisked me towards him.

Warmth. I felt liquid warmth pooling in my palm and streaming down my arm.

Drex didn't say anything. He immediately lifted me into his arms and carried me to the kitchen. He set me down on top of the island.

Kai grabbed a dish towel, wetting it and coming right over to me. He reached around where my hand was plastered to my face and wiped up my forearm.

Kellan appeared; his eyes were stricken as he took me in. "What the hell happened?" he barked. The tone in his voice was laced with accusation.

Drex had a bag of ice and a cup of blood ready to go. Both men ignored Kellan.

"I need you to move your hand, Leka." Kai wrapped his hand around my wrist.

I was afraid of how bad it was. He must have carved off a piece of my flesh with whatever he threw at me. I was certain of it. The area throbbed; a stinging ache seemed to shoot out from the wound. He'd moved so fast as if he was

on vamp steroids. In what seemed like less than a nanosecond, I'd been hit. His speed and reflexes were impossible to fathom.

Slowly, I allowed Kai to move my hand away. Cool air seemed to touch my bones.

The guys didn't react verbally, but they didn't need to. Their eyes narrowed and darkened as they gawked at my face.

Snapping out of it, Kai pressed the towel to my cheek. He glanced sideways at the cup of blood. "She needs vamp blood. She won't heal as fast being pregnant, and she can't afford to lose so much."

Why did every injury have to be so complicated for me? I was a vampeen for goodness sake. Somehow I was the exception for the healing rule. I knew I was being pessimistic, but it was maddening. I was a strong, independent vampeen. Apparently, that was *except* when it came to taking care of myself physically.

"Here." Kai bit his wrist and put it to my mouth.

I looked to Kellan. His entire body was stiff; his lips were curled into a scowl. "Do whatever the hell you want," he snapped, pushing through the vamps watching.

Tears welled. It looked like our talk had done nothing. He was choosing to walk away, and it seemed like he was doing it much easier than I'd hoped.

I accepted Kai's offering, placing my mouth around his flesh. I closed my eyes as tears dribbled down my cheeks. His blood was like sweet honey pouring over my tongue. It slid down my throat, cooling my serum yet warming me at the same time.

He moved the towel away briefly. "It's working. The muscle will take a bit longer, but as long as the flesh closes, you'll be good." He dabbed the side of my face with the towel, as if the blood was slowing already.

I opened my eyes, looking towards him.

His eyes softened as he met my stare. "When he's gone," he stated, assuring me I wouldn't be alone.

I released his wrist. "Sorry." I pushed off the island. Vamps slid out of the way as I escaped to my bedroom. I bypassed Kellan pouting on the bed with his phone and ran straight for the bathroom. I locked the door the second the serum surged into my mouth.

I bent over, heaving out the serum and blood into the toilet. Tears kept coming. I had no control. Everything was spinning. Nothing made sense. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

That was life though. It never turned out the way we planned, the way we wanted it to.

I flushed, sobs weakening me as I climbed into the shower, clothes and all. I turned on the hot water and fell apart beneath the torrent of warmth.

—

KELLAN

I stood outside the bathroom door, listening to her painful cries. I'd done that to her. I'd caused those tears. *What the hell was wrong with me?* I loved her. God I loved her. Yet I couldn't help myself. I couldn't keep my mouth shut long enough to think through the words I was about to unleash on her.

Repeatedly, I abandoned her, and continually, he picked up the pieces. Maybe deep down I believed he was better for her. Perhaps I was subconsciously making the ultimate sacrifice because she deserved a great man, not a just decent man.

I couldn't face the idea of him raising my child as long as I was alive though. Maybe the prophecy *would* come true, but not because a single shot whistled through the air unexpectedly. I would probably see the moment as an opportunity to end it all by chance.

I shook myself. What was I talking about? I pinched the bridge of my nose. There was something majorly wrong with me to be looking to that kind of escape.

Kai barged into the bedroom. "What the hell was that?" he growled.

I tried to calm myself as he moved towards me. "She decided, didn't she?"

"You left her no choice storming off like a pouting toddler." He clenched his jaw, rising to his full height, gaining a smidgen over me to glare back down at me.

"No one's perfect." I shrugged. I wasn't going to get into it with him.

"You know, I don't get you. You've got everything I would kill to have, but you don't appreciate it. Mark my words. One day you're going to lose her. And it'll only be then that you realize what she's really worth." He pushed past me and knocked on the bathroom door.

I'd been staring at that door for the past ten minutes, unable to lift my hands and do what came so naturally for him.

“Leka?”

I wasn't even fighting for her anymore. I'd completely given up. Where was my possessiveness? I was a jealous beast at one time...but that was back when she was my everything. Something had happened though. Somewhere along the way, I'd lost my passion.

“Don't make me break down the door,” Kai commanded. He glanced back at me, sneering with disgust before focusing on the door again.

“I fucked up. I know that. I'm just not sure why or even how to make it right,” I conceded.

“You need to figure that one out for yourself.” His voice was hard, but controlled.

The shower turned off. I still heard her snuffle as she moved for the door. She unlocked the door and Kai plowed in. I caught a glimpse of her, but she wasn't the strong woman that I loved. She was a broken vamp with sad, swollen eyes, a red cheek where she was still healing and sopping wet comfort clothing clinging to her skin. She had a puddle of water pooling around her; her hair was glued to her face.

I focused on her baby bump. I was able to discern the flutter of movement beneath her skin right as Kai closed the door.

—

Chapter Twenty-Five

LEXI

I bit my tongue, trying to calm my shaking body. He just stood there, watching me. He didn't move towards me; he didn't try to comfort me. It was Kai doing everything, despite the fact that I wore Kellan's ring.

Kai wrapped one towel around my upper body and used another to wipe around my dripping sweats and the floor.

"I'm sorry. You don't have to do that." I clamped down on my bottom lip. "Why is he being this way, Kai?"

He stopped what he was doing and moved in front of me. "I don't know, sweetie."

My stomach growled again as the baby continued to kick around.

"Let's get you into some dry clothes, and I'll send someone out for food."

I blinked repeatedly as anger surged within me. "It should be *him* doing that, not you. It's his baby."

He pursed his lips, considering me. "Why don't you get out of these wet clothes and finish drying off while I get you some dry clothes?"

He was changing the subject. I was exhausted though and didn't feel like fighting him. "Alright."

Less than a minute later Kai handed me a batch of fresh clothes discreetly through the door.

I stared at myself in the mirror. I was a mess. I knew life was hard. I knew relationships got tough. I'd even known that love was easy, but commitment took work. Especially now. I was ready to walk away from Kellan. He was making it easy to walk away. But as I reflected on my engagement ring, I knew I couldn't give up so easily.

When he gave me that ring, he gave it to me with a promise. He'd said it more than once, that I was his forever girl. Men didn't toss those words around lightly. He had to have meant them at some point.

I knew he was in a funk. Thinking back with the newer pieces of information I'd been given, I could see how Kellan had pulled away because he was putting too much pressure on himself to be the hero. He'd tried to go after world-class villains with supernatural powers alone. That took guts. I never doubted his courage, his bravery. It was his vampire impulses that weakened him. While many vampires argued it was their leverage over vampeens and humans, Kellan was proof that, sometimes, it backfired. Not every rapid impulse would end up in your favor, and Kellan was finally realizing that.

Maybe I'd added to his pressure by trying to be superwoman. I could understand from a macho man perspective how intimidating that might be. No one wanted their woman to be above them on the totem pole, especially a vampire with a vampeen.

I frowned. I hadn't thought of it from that angle. Did Kellan subconsciously want to be the vampire above the vampeen?

And, therein lies the problem. I didn't know. I didn't know because he wasn't talking to me the way he used to. We didn't have the intimate conversations anymore. We didn't stay up for hours chatting in bed, giggling and

enjoying each other. Half the time, I didn't even fall asleep with him. Our schedules clashed at times with his vamp army work and plans with Craig, Kalel, Auggy and his dad. I didn't dare demand him to choose. I wasn't that cruel. But perhaps we needed a compromise.

This wasn't working. We were sliding further and further away from each other as my due date drew closer and closer. I didn't want Kellan to observe his child's birth from a distance. I didn't want him to be an active father only on designated visitation days.

I twirled my ring around my finger. I'd said yes for a reason: because I loved him, and, at the time, couldn't picture my life without him. Neither of those had changed, but my mind was beginning to open up to the possibilities of life sans-Kellan. That's not what I wanted; but it's what I felt I was being forced to do.

I sighed, feeling the tears start to build again. How did you help someone who didn't want help though? I'd always known that you couldn't change people, only hope to inspire them to change at best.

I had to accept my part of the responsibility. I hadn't made any effort to work in time for my relationship. I'd focused so much on everything else, letting go of the most important thing. My neglect was not only affecting me, it was damaging my child's future. I would have to accept some of the blame if Kellan wasn't there for us.

I swallowed hard, looking at myself in the mirror. I looked deep into my eyes, seeing the resolve as it bloomed. I didn't need Kellan to make this happen. I would change the changeable. I would take control of the only part of life I could control: myself. I couldn't control fate, but I could control how I reacted to it. I couldn't control my future, but

I could control my efforts now which, I turn, would affect my future.

I inhaled deeply; my chest was finally able to expand to its full potential after all this time. I was tired of crying, though, and tired of fighting; I was tired of being dependent for certain things. I was going to do something about it all. This was my time to rise. Cecilia could kiss my white butt. I wasn't going to lose Kellan to her or lose anyone else; and my baby wasn't going to lose its mother to her either.

I dried off, dressing in the same comfy outfit, but in a totally different color palette. I smiled, satisfied. Kai knew me well. I couldn't lie. It was comforting to know that he would always be my back up. It wasn't fair to him though; I knew it was selfish on my part, but I relished all he gave me. I was afraid to admit that losing him would be almost as hard as losing Kellan probably.

—

Everyone looked up at me as I entered the living room. They were all huddled around the dining room table. No one stood guard by the windows. No one roamed. They were all together, discussing something that I'd just interrupted, Kellan included.

I pushed in beside Drex. My eyes were immediately drawn to the thin line of blood on the envelope setting on the table, and I knew it was intended for me. The note had been removed and was lying beside it. I picked it up, unfolding it. They all watched me with interest, quiet observers that unsettled me. Nerves wrestled inside my stomach, right as it growled again. Instantly, I felt my cheeks flush.

"I sent Dramo out for food," Kai said.

“Thanks.”

I focused on the letter. I gripped the paper tighter, hoping they wouldn't notice that my hands were slightly trembling.

He threatened my love, now I will threaten yours. The blood of your unborn abomination or his blood is all I will accept. Twenty-four hours. Meet me or I'll open the gates of hell upon you and yours. I'm looking forward to meeting the infamous Alexa Jackson. -CR

I pulled out the closest chair and sat down. Perspiration tickling my skin, as my heart raced. I'd just set my mind. I'd just declared that I wouldn't lose Kellan, and my child wouldn't lose him as well. I refused to lose my baby though. I didn't plan this, but it was a part of me now. I felt it move and heard its heartbeat. Now it provided a constant melody that I worked to - lived to - and the rhythmic sounds soothed me to sleep.

That settled it. I would fight, even if I had to fight alone. “Where do we meet her?”

Someone flipped the envelope over, showing a series of numbers.

“It's longitude and latitude. It's an exact point on the map,” someone else replied.

I didn't look at faces; I only focused on what was in front of me on the table: fate, our future.

“This isn't your battle, so I understand if you don't want to go, but just know that *I am*.” I looked directly at Kellan, staring into his beautiful emerald eyes. “I'm not giving up. I refuse to surrender any part of my soul.”

There was a storm of emotions brewing in his eyes, some of which I couldn't define. I didn't have to though. "I don't want you to," he stated.

"Everyone, let's move to the army headquarters. We'll use their satellites to get an oversized visual of the area." Kai placed a hand on my shoulder, letting me know that I wouldn't be going alone.

They began clearing out, taking their weapons with them. My home was growing colder, emptier by the second.

"Why don't you go with them? Cecilia will be coming right for you. You'll need the strategic advantage." Kai gestured for Kellan to go with the teams.

Kellan focused on me. "Will you be okay?"

"Will *you* be?" I countered, my brows drawing together.

"I hope so." He gave me a faint smile. "Truce?"

"Truce."

"Good." He closed in on me, capturing my lips as his hands gently rubbed my belly. Pulling away, his eyes sparkled like a chandelier. "I'll see you soon."

I nodded. "Okay."

Kellan stopped in front of Kai. He stretched out a hand towards him. "Thanks."

Kai shook his hand, but held his tongue, remaining quiet. His flexing muscles and controlled expression said it all for him.

Kellan dipped out, leaving us alone. He sat down across from me at the table. "Dramo should be back soon."

“Okay.”

He nibbled his bottom lip, something I hadn't seen him do before. A frown marred his features. “Leka...” He sighed, rubbing his fingers across his forehead. “I have to know why. Why him and not me?”

My mouth went dry, all the serum evaporating from my throat. “It's not a mental or emotional choice. It's not even a physical one. In fact, if I was to decide based off those things, then I would be with you. I can't explain my soul, but that's what it is. My spirit has this otherworldly connection with his. I can't define it, I can't sever it and I can't ignore it.”

I rubbed my thumb in circles across my palm. “I love him, but it's not our love that keeps us together, if that even makes sense. It's why I can so easily love you both, yet still choose him. And I'm so sorry for how awful that sounds.”

Kai's face became a mask. He wasn't giving an inch. It hurt my heart to lay it out like that. But it was the truth, in words I'd never even spoke to Kellan. “I'm not mad at you for telling me the truth. How could I be, when you still said you loved me?”

I didn't feel any better. In fact, my gut continued to coil tighter. Every inhalation sent sand blasting into my lungs rather than air as I openly gazed at him. “I wish it wasn't that way sometimes. I wish I could snap my fingers and regain my freedom of choice. Life isn't that nice though. Or that easy. It likes to show you several paths, giving the illusion of options, only to force you down one due to uncontrollable circumstances.” I placed my hand over his fist on the table. “I really am sorry. Please know that I appreciate everything that you've done for me. I wouldn't be where I am without you. A scary fact is that,

lately, I trust *you* more than Kellan. You've been more reliable than him; better in so many ways. I'm telling the truth when I say I wish it could be *us* sometimes."

"I understand, Leka. I don't blame you, although it doesn't make it easier to accept. You've told me plenty of times to move on though. You've never faltered in making it clear that you would always choose him. Leave it up to a man to have selective hearing, right?" He smirked, his smile growing wistful. "I guess I was still holding onto chance, wishing that fate would intervene for me."

The prophecy crashed into the forefront of my mind. My heart sped up. The hard part was, I could picture myself so easily with Kai, but couldn't fathom the amount of pain I'd bear in the beginning over the loss of Kellan. Reversely, it would be similar, but not to the same extent. I loved Kai, but our souls didn't touch the way Kellan's and mine did. I loved Kai, but he didn't own every part of me the way Kellan did. I supposed this was how Bella felt. She loved Jacob, but Edward had already captured so much more than he could ever access.

Someone rapped on the door. Kai looked up at the security screen. "It's Dramo."

I let go of his hand as he got up to answer it. I listened as he updated the vamp and sent him off.

He rounded the corner, setting the food and the milkshake on the table in front of me. "Eat up."

"Thanks. I probably won't have time to stop again before everything happens." I pulled the burger and fries from the bag, immediately shoving a stray fry into my mouth.

His features drew down. "Make sure you rest."

“I’ll probably just crash on the couch in Auggy’s office for a bit.”

Something was troubling him. “Kalel and Gabi already issued the order for all Bladang soldiers in the state to be there backing you up tomorrow. Auggy did the same as soon as he found out. You’re not in this alone, Leka. No matter what, you’ll always have back up. You’ll *never* be alone.”

I swallowed the bite in my mouth. “You’ve made sure of that.”

He nodded. “I’ll always make sure of it, whether I’m here or not, okay?”

I didn’t like the direction of this conversation. He was hiding behind a hard façade. I couldn’t gauge him. I didn’t know if this final spurt of truth was sending him off into the sunset far away, possibly in Hawaii, or if he was speaking metaphorically. Rather than question him, I found myself simply saying, “Okay.”

“I’ll take you over to headquarters, but after that, I have a few things I need to do.”

My expression barely changed. “Okay.” I ate another fry.

“I love you, Leka.” His voice was soft, reverent. He was standing a good seven feet away, yet I’d never felt so enraptured by him, so wrapped up in him.

“I love you too, Kai.”

He glanced down at my food. “Eat. I’m going to make sure everything is locked up around here.”

I watched as he moved into the study. My heart was bouncing around in my chest, foreboding rising in me. I

didn't know which man it was for, but I knew without a shadow of doubt that I was about lose one of the men I loved.

—

Chapter Twenty-Six

“That evil witch is not laying a finger on either of my babies,” Beth growled, rubbing a hand on my belly. “We’re going to fight like hell, sweetie.”

“I second that, honey. Nothing is going to happen to you, Kellan or that baby on our watch,” Aunt Claire declared. She and Beth were dressed in the vamp army issued black uniform.

“Thanks. I really appreciate your support, but please, don’t get hurt out there.”

Mel laughed. “So says the disabled pregnant woman.”

“I am not disabled,” I snarled.

That only sent her laughing harder.

Gabi elbowed her for me. “We’re here. We’re ready, and we’re going to kick some ass.”

“Damn dittle, love.” Craig draped an arm around my shoulders. “For the upple pup too.” He touched my baby bump.

“We’re ready, boss.” Jarrod nodded at me.

“Perfect. Load up and I’ll meet you two miles from the location.”

“See you there.” He walked away.

“Hell yeah! They gave me grenades this time, bro.” Anthony juggled a duffle bag that I assumed was full of explosives.

“Be careful you don’t set those off, itchy fingers.”

He looked at me and winked. "This is my forte, baby."

"Why do I get the feeling he's going to set those off before they ever reach our destination?" Mel shook her head in dismay.

"Dear heavens. He works for you, honey?" Aunt Claire seemed squeamish to say the least at the prospect. She placed a hand on her chest, frowning as Anthony walked out with the rest of my special op squad. They were the best at combat. I hadn't had the chance to gauge my other employee's skill yet and didn't want to risk them.

"Yes. He's a lot more competent than he looks."

"I'd hope so," she said.

"We're going, Jackson," Auggy called. "I've got more men heading up."

"Alright. I'll see you there."

"You ready for this?" Kellan asked, coming up behind me. He wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me against his warmth.

I took a deep breath. I'd had time to consider the possible outcomes. I was prepared for none of them, but I would control the controllable: my reaction to it, whatever it happened to be. Or, at least, I hoped I could.

"Let's get rolling, *primo*," Derek stepped into our circle. Kellan had called him and he'd been eager for a second chance at Cecilia, and also to back his new family. I still didn't know much about him. From the Face Time chats I knew he wasn't an open book, but with time, maybe he'd allow me access to a few pages.

I frowned as I looked around the office. Kalel had been there earlier with Francesca, but went out to grab more

weapons. It was Kai who had been absent most of the day.

“You ready, sweetie?” Beth’s voice cut through my worry.

“Um, yeah.” I tugged down on my tank top. I was still in my VS Capri sweats and a tank. With tennis shoes though, it made the perfect workout outfit, or in my case, combat outfit.

—

KELLAN

I’d consulted with Will earlier. He wouldn’t budge. He refused to give me the tiniest hint into what we were facing. I tried studying the prophecy myself, but it was too cryptic. Half of it really was left up to interpretation. I’d have to keep after Will to help me.

I hated the idea of Lexi being anywhere near Cecilia. The only reason I wasn’t fighting her on this was because of the amount of back up we had. The connections we’d forged had proved invaluable. I couldn’t look around at all these vamps willing to fight for us and ever think that we were in this alone, and as long as I had her, I *knew* I wasn’t in anything alone.

I’d lost sight of that recently. I’d take her distraction and turned it into a dismissal. I hadn’t taken into account her circumstances.

“Dismal donger on the stock, mate. We’re gonna stook her.” Craig spoke with conviction. His eyes affirmed his words.

“I hope so.”

We all moved out and loaded into the cars. We were headed northwest towards the mountains. We had five

hours until fate would come to pass.

—

KAI

“Are you certain?” Will pursed his lips, twining his hands on the desk.

“After studying the prophecy, I’m certain that it’s me.”

“Well, then, best of luck to Lexi. She’s going to need it.” His eyes twinkled with respect.

He stuck his hand across the desk between the piles. I firmly shook it. “Thanks.”

—

Chapter Twenty-Seven

My heart pounded in my chest as we arrived at the meet-up location. I was surprised as I scanned the area, noting the amount of vehicles parked. At least two hundred vehicles were scattered along the forest wall. *All of these people were here to help us?*

Kellan grabbed my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Let's go."

"Let's go kick some vampy butt," Mel declared.

While she was excited, I was nervous. The baby had been unnervingly quiet the entire drive. Its heartbeat was steady, but the lack of movement still concerned me.

I slipped out of the car, immediately spotting my team. I made my way towards them. "You all ready?"

"Hell yeah!" Anthony lifted the bag of grenades.

"They made it here safely, I see."

"Barely." Germia cut her eyes at Anthony.

"We want to be on the front lines with you. We were bread for this," Rodney said.

They watched as I contemplated. I didn't want anyone on the front lines with me. I wanted them all tucked away, in the back. I hated that I needed numbers in order to fight this battle.

"You've done a lot for us. It's the least we can do." Jarrod met my gaze, imploring me.

"Please be careful. And one of you take the launchers from hot hands."

“Gladly.” Germia made a grab for the bag in Anthony’s hands.

“I’ll see you guys out there.”

They all nodded in unison, a mutual agreement.

Kalel, Auggy, Gabi, Jack, Kellan, Al and I met in the center of the crowd. There were a lot more than two hundred vamps here. By my estimate there were at least nine hundred. It was overwhelming to look out at them all. It was hard not to get choked up at the scene. The one nagging part was, despite all these vamps, Kai wasn’t here.

“We’re going to move in units so we can surprise them on the other side.” Kalel handed me the camera earrings.

I put them on. “I take it you’ll be watching through these, gauging when to send in the next team?”

Auggy nodded. “We figured we’d send you in with your nine ops first, since they’re already familiar with their faces. Drex, Sanders and Derek are supervising Kalia. They’ll be moving in with the next team. They’ll be bringing her then.”

“We’re still going to use her as leverage?” I checked.

“We’ll try,” Kalel said.

“You have any of those burners I can use?” Kellan looked at Kalel.

“In the black van. Christian will be beside it standing guard.”

Kellan chuckled. “Vamps with weapons. You would think they were going after blood.”

“Alright, I’m going to grab my team, Mel and Craig and start moving.”

“And me.”

We all turned. William stood there in disheveled attire. His hair was a mess, and his tie was hanging loose around his neck.

I swallowed hard. “What are you doing here?”

His eyes softened. There was sadness, regret, in their depths.

“Oh,” I choked. My gaze zoomed to Kellan.

He sucked in a breath, exhaling resolve. “You can’t change fate, babe.” He caressed my cheek.

“We can assign some vamps to watch you. We can have you sit this one out, no problem. We can...” Tears sprang forth.

“Stop.” He gently kissed me. It was a kiss of peace. How could he be okay with this? “If I’m going to go, I’m going to go out fighting to the death. At least let me go with honor.”

“It won’t happen,” Al growled. The hard glint in his eyes said he was going to be watching out for his son, that he would take the bullet for him if he had to.

There was silence all around us. Somehow the chatter had died away in the moment. It was like a quiet omen – silent and looming.

“I love you.” He kissed my forehead, dragging me into a tight embrace.

I wrapped my arms around him. “I love you too. That’s why you can’t leave me.”

“I haven’t gone anywhere yet, babe.”

“I feel like you’re going to though.” The tears formed a wet trail down my face. I pressed my nose into his shirt, trying hard to breathe his scent, some essence of him - aside from his cologne. Alas, I didn’t smell him like I did Kai.

Kai, the one who said he would always be there for me, yet hadn’t bothered to show up.

I sighed. I couldn’t be too angry with him. It really wasn’t his battle.

I pulled back, brushing aside the last of my tears. I glanced at Will. He’d slid behind a veil, hiding the truth from my all-too-knowing eyes. I looked up at Kellan again. “Let’s go fight.”

He smiled. “That’s the feisty girl I love.”

“Here.” Auggy passed me what looked like a copper turtle shell with straps. “Put it on over your stomach. It’ll protect the baby.”

I nodded. “Alright.”

Kellan helped me fasten it over my shirt; it was a perfect fit.

“Bye, guys.” I met their gazes one by one, lifting the window to reveal my feelings.

They all stood, hands tucked into their pockets, the same hard expression on their faces. They’d all read the prophecy. They knew what I feared.

Gabi yanked me into a last-minute hug. “We’ll be there.” She’d been eerily quiet.

“See you soon,” I said as I retreated.

“Come on.” Kellan wrapped an arm around my waist and led me towards my team. “I’ll round up Mel and Craig. You get your men ready, and we’ll meet you just beyond the tree line.”

“Are you really ready for this, Kellan?”

“I’m always ready to fight for you and for our baby now. I may not be the most stable vamp, and I may not think clearly all the time, but the one thing I am always ready to do is defend the ones I love.”

I couldn’t argue there. “Please be careful. Look everywhere. We know what it says.”

In a second of victory, all shall be lost, for a lone stray shall have his way. A shot shall echo through the forest floor, an impact so strong he shant steal a chance. The question is not can he survive, for he surely does not; the question is who shall carry on holding her up in her despair, for her anger shall cause her enemies to weep; her own grief shall slowly consume her shall a new prince not resuscitate her. It ought to be known that no one shall love her the way he did; no one will fight with the heart he possessed. But alas, he shall pass her on to the finest suitor with nothing left but his final breath.

“I could never forget.” He delicately stroked his thumb across my cheek.

—

AL

I wrapped my arm around my wife as we watched our son disappear into the woods with his new family. He was our only child. The loss of a child is an unfathomable despair.

When your children come into this world, they *become* your world. Everything turns on its end. Your world revolves around them, and them alone, from that point forward, regardless of how many you have. You love them more than you could ever love yourself. You cherish them more than anything on Earth. They are the one irreplaceable item in your life you never want to lose.

Sadly, a wife can be replaced, but a child never can.

Beth trembled in my arms. Without looking, I knew tears were falling down her cheeks.

The moment we discovered the truth about Lexi and Kellan, and their destiny, we dove into the prophecy. We studied it backwards and forwards, reading every line and even reading between the lines. There was no way around it. We'd known that we'd just read our son's death.

How did you cope with the present when you knew the future? I would take a bullet for my son in an instant. I would take a dart, a torture chamber, an electric shock, hell blazing death by fire...no questions asked. I would do anything for my son. I didn't want to picture a world without him. I didn't want to imagine the pain we'd suffer in his absence. A part of me would die with him; a vital part.

From early on, children are a part of you. They are the best of you, regardless of whether they are on their best behavior. I'd never get over his death. I'd die a lonely bitter man before I accepted fate without rebellion.

"We'll be watching over him." I assured Beth the best I could, hugging her tighter.

"Always." Her voice cracked.

LEXI

My gut twisted as we approached the meeting location. Initially, I noticed that our first team was grossly out numbered. The second thing I noticed was that they'd set up hours ahead of schedule. Vampires were in trees, looming over us as we made our way towards the front line.

Kellan squeezed my hand.

A shiver ran down my spine as my pulse raced at alarming speeds. "We'll definitely need back up."

Javier met us in the middle. "Alexa Jackson." He cocked his head, considering me.

Kellan stepped in front, pushing me behind him.

"How sweet. You can protect her here, but not with Cecilia. Lucky for you both, she sent me instead."

I frowned, moving around Kellan. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. She sent me instead to complete the mission. She didn't think she could bare the pain on your face when we accomplished it."

I slid in front of Kellan, looking up into the trees. "You talk a big game, and granted, you're prepared, but even the best planned missions fail sometimes."

He cackled; it grated on my nerves. "Please. You have thirteen including yourself. I have approximately five hundred and sixty two. Shall we do the math?"

I smiled wide. "Well, David *did* defeat Goliath."

"Then I suggest you start slinging your stones." He crossed his arms over his chest, standing with his feet shoulder width apart. He was waiting for me to do my best.

I wouldn't give it to him. He'd strategize around that.

I heard my team move behind me. They huddled together. I ignored their whispers. I was focused on a single opponent, not an army. Javier was the vampire calling the shots. As long as I distracted him...

"They're launching!" Someone shouted from above.

I glanced over my shoulder to find my team had divided up the grenades. Javier could move fast, but he'd still suffer a loss.

"Go!" Jarrod shouted.

My heart lurched when I saw Mel chucking grenades as we moved back.

Javier jumped into action, but not before his army slipped into chaos behind him. Vamps ran for us at warp speed.

Kellan and I shared a brief look. He nodded his head, assuring me before he lunged into the middle of it all. He snapped the neck of one vamp before elbowing another and sending him flying, knocking over a few more. He flew at lightning speed. I'd never seen him so vicious. He was like a skilled assassin. Pride soared in my chest. He really was ready to fight.

I kicked out at the vamps swarming me. One put his hands around my neck as the other wrapped his hands around my waist. I heard the Velcro peeling apart.

"Over my dead body, buddy." I kneed his crotch. The second he released me, I used his body as leverage to kick up and over the vamp behind me. I immediately snapped his neck.

My victory was short lived as an arrow whistled through the air above me. I grabbed the closest vamp and shoved him in front of it. He immediately fell to the ground, which meant the arrows were laced with something.

—

AUGGY

Everything was fucked up. Nothing was working. I called in the helicopter to airlift Kalia to the holding cells again.

“Teams two and three, move in now. Have your weapons up and ready. There are targets above and in front of you. Go, go, go!” I yelled.

Claire moved to my side. “How bad is it?” She wasn’t able to look me in the eye; she feared the worst.

“They’re alive, but grossly outnumbered, however, she’s fighting hard and well, I might add.” I slipped her the phone.

She gasped. I knew she’d be overwhelmed by the amount of vamps attacking Lexi at once. The girl was strong though. She was holding her own.

Her hands shook as she passed it back to me. “I have to get in there and help.” There was strength and determination in her eyes.

My heart swelled. I’d never loved someone like I love Claire. She challenged me and protected me; she constantly saved me from myself.

She’d never held me back. I could see now that I wouldn’t be able to hold her back either. Lexi had become her child. No parent would ever let their child battle alone, regardless of who they were.

“You can move in with the fourth team...with me.”

She touched my cheek gently, but there was power in her stance. “I’m ready, Augustine.” Her voice was tight, decided.

I wanted to beg her to stay behind. That’s what she did to this grumpy old vamp. She brought me to my knees. I never feared losing my own life, but I always feared losing her.

“We’ll fight together. Have Christian load you up, just in case.”

She lifted on her tiptoes and brushed her lips across mine. Warmth spread through me; for that one millisecond, everything stopped around me. I wasn’t in the middle of a war zone. It was just she and I.

Damn it. Love really was a weakness in the vamp world.

—

Chapter Twenty-Eight

LEXI

I heard the bustle of back up running straight towards us. My body was already growing weary from the excess physical demand of fighting off so many vamps alone.

My heart pounded in my chest. The baby's heartbeat was also elevated by my exertion.

I couldn't see anyone. I could only fight hard and hope they were all still alive. I had to fight to see that he survived. It was imperative that Kellan survived.

I kicked out, at the same time decking a vamp at my side. I was struggling to keep my light show under wraps. My pulse was pumping loud and hard; my body shook with electricity, with energy that surged towards the end goal of victory.

I caught Drexel beside me. "You doing okay, Baby Cakes?" he asked, knocking out a few vamps.

"I'm dealing," I replied, snapping the neck of another. "Have you seen Kellan?"

"Afraid not. I'm sure he's okay though."

We were pulled in opposite directions as we continued battling the swarm of vampires. It should never be one race against another. We should never fight over something that is unchangeable. The color of someone's skin, their ethnicity, is unchangeable. No one should ever be punished for having to wear glasses, for having brown skin, for wearing ragged clothes or for living in a shack. Focus on the changeable.

We have too many issues in the world, vamp and human, to focus on petty items. We need to fight to inspire change that might possibly come to fruition. When we unite together for a common good, we accomplish amazing things. We make a difference. We change our futures. We impact our futures by having the courage to change the changeable.

I moved in and out of the crowd of vampires. I heard weapons fire. vampeens and vampires dropping behind me. My heart skipped each time.

War cries filled my ears, grunts echoed all around as we fought for what we believed in. This was about more than Kellan and me. This was about fighting for a better world. We would never know peace as long as we killed over things that couldn't be changed. We had no control over whether we were a vampeen or vampire.

I elbowed a vamp, sending him backwards, twisted into a semi-circle and shot my other elbow up into another vamp's neck, effectively breaking it. I spun around to take out another vampire when he abruptly threw his hands up in surrender.

I looked up and out over the mayhem. It appeared that another team had moved in, because I saw Auggy taking prisoners. It was more than just my vampire surrendering.

I watched as many vampires tried to escape in opposite directions, but they were being caught. Like a coordinated symphony, vampires started throwing their hands up in surrender.

Pride and relief surged through me. We'd done it. One by one the remaining vampires were surrendering. My adrenaline was still pumping as the last of the vampires were killed or subdued into forfeit.

As the field started to open up amidst the cluttered chaos, I got a better view of the area. Horror ran through me as I gazed around at the scene. There was more bloodshed than I would have liked. Hundreds of bodies lied limp on the ground. I swallowed hard. I knew it was unavoidable. There were always more sacrifices than victories.

Kai approached me, sheathing his gold dagger. He glanced around before returning his gaze to me. He withdrew an envelope from his back pocket and handed it to me.

“What’s this?” I studied my name on the front of it written in his handwriting.

As I lifted my gaze back to him, he bent and kissed me. His lips were soft, yet there was an unyielding urgency to his touch. The feel of his mouth against my own sent my heart into overdrive. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into him. In an instant, it was as if our souls were intertwined. Breathing in his scent, I inhaled all that was Kai as I returned his embrace. I wasn’t able to think clearly, I was only able to feel, and I felt Kai. I felt his blood pumping through him at a steady rate that matched my heartbeat. In this moment, with his lips secured to mine, with our bodies interwoven, it was as if we were one.

He slowly drifted away, lingering with a few soft kisses. When I opened my eyes to him again, there were red tears streaking down his cheeks. He smiled at me despite the sadness in his eyes.

He swallowed hard. “I love you, Leka. Take care.” He kissed his fingertips and pressed them to my burgeoning belly.

A chill ran down my spine. My pulse was racing as I watched him survey his surroundings. I looked out, but there was nothing to see. Everyone was either standing around or restraining new prisoners.

Abruptly, Kai took off in an open throttle run. That's when I saw him: the vamp in the tree.

"No, Kai!" I cried. I dropped the letter, chasing after him.

—

KELLAN

At Lexi's scream, I instinctively turned towards her voice. I was immediately thrown backwards. Everything reduced to slow motion. I was on my feet in time to see the dart flying through the air. Kai turned to me, meeting my gaze. He nodded his head once, as if to affirm what he was doing. The dart pierced his chest the moment before Lexi reached him.

I ran to his side right as Lexi's body started quaking. I checked for a pulse, but found nothing. He must have died upon contact.

Lexi's shudders turned violent. Tears streamed down her face as her veins illuminated the familiar blue. Faster than ever before, electricity crackled over her flesh. She yelled at the top of her lungs; flares of blue sprung up and out of her every time she cried out. Her bellowing shrieks shattered my heart; I heard the breaking of her heart in those guttural roars.

One second she was in front of me, the next the shooter dropped out of the tree, his neck having been snapped. One by one the prisoners we'd taken hostage were withdrawn from an ally's possession and killed. Lexi

was moving so fast; I couldn't keep up, even with my enhanced vision.

A wave of fear rolled through me, concerned with her safety, and the safety of our unborn child. I was on my feet, trying to cut her off, but she wasn't slowing. Her rage only seemed to grow.

I watched closely as she returned to the center of the small clearing. She was struggling to breathe as her lips quivered. Her thoughts were closed off to me; a protective shield around her, preventing anyone from getting close.

Tears steadily streamed down her cheeks with no signs of drying any time soon. Kalel and several others were hovering over Kai. Everyone had turned to observe Lexi though; to watch as she fell into the depths of despair.

Suddenly, she let out a cry so loud that it shook the surrounding timbers with its echo. Everyone leapt back as bolts of lightning, thick darts of electricity shot from her flesh. The lightning bolts hit the nearby trees, burning their trunks in seconds and sending them crashing to the ground. Vamps scattered, fleeing any way they could.

My chest hurt, my heart burned as I was forced to stand on the sidelines and watch her suffer. My hands were cuffed. There was nothing I could do. And for the first time, I understood what it truly meant to be helpless.

She stumbled over to Kai's lifeless body. Everyone had stepped away from him when her outburst turned lethal. She collapsed to her knees, the light in her body beginning to ebb. Sobs poured from her, still, as she wrapped herself around Kai. The armor Auggy had given her for the baby was long gone. Her baby belly was exposed, lying slightly above Kai's stomach. She yanked the dart from his chest and tossed it aside. She pressed the side of her face to his

chest. Her hands shook as she gathered one of his into her own. She gently kissed his palm, a new set of tears deciding to avalanche.

I moved closer, wishing she would stop glowing so I could hug her, hold her; so I could soothe her and comfort her the way she needed to be. I was so wrapped up in her that I couldn't mourn Kai's passing or honor his sacrifice at the moment. He saved my life. Single-handedly, he beat fate, but it was at a high cost. I'd called him selfish in the past, but I could see now that he was actually selfless.

I crouched down on the other side of Kai, where Lexi could see me. Her eyes met mine, and I fell back at the raw pain that her eyes bared.

She bit her lower lip, trying to hold back another swell of emotion. "He's gone." Her voice was hoarse; she sounded empty and hollow.

She swallowed hard. I knew her serum must have drowned her mouth several times by this point. She focused on Kai again. I could tell the fight was leaving her. Her anger had given way to pain; her rage had given way to sadness. She reverently pressed her lips to Kai's, closing her eyes and allowing the tears to splash onto him.

A whimper escaped me as I saw her pull away. She rested her head on Kai's chest again, and within a few seconds, her light disappeared as she slipped into oblivion. It was then that I heard the baby's heartbeat escalate, beating faster. My gut wrenched tight, my chest constricting from the fear that it wouldn't survive. I sat, paralyzed by the idea that after all of this, the baby could possibly not make it. I'd never heard its heart so quick and erratic.

Kalel and I reached their side. Tears rimmed the strong vamps eyes, as he stared down at the pair. His jaw line was rigid; it was taking a lot of effort to keep his emotions at bay. This was his brother, his maker, his best friend and so much more. I could only imagine what he was going through. I couldn't help the guilt that furled deep inside me; Kai died so that I could live, so my baby would have its father.

Kalel placed a heavy hand on my shoulder as he bent down beside me. "I don't blame you. It was his choice." He looked away, his breathing becoming haggard. "*Damn him* for making this choice."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but this was on the ground over there," a high-pitched, male voice came from my left.

Kalel and I looked over to see a plump, rosy-faced teen looking down at us. His chubby fingers tightly grasping a white envelope. I took it and flicked my wrist for the young vampire to go away. I studied Lexi's name on the front of the sealed envelope; my chest collapsed in on itself at seeing Kai's handwriting.

Drexel approached on Lexi's side. He knelt down and carefully lifted her into his arms. "We've issued orders for all the dead vamps to be buried here. Graves are already being dug. I'll leave it up to you what you do with his body." He bowed his head for a minute. "I'm sorry for you loss." His voice was soft, unlike the deep, brusque voice I was used to hearing from him.

One by one, they started closing in on us. Gabi fell to her knees beside Kai; Jack was right beside her. Red tears stained her cheeks. She gathered Kai's hand in her own and kissed the top of his hand. Francesca moved in beside Kalel. She laced her fingers with his, offering him the

strength she knew he needed. The High Authorities stood together in the distance, regarding their fallen comrade.

Bladang officers ripped off a piece of their clothing and began piling them on top of Kai. The affect was like rose petals of varying colors and shapes.

Suddenly, I didn't care about all the times he put the moves on Lexi; I didn't care that he kissed her more times than he ought to. As hard as it was for me to admit, if he didn't have the connection he did with Lexi, then I wouldn't be here. For *that*, I would always be grateful.

I looked at my beautiful fiancé lying limp in Drexel's arms. The swell of her belly sent my limp heart into a flurry, as it always did. Pain twisted my insides as the memory of her outburst flashed in my mind. I couldn't live with the situation if Kai *and* the baby died. I released a harsh sigh. *No!* Kai couldn't die in vain.

I patted Kalel's back. "I'm sorry. There are no words that could express how utterly sorry and equally grateful I am."

He met my gaze. "I know, *brah*." He lifted his eyes to Lexi. "Go take care of her. I think she's taking this harder than anyone. She's going to need us. But first you need to make sure that the baby is okay."

"Dr. H and Dr. Zhan are both on their way via helicopter," Drexel announced.

"I'll catch up with you later," I told Kalel as I stood up.

"I'll be by the doctor's office later to check on Lexi," he said. Even he was being selfless in this moment. He'd lost the last of his blood family in a single moment, yet out of concern, he was setting aside his grief.

Mel and Craig were at my side in an instant, along with my parents, Sanders, Claire, Gabi and Jack. "We're going with you whether you like it or not," Mel stated, stomping her right foot into the ground. They all nodded their heads and murmured their agreements with Mel's statement.

"Of course." I couldn't blame them. They would be equally concerned about Lexi and the baby.

I heard the helicopter's blades slicing through the air as it drew closer to us. Everyone retreated into the covering the trees offered, moving over the fallen trees and branches that Lexi had destroyed. I ran the back of my hand over her cheek as she rested in Drexel's arms. I needed to hold her. I needed to have her against me, with me, where I knew she was safe.

"Please give her to me." I held out my arms.

Drexel scrutinized me for a long minute before he surrendered Lexi into my arms. Her neck fell into the crook of my elbow; our baby pressed against my chest. I walked with her to the helicopter.

"It's going to be a tight squeeze," Dr. H said as everyone began boarding behind me. He and Dr. Zhan immediately began checking Lexi's vitals, listening to her pulse and finding the baby's heartbeat.

They took out another piece of equipment. Dr. H lifted Lexi's shirt, exposing her belly. He pressed the end of a mic, attached to a wire and connected to the heart of the machine, against her stomach.

With the switch of a dial the baby's reckless heartbeat could be heard over a speaker. It sounded worse at the higher volume; so unstable. I started grinding my teeth,

trying to keep from reacting, from crumbling. Kai was dead, Lexi was unconscious and our baby was in limbo.

“This is not good.” Dr. Zhan shook his head, a grim expression on his face.

“What’s not good?” I demanded, wanting to know exactly what we were facing. My father pressed his hand over my upper arm as if to calm me.

Dr. H frowned, his brows furrowed closer together. “The baby’s heart is beating at an unsafe, accelerated and erratic pace. The baby is in distress. I’m afraid if the baby’s stats don’t mellow out soon, then we’ll be forced to deliver immediately, otherwise the baby is at risk of possible brain damage or something worse.”

“At five months?” I sucked in a deep breath, trying to force my lungs to expand, but they fought against me.

“I’m afraid so,” Dr. H’s voice was low and solemn.

Dr. Zhan rummaged in his bag and placed a mask over Lexi’s mouth and nose. He hooked the wire to an oxygen tank on his right, tucked out of the way. He turned on the machine. “We will be watching both her and the baby’s vitals closely. If the baby’s heartbeat continues at this rate for too long, then we will have to induce labor immediately, even while she’s unconscious,” Dr. Zhan said.

I heard their words, but couldn’t wrap my brain around them. Anger was blocking my receptors. I didn’t want to face the truth. I didn’t want to think about the possibilities. I clutched her tighter, rolling her onto her side and into me. I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to her head, willing her to hold on; praying that nothing happened to her or our baby, the two people I loved the most in this world.

“Stay with me, babe.”

—

Chapter Twenty-Nine

KELLAN

Doctor H's office was completely tumultuous. Everyone was demanding answers, but the doctors had shut us out.

I was surprised I hadn't worn a hole into the floor from pacing. My pulse was as erratic as Lexi's had been. I was on the edge of the cliff, teetering. This was not how it was supposed to be.

My parents were overjoyed, but their relief was clouded by a new threat. It was no longer their son at risk, but their grandchild.

Staring around the room, we had so many people who cared about us. We wouldn't have survived this long without them. But the single person who got us this far was no longer alive.

Every time I thought about it, it was like being sucker punched.

I sighed, peering through the small window in the door again. No one was in the hall, but I still heard my baby's heartbeat jumping around in the distance. It felt like someone was holding my heart in their fist, squeezing that last of the life from it.

I slammed my hands against the door, splintering the wood on the surface. As I turned back to them, they were all gazing at me helplessly. We couldn't do anything. It was up to Lexi and the doctors now.

LEXI

I groaned as I shifted. My entire body felt like it was bruised. My muscles ached.

Then, its heartbeat came into focus. My baby's heartbeat was unstable.

My eyes flew open, my hands immediately going to my stomach.

"We need you to calm down. That's the only way your baby will come out okay." Dr. Zhan petted my forearm, his eyes were compassionate, but not the eyes I wanted to see.

"We're going to keep you here for a couple hours until the baby's heartbeat regulates back to an acceptable level." Dr. H studied his clipboard of notes.

I swallowed hard. "And if it doesn't?"

He stared down at my belly before meeting my gaze, a grim expression on his face. "Then you'll be having the baby today."

"What?" My heart jumped. The baby immediately reacted and guilt slammed into my chest. I took a deep breath, trying to control my reaction for the sake of my baby. "Can it survive on the outside at this stage?"

Dr. Zhan smiled. "It is a vampire. It's stronger than you think."

I felt marginally better with his assurance. I leaned back on the bed, swaddling my stomach. It was my fault it was going through this. The one thing I had control of was my reaction, yet I'd lost it, the same way I'd lost Kai.

Tears quickly gathered, as my chest compressed and my lungs struggled to expand.

Dr. H eyed me hard. “You’re lucky to be alive. Now you need to relax and rest.” He sighed, marking something on the stack of papers in front of him. “You have a waiting room full of people storming down our doors.”

I popped my head up. “Where’s Kellan?”

“I’ll send him back. I’m serious though. Don’t work yourself up. You can break down later once your baby is in the safe zone.” Dr. H’s tone was firm.

I nodded. I didn’t know how I would choke down the overwhelming amount of emotions already swelling up inside me, but I’d do it for my baby.

They left, and a minute later Aunt Claire, Kellan, and Beth walked in.

“How are you, honey?” Aunt Claire fussed over me. Her expression changing slightly, as she took me in.

Beth stood back, watching me from a distance as Kellan immediately moved to be by my side. He brushed the stray hairs back away from my face, kissing my forehead lightly, with such meaning.

“How long have I been out?” I fidgeted beneath their heavy gazes.

“Quite a while,” Aunt Claire stated.

“You need to take it easy, sweetie.” Tears shone in Beth’s eyes as she stepped forward. “We can’t lose anyone else.”

I took her hand. I felt the telltale tightening in my chest as liquid threatened to spill from my eyes. “I don’t want to lose anyone else. I can’t.” I swallowed hard, trying to contain my anguish.

I took several deep breaths, blinking the tears away.

Two by two, they entered the room, checking on me personally. No one spoke of what had happened, the loss we were dealt. Instead, all I received were sympathetic looks that made me want to scream.

Kellan remained by my side until the doctors released us three hours later. They said tightening in my stomach or light cramping was okay, but anything stronger or anything recurring would need to be addressed immediately.

“You ready, Baby Cakes?” Drexel tried to smile, trying to keep things light and airy, but even he failed under the current circumstances.

“I got here as soon as I could,” Kalel rushed towards me as we were walking out of the doctor’s office. It was obvious he was fighting hard not to let go, struggling to be the strong, in control vampire everyone knew him as.

I reached up to touch his face, fighting against our odds, as I stared deeply into his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

He’d put up a string front. He gripped my wrist, pulling my hand towards him. He pressed a kiss to the back of my hand. “How are you holding up?”

“I think we both know.” My voice was low, strained.

He nodded. “I’ll follow you back to your place.”

“You don’t have to be there, Kalel.”

He averted his gaze for a moment before meeting mine again. “He would want me to be.”

I couldn’t argue with him. I knew Kai would want him to be. That was the hard part. I knew him too well. My heart broke again, emotions overpowering me. I breathed

deep, trying to brace myself against them. I struggled to beat them down, especially with the aftermath staring me in the face right now. Kalel was officially an orphan in this world...I couldn't help but feel guilty. Had Kai never loved me, he wouldn't be suffering this loss.

"Everything happens for a reason." Kellan hugged me to his side.

—

Chapter Thirty

Will met us in the lobby at the condo.

“How are you, lovey?” He observed me closely.

I gave him a tight-lipped smile, shrugging my shoulders.

He gazed at the ground for a moment, collecting his thoughts. He lifted his focus to Kalel before trailing back to me. “He chose this. He spoke with me about it. This was his decision, a decision that he had every right to make.”

I bit my lower lip hard as it quivered. I was so close to breaking down; so close to losing the armor I’d carefully built between me and the loss of someone I loved so immensely. “You knew?” My voice squeaked.

He frowned, shaking his head with an affirmative ‘yes.’ “It was his decision. He decided he loved you enough...”

“I can’t deal with this,” I clipped, running for the elevator.

The guys moved quickly behind me, easily catching up. I breathed hard and quick, trying to keep it all at bay. I was failing miserably though. Tears stung my eyes, threatening to fall again.

Kellan slipped his hand in mine giving it a light squeeze, assuring me that he was still there.

As we got closer to the apartment, I heard music. It momentarily distracted me from my dreariness. Drex moved in to unlock the door. As he opened the door, the music resounded loudly, flooding me, full force.

I promise you, I’m always there

When your heart is filled with sadness and despair

I'll carry you when you need a friend

You'll find my footprints in the sand

I heard the song, the lyrics floated over me, piercing my heart. I took a step into my condo and doubled over at the sight before me. Tears swiftly chased each other down my cheeks. Kellan pulled me into his protective arms, allowing me to crumble in the security of his clutch.

I sobbed. It was too much. The pain was a hollow, ache that refused to move from my chest. I felt like I couldn't breathe, like tomorrow would always be tainted without him. I always thought it was Kellan that I would feel this way with, but now I knew the pain would be even worse if it had been him. I hadn't captured it right before. I loved Kai; I loved him more than I ever admitted to myself. I could picture him so easily; every time I closed my eyes his beauty and presence haunted my mind, and a fresh set of tears fell, a novel pain rocked my core.

Kellan was silent. No one said anything. Kalel leaned in and kissed my head, running his fingers through my hair. I reached out and pulled him into me, slipping from Kellan's grip. Kalel hugged me fiercely to him.

"I'm so sorry, Kalel. I'm...I'm so...so...sorry," I cried.

"I know, sweetie. It was his choice though." He cupped my head to his chest.

And then the song started over. He had Leona Lewis' song 'Footprints in the Sand' on repeat. Kalel stood holding me for the longest time. His pain was palpable, yet he remained strong and brave.

I took several deep breaths trying to control my emotions; trying to wrap my mind around everything that was happening...trying to comprehend this reality. He was really gone. I would never see his smile; I would never breathe him in again. He wouldn't be there, pushing me into adventure or protecting me from danger. He wouldn't be there to meet my baby.

I turned away from Kalel's embrace and faced the beautiful scene before me. Open vases and jars of sand from the beach sat on every solid surface with a white orchid in the center of them. White candles were lit, casting a warm glow over the entire space.

I bit my bottom lip to stop my jaw from shaking, but ended up breaking the skin, droplets of blood dribbling into my mouth before the wound healed itself. Sitting in the middle of the island was a silver-framed photo of Kai and me from the night we'd spent with Mel. He hugged me securely, both of us smiling towards the camera; he had a hand pressed lovingly to my baby belly. His eyes sparkled with happiness. I hadn't noticed his glow the night it was taken.

Kellan came up behind me; he grabbed my hand and led me deeper into the house. With each step more tears rolled, new waves of sorrow crashed over me. For the first time as a vamp, my vision blurred, obstructing my view. A sob escaped me as I looked at the note on the nursery door.

*Congratulations Lexi and Kellan.
It's a boy, a boy I know you'll both love and treasure.
All my love,
Kai*

I felt Kellan tremble beside me. Kai gave up his life so we could both love our baby; a baby boy. Breathing was

difficult as my emotions choked me; salty tears tumbled from my eyes uncontrollably.

I glanced at Kellan. Tears rimmed his eyes; his teeth were clenched, his lips smashed together. His chest vibrated as he stared at the piece of paper taped to the nursery door. Kellan wasn't openly emotional, yet I knew we were both humbled by Kai's deed.

*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down
his life for his friends.
John 15:13*

With a shaky hand, I turned the doorknob. My hands immediately flew to cover my mouth as I caught my first glimpse of the completed nursery.

Ocean blue paint covered the walls. A dark wood crib sat against the wall opposite the door. One of the paintings of Hawaii, from Kai's bedroom, hung above the crib, spanning nearly its entire width. It was substantial and anchored the space. A beautiful, pure white crib bedding set contrasted gorgeously against the dark wood and the walls. I walked over and ran my hands along the soft fabric. A plush tan teddy bear sat in the corner of the crib. I picked it up and hugged it to me, smoothing my hands over its fur.

A white mobile hung on the end of the crib, with white stars and a moon dangling. I pressed a button and the lights reflected the moon and stars onto the ceiling as the ones hanging from silky ribbon flowed in a lazy circle; a lullaby filled the room, meshing with Leona's ballad in the background. I ran my hand over my stomach. I gasped, feeling the baby move.

"What's wrong?" Kellan was in front of me in an instant.

I smiled wide, fresh tears flowing yet again. An emotional giggle escaped me. "Nothing. He's just moving."

I grabbed Kellan's hand and placed it over my stomach where I'd felt the flutter of our baby boy. Kellan's eyes lit up in amazement as the little one kicked his legs near my belly button. As if my insides were rumbling, an incredible butterfly with strength in its moves fluttered about, delivering jagged touches to my womb. My heart swelled as the baby tumbled inside my belly; he danced about as if he was happy, as if he knew that both of his parents were there, and would always be there, to love him...thanks to Kai.

Keeping one hand on my stomach, Kellan used his other to wipe away the tears. He kissed my lips. His tenderness touched my soul; causing a new pulse of emotion to tighten in my chest.

"I love you, Lexi." His voice was a whisper over my lips.

I became lost in his emerald eyes; the realization that I'd almost lost him today hit me like a ton of bricks. I choked back my serum and labored through my breathing, as the tears continued to stream down, replacing the ones he'd just wiped away. "I love you, too." A whimper escaped me. "Oh God, Kellan. He's gone and you're here."

Kellan yanked me into him; I clung onto him as if my life depended on it. I felt Kalel move in behind me. He rubbed circles on my back. I heaved, feeling like a sensitive wreck; a useless, harrowed victim rather than a woman whose soul mate had just been spared. I hadn't realized until now just how much Kai meant to me. Life wasn't going to be the same without him; tomorrow wasn't going to be the same without him - it would never be the same without him.

I slid from the comfort both men were offering. I laid the bear back in the crib where Kai had left it and moved to the wall adjacent to the crib. I stared in awe at the window. Beautiful green curtains hung down each side, framing the window. A low, white bookcase was stationed in front of it. Several children's books sat on a few shelves along with a few toys. A dark wood and tan microfiber, gliding rocker with an ottoman was beside it; a yellow pillow with green palm trees and turtles added a pop of color to the nursery. I rested a palm on my belly, already envisioning late night feedings and then rocking the baby back to sleep in the chair.

Turning to the right, I gazed at the wall with the door on the right side of it. A tall, dark wood, five-drawer dresser was on the left. A silver lamp with a blue, green, yellow and white striped shade was set on top of the dresser. Beside the lamp was another vase with sand. Unlike the others though, this one had different types of shells on the surface of the sand.

Beside the dresser was a changing table stocked with diapers, wipes and other baby essentials. My heart skipped a beat at the TV mounted to the wall; just as Kai's did in his bedroom, it played a live feed of the sunset in Hawaii over the beach. The ocean's waves crashing against the shore created a soft lullaby throughout the room. He'd thought of everything and even had small plush crabs and turtles secured to white ribbon and hanging along the bottom of the television so when the baby was lying there, he would have something to focus on.

Feeling my emotions flaring up again, I turned away. I sighed as I looked at the wall to the left of the crib, the white closet door standing out against the blue. The baby's swing, the swing Kai had helped me pick out the day I told him the news, was angled diagonally in front of the wall,

facing towards the TV. On the wall behind it, scripted in crisp white letters was, *'Rock-a-bye my sweet baby.'*

I looked at Kalel and Kellan, both watching me apprehensively. I smiled, even as my eyes watered again. "He thought of everything." I bit my lip to hold the tears back. I swallowed hard. "He's given our baby everything."

Kalel pursed his lips, a sadness in his eyes. "You brought out the best in him, Leka. This room is proof of that." He averted his eyes, looking around the room. I knew he was thinking about him.

Kellan clapped Kalel's shoulder, standing silently beside him. I could tell he didn't know quite what to say. I saw the emotions glazing his eyes as he studied me. He flashed me a meek smile. *Why did this moment have to be so bittersweet?*

Drexel approached the door. "Are you okay, sweetie?" His hands were crammed in his pockets as he watched me closely from where he stood.

Not trusting my voice, I nodded my head 'yes.'

His gaze took in the room before coming back to me. "He did a great job; this is the room he left you, with a piece of himself in every corner."

"Yeah," I choked. "He did." I tried to smile, but ending up huffing. "Why can't I stop crying? Ugh!"

I felt Drexel envelope me. "You're pregnant, and you've just lost someone you loved. It's to be expected."

"I feel like a blubbering mess."

"At least you're a cute, blubbering mess," he chuckled lightly, kissing my forehead.

“I doubt that, but thanks.” The tears receded again, giving me time to recuperate before the next bout.

My tummy growled right as the baby kicked me again.

“Why don’t we get you something to eat?” Drexel pulled back to gauge my reaction to his suggestion.

“What do you want, babe?” Kellan asked, skimming his hand along my upper arm.

“I don’t mind going to grab something for you, if you want,” Kalel offered. I studied him. There was something in the depths of his eyes that told me he needed a reprieve.

“Um, maybe a burger with blood sauce instead of ketchup...” I puckered my lips, trying to push through my mental fog to determine what sounded best. “And fries.”

“I’ll go get it. Do you want it from any place in particular?” Kalel asked, giving me an amused grin.

“No, but thanks. Just make sure it’s good.”

He laughed. “Considering I’ve never eaten a burger, let’s hope my instincts steer me in the right direction.”

“I trust you.”

He walked through the condo towards the door. I popped up, wanting to add to the list. I flew to him. “And a milkshake, please?” I smiled up at him.

“What flavor?”

“Vanilla.” My stomach rumbled at the visualization in my mind alone.

“You got it, sweetie. Call me if you think of anything else.”

“Thanks.”

He took off, leaving me staring at the door. I took a deep breath before I turned to face the condo again. Kellan and Drexel were waiting, as if they knew I'd get emotional all over again as I caught sight of the vases, the sand, the flowers and the candles. Just at the thought, emotion wracked my body as it had the first time I came into my home since his death. Kellan caught me as I collapsed, the new bout of tears drowning me.

—

Chapter Thirty-One

My Dear Leka,

Saying good-bye to you is the hardest thing I've ever had to do. You're the best part of my life; I gave you the best part of me. You touched me in a way no one else ever has; you shattered my defenses and made me take a hard look at myself and my life. I can never thank you enough for that. You're the reason I'm the man I've become and the man I will die as today.

I feel like I should say more, yet words escape me. I can only keep thinking of how much I love you. It doesn't matter that I was never able to consummate our love; it only matters that I felt your soul on a deeper level. You're embedded in me; you gave me new life, Leka. And I know you'll continue to breathe new life into others as well.

I'm so proud of you for the strong woman, the amazing vampire you are. You take a stand when others won't. You're fighting to create the change you want to see, and not a day goes by that I'm not in awe of that; not a day goes by that I'm not in awe of you.

I'm a part of that change, Leka. I'm proof of the changes you've made, and my death will hopefully signify the changes yet to come. Don't drown yourself in sorrow, my love. Raise yourself up in hope. You still have fight in you. Together, you and Kellan can do this. I have faith in you. I'm staking my life on you and him.

You have more than me to live for. You're carrying the greatest blessing: life itself. Take care of yourself; and take care of your precious baby boy; and take care of Kellan. Treasure the ones you love, Leka, for I've always treasured you and your love.

Today, tomorrow and always, I love you, Leka. Regardless of where I am, you will always be a part of me.

Good-bye.
Kai

My tears stained the worn paper. I'd handled it so much in the course of an hour that it appeared much older. The same hollowness consumed me each time I read it; the same hollowness haunting me now.

Going into battle, you think you're prepared for the worst, yet it's never truly defined. I knew I loved Kai, but I adamantly knew I loved Kellan more. I can't help but wonder if this was merely a glimpse at the worst life could do; the ugliness of my enemies. It's no longer just my heart at risk; it's my baby's heart, it's my baby's life. I lost my father and my mother in the past year; I never want my child to feel lost like I was at times. Parents are pivotal people in your life. They're the essence of your being; you're the blending of their souls swaddled. To lose them, to lose any part of them, is to lose a part of yourself you never knew you needed.

I was bleary eyed. Kellan took the letter out of my shaking hands and set it on the coffee table. He sat down beside me on the sofa and gathered me into his arms as he'd done every time I broke down. It'd been three days since Kai's death, yet the pain was still fresh. Every time I thought of him, it was like another knife was plunged into my chest.

—

KELLAN

"Take that to the room. I've got her," Drexel said, jutting his chin towards the master bedroom.

I swallowed hard. It had been pure agony watching Lexi suffer. She was a corpse of the fiery woman I loved. I didn't realize how deep her love for Kai ran until he ceased

to exist, until he took such a big part of her with him. She ate sparingly, spending most of her time crying and listening to that same damn song.

I was shocked when I found her baking at two in the morning the other day. Tears were streaming down her face, silent sobs wracking her chest. I found it ironic that she was creating desserts that made vamps smile while she crumbled in despair. She refused to allow her business to suffer, she said.

I studied her profile. She sat, dejected, in my lap. Despite her sadness, she never looked more beautiful. Her messy hair was enchanting; her disheveled and stained clothing were endearing, much like the woman herself. Her bottom lip quivered and her chin bounced up and down, as a new wave of hurt swept her away.

“Why?” she cried, her frail body trembling. “Why, God, why? Why him? Why...” Sobs stopped her from being able to form the words she wanted to scream from the rooftops; the single question she’d painstakingly considered over and over during the last few days: *Why?*

I rubbed her belly and kissed her head, my other arm draped around her shoulders. The baby’s heartbeat sped up a few beats every time Lexi cried; he sensed her anguish. I only hoped her grief didn’t harm him somehow, not that she would knowingly let that happen.

Drexel shooed me away. I stood and he slid into my seat behind me, immediately pulling Lexi into his chest. I watched them for a few moments feeling utterly and completely helpless. I hated this feeling. I hated not having the ability to make her smile; I hated not being able to lift her spirits. Mel called me nearly every hour; Gabi called every other. Kalel had stopped by several times along with others. I could tell she was trying to snap out of it, but then

she would see something, hear something, think of something and the sorrow would drown her all over again.

I sighed, picking up the envelope off the coffee table and heading for the master bedroom. I gazed down at my name scribbled in Kai's writing. I owed the vamp a lot.

I took a deep breath before tearing open the envelope along the flap. I took out the single sheet of paper and stared at it for a long minute before I opening it.

Kellan,

We haven't always seen eye to eye, but we can both agree that we love her. She's the reason I'm doing this. I would do anything to make her happy, and to keep her happy. Seeing her son without his father would bring tears, not a smile, to her beautiful face.

Make it worth it. Love her well. Love her the way I always wished I could.

Don't allow my death to be in vain.

Good luck, my friend.

Kai

My chest tightened; my body stiffened as the significance of his sacrifice hit me. Tears stung my eyes as I thought of my baby boy without a father; as I thought of Lexi as a single mother. That's not the future I wanted for them. That's not the future they'll have.

—

GABI

I stood up, unable to remain still. It was so hard to be here in the lake house without him. A shiver ran down my spine. He was gone. He's really gone.

How could he sacrifice himself like that? How could he selflessly give himself away? That was not the man I knew, the vamp I first loved. She really had changed him. Loving Lexi was what changed Kai, not me, not Kalel; no one but her.

I loved him enough not to be selfish and hate her for it. I wished I could have had that influence on his life, on his actions.

I closed my eyes, digging deep for the first time in ages. I allowed all of my suppressed memories to surface.

“Hello, pretty lady.” His tone was charming, catching me off guard. No man took the time to charm me. I was a royal obligation; nothing more.

Not hearing a polite constraint in his voice, my body warmed. I heard the hitch in my breath as I gazed up at him. The sun radiated over his half-naked body. He was a golden god with long, dark brown hair spilling over his shoulders. No hair cluttered the view of his caramel hue, of his beautifully sculpted body of muscle; it was the same rich caramel that dripped from his voice and sparkled in his eyes.

“Hi,” I breathlessly replied, gaping up at him, like a fool I was sure.

Then he smiled and warmth singed its way down to my toes. I never realized the sun couldn’t heat me as well as a man could.

He took my hand in his, dwarfing me with his size. He lifted the back of my hand to his full lips, pressing them gently against my skin.

Electricity shot through me, awakening every sleeping part of me, every nerve, every pore, as desire pooled low in

my stomach. Never had anyone affected me this way. Never had a man wiggled past my defenses so swiftly and easily.

“Care to go for a walk with me, pretty lady?” He still held my hand securely in his. His eyes were dancing with delight as they raked over me.

I stumbled up, still staring up at him. I couldn’t believe such a man would want me over anyone he could have.

He chose me, over my self-absorbed sister, Veronica, with her gorgeous olive skin and bright blue eyes. Her breasts defied gravity, even without her corset. He chose me over Vianca, my mother’s thin, yet voluptuous maid that had the lips of a seductress and the feistiness of a bull. She pampered my mother in a lounge afar. He chose me over Audrey, our French maid who defied us all with her blonde hair, green-eyed beauty. She was incessantly fanning my sister, who grumbled about the heat and the lack of appropriate housing.

How could he choose me over all of them? Perhaps they didn’t all have wealth or knowledge, but they had what attracted a man on the surface.

Choosing to embrace the moment rather than destroy it with vulgar meandering, I took a step closer to him. He laced his fingers through mine, dropping our joined hands to rest between us.

“Voy a dar un paseo, Madre,” I mindlessly called over my shoulder.

“What is a stunning woman like yourself doing here?”

The waves crashed against the beach behind us as he guided me farther down the coast. The sun shone brightly in the sky, illuminating nature’s beauty all around us.

I glanced down at my ensemble. I'd wanted to shed several more layers, to be closer to the sun the way this golden god was, but Mother wouldn't allow it. Rather, I was in a thin dress that puffed up and around my arms and shoulders. My skirt fell in layers down to my ankles. I was forced to hold up the offending garb with my other hand as he walked with me along the sand. My only ounce of freedom in my attire was my bare feet, burying into the sand with every step.

I looked up at him and smiled. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

He met my gaze, accepting the challenge silently. "Try me, my dear."

"My father challenged our ship's captain across the Atlantic, steering us southwest rather than northwest. We crossed through a narrow canal in the center of a city before reaching another expanse of ocean. Our map did not extend this far, so we were lost.

"Rather than turn around, my father, ever the pigheaded and stubborn King that he is, said we would reach land eventually; that Christopher Columbus had assured us the world was round. Sixty-two days after we left my country's harbor, we arrived here.

"My father determined it was inhabitable, despite your rather savage looking residents, and thus, we docked," I explained. Why was I rambling? He wouldn't care about my father's narrow-mindedness.

"I must thank your father." He feasted upon me with his eyes.

I found I couldn't stand still beneath his scrutiny. I averted my gaze and traveled on.

“I must correct one item that you mentioned,” he stated, tugging gently on my hand to stop me.

I swallowed hard, turning to face him.

He met my gaze. “We are not a savage kind. We are survivors. We live off the island; surviving off all the island has to offer, including the fair lady in my arms.” His eyes twinkled with mischief.

He lowered his head beside my ear, his breath tickling my skin.

My heart leapt about in my chest, punching my lungs and making it impossible to breathe. For once, my barriers came tumbling down, every last one of them. I didn’t care who saw us.

“Do you think me savage, pretty lady?” He kissed the pulse point in my neck, sending tingles of delightful awareness throughout my virginal body. He pulled away with a knowing smile on his face.

How had he done it? How had he stolen my voice? This was not me. I was Gabriella, future queen of the Spaniards. I did not fumble or bumble around the opposite sex. I was a strong, confident woman with ambitions that surpassed most of my male subjects.

Kai spent every day with me over the next few weeks, as my father composed a trade agreement with the locals. He fed me endless amounts of the food his people survived off of, further plumping my already robust figure. He made me laugh; he made me smile. He made me a different woman; he taught me how to let go and enjoy life. He taught me that obligation didn’t mean monotony.

Alas, I was merely a toy to him. Whilst I was a toy, he was my life. It didn’t take long for him to own my heart,

only to end up shattering it.

In this moment, I realized that I loved him the way he loved her. I would have done anything for him. I rejected tradition to be with him. I accepted a commoner, a vampire, over the royalty I was promised to.

I gave up everything for him, the way he gave up everything for her.

“Damn you, Kai.” The harsh curse fell from my lips as several tears slipped down my face.

Jack entered the room from the kitchen, his eyes full of sorrow. It was a pitiful glance; it was a distressed pull, like somehow he knew what I was suffering.

I swiped at my cheeks, giving him as much of a smile as I was able.

“Oh, my love. You do not have to hide from me.” In a flash, he was beside me, tugging me into his arms.

“I loved him.” I cried openly.

He slid a finger beneath my chin, lifting my face towards him. His dark eyes shone with compassion. “You know he loved you in his own way. Perhaps not the way you wanted, but he cared.”

“I know.” I nodded. “And I hate him for never telling me,” I bit out, trying to choke back a sob.

My chest felt tight, making it hard to breathe as emotions swarmed within me. This was not the future we had envisioned. Kai, Kalel and I used to joke that we’d live to see the Earth explode. But now, I stood here a partially broken woman because my business partner, my ex-fiancé and one of my best friends was gone. My world was turned upside down. I couldn’t help but feel slightly lost.

As much as I loved Rafi, it was nothing compared to Kai.

“Ah, but your love for him is nothing compared to your love for me, *Mon Cherie*.” Jack feathered kisses across my cheeks.

I cut my eyes at him, sobering a bit. “How do you know?”

“Because you’re still standing. I have seen the torture my death would cause you. It rivals the pain Lexi is experiencing; it even rivals her rage.”

Lexi. Damn. She fought her love for Kai so much, and I knew, to an extent it was because of me. My assurance had never really settled with her. She knew my feelings for Kai had lingered.

I recalled her cry in the field. The sheer emotion of it splitting me in two; it shook the entire world with its harrowing pain.

No. I loved Kai, but not like Lexi. Her heart was larger than mine. Her heart had the capacity to love two men passionately, at the same time. Mine never did. Perhaps that’s why Rafi didn’t receive the recognition he needed from me after his death. Perhaps that was why I was still standing. I was mourning the loss of Kai, my best friend, not Kai, my lover.

I gazed up at Jack, his coffee-colored eyes searching mine. I cupped his cheeks, reveling in the color of my skin next to his. Like vanilla next to chocolate in the ice cream container, there was a deep contrast, but there was something rich and right about the flavors being married.

I brushed my lips against his. My body immediately responded to his sensual touch. It was similar to the way

Kai awakened me every morning, yet there was more substance to my relationship with Jack. He wasn't Kai. His feelings for me didn't sit on the surface. He opened his mind to me and allowed me to experience the depth of his love, a love that reached our souls and intertwined them every chance he could.

Kai, my lover, was long gone. Kai, my friend, was recently departed. Rafi, my lover and friend, was appreciated, but never loved the way he ought to have been. Jack though, he defied them all. He called to me in a way no one else did. He was right. Should he die, my world would cease to turn. Air would escape me and never return. I would be the broken hearted clump that Lexi had become.

Poor Lexi. Her heart was too broken. She was so focused on the half of her heart that was missing that she wasn't seeing the half of it that was still in tact; she ignored the fact that she still had Kellan, the way I had Jack.

Jack slid his fingers into my loose hair, deepening our connection, intensifying our kiss. He never ceased to open my eyes, carrying me to new heights. The same way that he touched me physically, he managed to touch me spiritually, a far less accessible side of me.

I was lucky to still have him. I lost some a part of me with Kai's death, but I didn't lose everything the way I would have if it had been Jack.

I love you, Kai. I'm angry that you left the way you did, unannounced, but grateful that you experienced love the way everyone ought to before they pass. You learned what it was like to be loved and, finally, to love.

Chapter Thirty-Two

KALEL

I mashed my lips together as I looked around Kai's condo. It had an ultra-modern design with a light, airy feel. Paintings of our home island hung on the walls; the depicted mountains and shorelines were the only color in the otherwise neutral pallet. Oversized pieces of coral stood tall in shiny white vases rising up from the floor. Shells from the shores of our Hawaiian home sat sparingly atop the sleek surfaces.

Every piece in his home had meaning. He treasured our heritage. Though he lived most of his days thousands of miles away, he kept it close. I knew if I turned on the TV, it would give me a live feed of the Hawaiian shores.

I collapsed on the white leather sofa. I closed my eyes, holding back the tears that threatened. How could he leave me like this? Why didn't he tell me about his plans? Why did he have to be so single-minded, so dedicated to her?

Francesca sat in my lap. She swept a soft hand across my forehead and down my face. She'd been so worried about me. Strain still showed in her features. Her eyes were vast fields of despair. She didn't know my brother well, but she suffered the loss through me, with me.

"Eat, please." The plea in her voice, heavy with her Russian accent, was almost enough to break me.

I gazed into her green eyes, lost in the darkness that was stealing their brilliance.

Abruptly, I looked away. "I'm not hungry."

“Kalel.” Her voice was strong, demanding my attention as she touched my face. A fire burned in her eyes, the smoke disappearing into their depths. “Do not make me lose you too. Your brother would not want you to stop living.”

How could I live with this black hole in my chest? How could I carry on as if he never existed? I couldn't. He was embedded in me. I was still waiting to argue with his reckless abandon. I was still waiting for him to fall through the door, having done something that I didn't agree with. I didn't realize how much my life revolved around him. I never realized how much our lives were enmeshed. He was my brother, my business partner, my best friend. He was everything to me.

Francesca filled the void in many ways, but she would never be Kai. I was facing each new day because of her, because of her insistent strength, but I wasn't living. I merely existed.

Kai stole the last of my humanity, the last of my drive with his death. How could he be so selfish?

Damn it! Even as I thought it, I knew that wasn't the truth. He'd done a selfless thing. He'd given up his life for one of my close friends, Kellan. Kellan wasn't perfect, but he'd impressed me. He had so much potential yet to be uncovered. I just wished my brother didn't have to sacrifice himself for that to be realized.

Francesca kissed my forehead. “He sacrificed much, Kalel. I do not believe he did it to spite anyone. Rather, he acted with his heart. You must be proud that he acted with his heart for once.”

I was, but it wasn't enough. That didn't comfort the piercing pain inside me.

“You must look at his death with pride, not sorrow. He learned the lesson of this lifetime: that love is worth more than life. You cannot be angry with him for that. You cannot *sklúčený okolo* forever. He would rile you for such weakness, and my Kalel is strong. You are much stronger than this.”

My heart fluttered, my soul lifting at her words. She was right. *She usually was.* In this moment, she was more than my soul mate; she was my savior. Had I not had her love, I didn't know where I would be. I would have sunk into a dark abyss, allowing all we worked to create to die with him.

“Come, my love. We will eat and drink in your brother's honor. We will celebrate his sacrifice rather than mourn his death.” She gazed at me with hope in her eyes. The inflection of her voice told me she was hoping that I would concede.

I couldn't let her down. My wounds were soul deep. There would be no letting go of him at any time. There would be no getting over his choice. But I could pretend for her; I could try for her. For Francesca...and for Leka.

I could never reveal the depths of my pain. I could never unleash my anger on them for his action. I would have to bury it all with him, deep down inside. I couldn't allow them to suffer anymore than they already were.

No, I would face tomorrow without him because I had to, because as a warrior, we never stopped fighting because another soldier fell. Rather, we pressed onwards, fighting harder in their honor. We championed together to avenge their death, to praise their sacrifice, to make it worth the suffering, worth the pain to all who knew them.

Vampire or not, they would know my wrath. Those closest to me would never witness it though. I would leave the worst of me on the field, and give the best of me to those at home. Kai would want me to take care of those at home, especially Leka.

—

LEXI

I padded out to the kitchen, the iPod blasting Beyonce's *I Was Here* in my ears. Over the course of the past week, I'd slowly tried to switch to uplifting music, positive things that wouldn't make me remember how he died, but why he chose to die.

It wasn't easy leaving him behind, compartmentalizing that part of my past. Kai was a much larger part of me, of my life than I realized, than I recognized and accepted. He did so much for me, and then...

Tears burned my dry eyes. I'd cried far too much over the past week, it seemed like enough tears to fill the Atlantic Ocean. But I couldn't hold back. The agonizing hollowness in me returned with a vengeance. It was a pain that carved out my soul, dismembered my spirit and left me a shell of a person, merely a mold of who I used to be.

Damn it, Kai!

I slid down the kitchen cabinets, trying to suppress my sobs, trying to silence them as not to prompt Kellan, Drex or Sanders to come for me. I jerked the buds from my ears and tossed them aside, feeling desperate.

My lungs refused to expand, forcing me to gasp for air. The moment the sharp inhalation sounded, both bedroom doors opened.

I pressed my face into my hands and pushed them into my knees the best I could around my belly. Now that they knew I was out here crying though, I didn't bother to try and hold back. I allowed it to pour from me, as frantic as I felt. It seems like my entire world had been shaken and stirred. I had no control over any aspect of it; at least it felt that way.

I heard Kellan inhale deeply, sharply, exasperatedly, as he entered the kitchen. When all three men stopped their approach, I knew they were silently communicating about me, above me.

Finally, Kellan closed the distance between us. His hand slid between my arms and my face, his fingers resting beneath my chin. He pushed up, forcing me to face him.

"Lexi." His voice was low and carried a hard plea. The tears fell openly as I looked into his eyes. I was surprised to find a tough glint in them. His sigh was conflicting, both defeated and determined. "We've been coddling you, giving you time to heal, but you can't cry forever. You've got to pull it together for me, for yourself, for our baby." It didn't matter that his voice was soft, his tone was firm.

"Fucking idiot," Drexel whispered, growling under his breath.

I was slightly stunned. I knew my tears began to slow as I stared back into his earnest eyes. He really believed it was that easy. He really thought that I was being dramatic, drawing it out on purpose.

My upset morphed into anger. I mashed my lips together, swallowing the serum as it reached higher in my throat. I felt it coursing through my veins before Kellan jerked his hand away. I leaned onto the cabinets, using them as leverage to stand.

“Shit,” Sanders’ word was a bark. They knew what Kellan had done, even when he didn’t.

Tears continued to burn the back of my eyes as I faced him. They said that a tragedy would either push a couple together, make them stronger, or it would destroy them. The darkness inside me grew as I was forced to face the truth.

Kellan seemed confused as I glared at him. His eyes traveled up and down my body, illuminated by anger. I felt threatened, or else I wouldn’t have lit up. I felt overwhelmed and uncertain, or else I wouldn’t have lit up. Your soul mate, the love of your life, was supposed to comfort you in times of sorrow, and was supposed to support you, hold you up, when you couldn’t hold yourself up. He was supposed to be the yin to my yang, keeping me perfectly balanced. He was supposed to be so much more.

Maybe that was my mistake though. I loved Kellan as he was, but still expected more from him. I couldn’t expect him to change. You can’t force change. He had to want to change. He had to want to be different. And as much as he said he wanted to be, it was obvious by his actions he wasn’t ready.

The problem was that I was ready for change. Kai made me realize that even though I was immortal, my days were still numbered. I didn’t want to spend them with someone who didn’t appreciate me, who didn’t understand me. Kellan had comforted me and been there for me, but that was during the aftermath, when the shock was fresh, when the knowledge of what he almost lost was fresh. Now, now he’d snapped.

I didn’t deserve to have my character questioned. Who drew out sorrow? Who wanted to live a pity party for the rest of their life? In truth, I wanted them to just leave me

alone. Let me grieve in peace. Let me be. Let me let go of Kai in my own way, on my own terms.

I knew Kellan saw the fire blazing in my eyes as I speared him with my eyes. “Go,” I clipped.

“Lexi, think about this, babe. You’re just a little emotional. I’m only...”

“Go! I don’t want an asshole for a fiancé. I don’t want someone who insinuates that I’m crying for attention rather than from a broken heart. I don’t want someone who’s going to yell at me, who’s going to treat me less than how I deserve to be treated. I love you.” The tears welled, front and center, but I pushed forward. “God, I love you, but you clearly can’t handle that love. Everyone was right. You really are too immature for love. Your head is stuck so far up your own ass you can’t even recognize the obvious pain in my eyes. You don’t see anything you don’t want to see, Kellan, and I’m done.

“I’m done trying to open your eyes. I’m done trying to excuse your behavior. Everyone has something in their past to regret, everyone has some sort of hang-up. You’re no exception, and I refuse to be your exception to the golden rule of treating others the way you want to be treated. If you can’t love me through this, then I don’t want your love when I’m through this.”

My hands shook as tears trailed down my face. I struggled to tug the ring off my finger. Noticing I was still glowing, I set it on the counter. “Please go. Baby or not, I’m done, Kellan.”

I couldn’t even look at him as I moved past him, heading straight for the bedroom. The tremors got worse as I closed the door, Beyonce still sounding from the iPod on the floor in the kitchen.

My flesh was numb as I slid down the door, barely feeling the shock spark me when I brushed up against the doorknob. My outside was anesthetized, but my inside was swirling with potent emotions that had my body shutting down, my spirit wilting, my heart pounding, bordering on a human heart attack. My pulse thundered, echoing in my ears as I fought for air.

Too much was escaping me though. Air kept whooshing out, taking vital pieces of me with it. I heard the blood rushing through my veins, I felt the pounding of my heart against my chest wall, I felt my lungs expanding, sending much needed oxygen to the baby, but I didn't feel right. My body was only functioning out of necessity. I was reacting; my body was reacting to the feelings I couldn't even name.

I felt everything inside me moving, yet I felt so empty, as if nothing should be left.

I didn't know how much time passed before exhaustion seeped into my limbs. My heart slowed, my pulse quieted as I lay, curled on my side, on the cold floor. The cool, hard surface was the only thing that assured me I hadn't died, that I was still physically here.

My thoughts began to slow; the pain that brought me to my knees so often was receding, disappearing briefly under the cloud of fatigue. I wrapped my arms around my belly, cradling my unborn baby boy the only way I could and apologizing the best I could, silently.

My eyelids fell, the weight of them making it impossible to open them. With my eyes closed and my body tired and worn, I was able to let go; I was forced to let go. And, for the first time in a week, calm washed over me. And if I tried hard enough, I could almost sense Kai cuddling me, comforting me from beyond. Peace. He was offering me

peace in the midst of the storm. God, I missed him so much!

—

Chapter Thirty-Three

KELLAN

I pounded on Craig's door. When the door jerked open, I saw the shock on his face for a split second before I pushed past him entering his condo.

I scrubbed my face with one hand, tugging on my roots with the other. I couldn't fucking calm down. I'd finally done it.

I'd been a fucking idiot. I could put two and two together. Judging by Lexi's words, the looks I'd received over the past week finally made sense. Everyone thought it really should have been me to die. Kai's sacrifice seemed to highlight all of my flaws. People seemed capable of judging me openly now that I'd narrowly escaped fate, now that someone else had sacrificed in my place.

They acted as if I chose this.

I sighed, the fight leaving me. I was done being angry. Anger did nothing but destroy the ones closest to me. Anger got me in trouble. Anger ruined me as a man and made me a sloppy vamp.

"Why the blunder, mate?" Craig eyed me with concern and compassion. He and my parents were the only ones still offering me a bit of respect.

I threw down the ring on his coffee table, the truth of its possession saying what I couldn't. Seeing it there between us stirred up everything I'd struggled to bury on my way here.

I glowered at the ring. How could a single item hold so much meaning? Emotions boiled inside me, rapidly rising to the surface. I focused on trying to keep them down, on trying to hold back all that was on the verge of erupting from within me.

It wasn't working though.

My chest constricted as tears stung my eyes. The moment I recognized their presence, the red drops were already sliding down my cheeks. *Fuck!*

It was finally hitting me. I hated their looks because it was how I'd come to look at myself lately. I knew my mistakes better than anyone. I knew better than all of them how little I deserved her; how I didn't deserve his sacrifice either. Her words today proved it.

"Ah, fuck, mate." Craig threw his arms around me.

I crumbled, unable to hold back. I threw my arms around him, squeezing him to me. Maybe it should have been me that died. Fate had a reason for everything; escaping it didn't change its intentions, the harrowing honesty of it. As much as I hated to admit it, he had treated her well. He'd treated her better than I did.

Fuck. How could you so easily destroy the person you loved the most? Why was it so easy to lash out at her? Why did I hurt her instead of a stranger? Why did I unleash my darkness on the purest light in my life? God, I was so fucked up. I'd completely bashed her love. I'd stomped on it every time I yelled at her. I'd stabbed her heart with a sharp knife every time I kept something from her. I'd been such a bastard.

She wasn't perfect. She'd made her fair share of mistakes, particularly with Kai. But I couldn't blame her. I

would run to him too, especially after I treated her like she was an afterthought.

I trembled in Craig's tight grasp as the aftermath of my destruction settled over me. I'd taken a once strong vampeen and reduced her to an insecure little girl. My anger, my lack of control, had done that.

Sobs heaved from within me. My lungs struggled to expand under the weight of my past, under the weight of all I'd been gambling. Why the fuck wasn't I thinking? How could I risk her like that? How could I treat her like trash and then expect her to love me the same, to not run to him?

Just as I had scars from my past, she had scars from me. Only hers went deeper than pride. Her kissing Kai only hurt my pride as her man, as the one she'd ultimately chosen. My outbursts reduced her, my rugged clips dug into her; they sent her crawling back into her human shell, questioning herself, questioning her worth.

Worse, I did it while she was pregnant. I did it to her while she was carrying my child. She was doing the most selfless act, showing me the greatness of her love in creating and nurturing a baby with me, but I threw it in her face. *Fuck*. I was in deep. I'd really messed up this time, and for once, I didn't know if she would forgive me.

My actions had finally caught up with me. My past had finally taken a chunk out of my present. I was going to lose the only one who ever accepted me as I was. I was going to lose my reason for living. I was going to lose everything I wanted in life, but had been too ignorant and stupid to appreciate.

"I've lost her, man," I cried.

"You gubbed it up, mate. But she loves you. Her pitter won't patter without you. You got to have faith. You got to

bend down and have faith in her love for you.” He patted my back, pulling back to look me in the eye. “Stop blubbering like a doll and grow a pair, mate. She doesn’t want a schlep; she wants the man she knows you are. The girl looks at you like you’re a slicken god. Give her time, and then bop her flippers off. You got this, Kel.”

I swallowed hard, trying to suppress my harsh emotions. I knew he was right. I knew I needed to just give her time and then go in swinging. I’d have to leave everything on the table and prove to her that I was still worth something. I couldn’t lose her, because if I lost her, then I lost my son too. The *idea* of losing them brought me to my knees, but actually losing them for good would be the stake to my heart that killed me; her back would burn in my consciousness as she walked away.

—

LEXI

I stretched, immediately feeling my baby boy moving inside me. I smiled, bringing my hands down over him.

I opened my eyes, surprised to find Drexel in the bed beside me. My smile slipped as all that had happened came rushing back to me.

His brows dipped as he stared at me, taking in every emotion that crossed my face.

Given his presence, I knew. But I had to ask. “He didn’t come back, did he?”

“Sorry, sweetie.”

I took a deep breath, slowly blowing it out. I nodded. “Okay.”

“You’ve got us though.” Sanders hugged me from behind.

I jumped. These two really had worked in special ops. I didn’t even realize he was there. I didn’t hear him breathing, didn’t feel his presence. It was as if he sprang from nowhere.

I chuckled lightly, over my initial shock. “No offense but you two can’t give me what I need.”

Sanders released me. Drexel kept his eyes intently focused on me. They may be lying in a bed, but they were still on the job.

“I’m going to take care of my orders for the day then shower.” And just like that the memory swam into focus. I could easily envision Kai, Drexel and Sanders sitting at the barstools, eating their cherry pies.

Tears pooled in my eyes as I recalled the big smile on Kai’s face when he set down his spoon. He had a look of appreciation; the sparkle in his eyes said he enjoyed every bite. And for just one moment, he seemed free. He wasn’t bogged down by the weight of his responsibilities; he wasn’t a worried friend. He was Kai: a carefree, charismatic, surfer boy from Hawaii.

I ran my teeth across my bottom lip, trying to keep the tears where they were, but lost the battle. I would never see that look again. I would never see his smile again. I would never feel his arms wrapped around me or his lips pressed to mine. He was really gone.

And now Kellan was gone too. *God*. How had I lost them both?

“Hey.” Drexel’s voice was soft as he used the pads of his thumbs to chase away my tears.

I laughed a humorless laugh. "I'm so tired of crying." I pinched my forehead. "I don't want to cry anymore. I just want the pain to go away."

The guys wrapped their arms around me, cradling me from both sides. They didn't say anything. They just held me. They were there, the way Kai was always there; the way Kellan used to be there.

"I feel like a blubbering whale."

"You're not, baby girl. I promise you're not." Sanders kissed my temple.

I took a deep breath as Drexel caressed my cheek with one hand. "I need to do something. Kellan may have had bad delivery, but he was right. I can't wallow forever."

"Don't let him get to you. Everyone grieves in their own way, on their own timeline. Never let anyone rush you through it or else you'll just bury it rather than face with it." Drexel's face was solemn as he regarded me.

I gazed into his eyes, reading between the lines. "I'll remember that."

I swallowed hard, fearing my serum would rise at any moment. I fidgeted as I looked around the room. Anxiety rushed my pulse. "I'm sorry, guys, but I have to get up and do something."

They immediately got up off the bed. Cold air kissed my skin, making me miss the company I'd dismissed, the present, ex and dead ones.

They watched me closely as I slid to the edge and moved off the bed. No sooner had I stood than a knock sounded on the front door.

"I'll get it," Sanders and Drex said in unison.

I frowned, eyeing them both. A sinking feeling settled in my gut. As great as they both had been, they were clearly uncomfortable with their new positions in my life.

“I’ll get it,” Sanders stated, escaping quickly.

I gave Drexel a wistful smile. “You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to. I’m not going to fall apart without someone.”

“Are you sure about that?” His tone carried a biting edge.

I considered him for a moment. “Will I break down and cry from time to time? Yes. But I’m not going to shatter into a million pieces.”

The bedroom door flew open. A second later I was being squeezed by two sets of arms.

“Why didn’t you tell me what happened with Kellan? You know I would have come right away,” Mel blurted.

“It should be obvious why she didn’t tell us. Her eyes are still red and puffy. For a vamp, that means she was crying up until a few minutes ago,” Gabi said.

“I’m okay, really.”

They both pulled back and gave me the same look. They clearly didn’t believe me.

Gabi frowned. “I know you have to be hurting, *chica*.”

I shuffled beneath their knowing glances. Why was I so easy to read at the worst times, the times when I really wanted to hide my feelings?

“Come on, Lex. We’re doing a spa day. You deserve to be pampered, and all the girl talk will distract you from

what's going on." Mel grabbed my hand and turned me towards the door.

"Wait. How did you two find out?"

Mel blushed, giving her shoulders a light shrug. "Kellan showed up at Craig's."

"Oh. Of course." Well, at least I knew where he went. A small weight lifted off my chest knowing Kellan wasn't out doing something stupid; too bad the tiny bit of breathing room was immediately crushed by a mountain of longing. I missed him. I missed both of them.

"Oh, Lex." Gabi's eyes softened as she took me in. "Why don't we order pizza and watch on-demand movies here instead?"

"Um, yeah. That would be good. I'm sure I have a list of orders to complete."

"No, you don't. Jack shut you down."

"What?" My eyes widened as I waited for a good explanation to follow. After all that had happened, it seemed like my business was all I had left at times. It kept me grounded, forced me to get up and do something every day.

"Lex, please don't argue with me. It's for your own good." She placed a hand on her hip and leaned into me a bit. "You've been through a lot lately. You lost two men you loved in the same week. You have a baby on the way. You're running an army and meanwhile have another army after you. You're not superwoman or supervamp or whatever the hell you want to think you are. You need to take care of yourself. Kai would have wanted you to take care of yourself." She inhaled deep, as if to reset herself. "So I had Jack post a note for your customers saying you were going

on hiatus for the next six months. That gives you time to get your life together, have your baby and hopefully fix things with Kellan.”

I couldn't argue with her. I knew deep down that she was right. I guess I felt like I was failing in so many other parts of my life, that by taking a step back, I'd be letting everyone down again; I'd be failing again.

I thought about Kellan. God, I missed him. I had this ache in my chest that didn't lessen; rather, it worsened as each minute ticked by without him. But what kind of example would I be setting for my son if I accepted his outbursts? What did it say about me when he yelled at me in front of someone and I said nothing? What did it say about *us* when he didn't take my feelings into consideration before he spoke, before he acted?

“As hurt as I am, and as much as I miss him, I don't know if getting back together with Kellan is the best thing for me right now.” Saying the words aloud cemented them in my mind. It was out there. My doubts were on the table.

I felt Drexel's hand on my shoulder. “I'll be in my room, Baby Cakes.” He kissed my head before walking out.

I faced Mel and Gabi. Their expressions were identical. Stricken. That's what they were. They couldn't believe I'd actually said that.

“I think you should probably give it some time. You're pregnant; you just lost someone close to you. You're not yourself.” I could tell Mel was trying to explain away my answer. Based on the fear in her eyes, I knew she was afraid that me and Kellan not working out meant her and Craig wouldn't either.

“We can't tell you what to do, but don't close any doors just yet, okay?” Gabi's gaze was wistful, hopeful.

I shook my head in agreement. I had my doubts, but that didn't mean I'd let go of my faith.

"Let's stop thinking about this stuff for now. I'm hungry, and I could definitely use a mental break." Mel tugged Gabi and me towards the living room.

At the sight of the closed nursery door I stopped. Happy thoughts and memories of Kai assaulted me. I smiled thoughtfully, rubbing my belly. "It's a boy!"

They both smiled wide. "Holy sugar plums! I've been waiting for this moment! Now I can start buying." Mel jumped for joy.

"Same here. O.M.G. This is so exciting, Lex! Wait until Jack hears, he'll be having a nephew. Believe it or not, the guy is stoked to have a baby in the family." Gabi grabbed Mel's hand, shaking it with the same excitement.

"Speaking of family, how is Imara? I haven't heard from her."

"Oh, she's around." There was something in Gabi's eyes that struck a cord with me.

Imara was up to something. And it involved me.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

LEXI

It'd been three days since I'd last seen Kellan. I thought time would make it easier, as with Kai, but it only grew harder. Everything reminded me of one of them.

I was pushing past it today to focus on a meeting with...I sighed. It would be hard to see the Bladangs, minus Kai, today.

Heading into my closet, I got lost in reminiscing about my shopping trip with Kai for a moment. I remembered how great he was, how complimentary he was that whole day. He'd coaxed me through my hesitation. He'd been amazing.

I grabbed a short-sleeved, cream turtleneck and the navy blue cotton maxi dress Kai had loved on me. It had a deep-V front with wide shoulder straps and an empire waist design.

I quickly changed and pulled my hair into a tight knot on top of my head. Stud earrings, the gold bird necklace Kai insisted looked great with the dress, and a pair of gold ballet flats completed my ensemble.

I stuffed my phone in my teal Nine West purse and headed for the door.

Drexel immediately fell into step behind me. "I'll drive."

"Thanks."

As we stepped out into the cool October air, my chest expanded briefly. Gabi had been right. I hadn't realized how

stressful running the business had been while trying to manage everything else. It wasn't always easy, but sometimes letting go was necessary.

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The conference room was ready when we arrived at the vamp army headquarters. I had my checkup appointment with Dr. H scheduled immediately after since he would be doing rounds at the army's offices.

I was immediately pulled back every time to when Rashik was still missing and I was staring out at my dedicated team. We'd been lucky not to lose anyone in the big battle.

Kalel and Gabi gazed at me across the table. Kalel had brown eyes of steel today. I could tell he was still holding everything in. It wasn't right, but it wasn't my place to govern anyone's grieving process.

"Auggy is out looking for Javier with his team, so I wanted to pull you two together to see if one of you would send a Bladang representative with me."

"Where?" Kalel angled his head, observing me.

"I know where Cecilia is."

He bristled, his eyes narrowing on me. "And you're going alone?"

"No, well yes, but no." I fidgeted with my hands in my lap. "I'm taking Drex as the representative of the vamp army, I'll represent the vampeen army and I wanted one Bladang soldier to represent you. I'm going to try to talk to her."

"You see exactly where talking got Kellan and you want to take the same path, the path that killed my

brother?" he snarled, his eyes changing to black. The vein at his neck bulging out.

I tried to fight the onslaught of memories, but they were relentless. I slipped beneath the weight of Kai's death too fast. Tears welled before I could brace myself against them. I took several deep breaths before meeting his gaze. "It's because of Kai that I'm doing this Kalel. No one else can die. We can't let this continue."

Gabi sat primly at the table. She hadn't spoken. She'd been watching me the entire time though.

"You're not a miracle worker, Leka."

I glanced down at the table. "I know." Had I been a miracle worker, Kai would still be alive and I'd still be with Kellan.

"We'll send Christian with you. But Lex..." I lifted my eyes to meet her gaze. She frowned as she stood up, apparently ready for the meeting to end. "Be careful. I can't handle another major loss. I don't think anyone is prepared for that."

"You can't be serious," Kalel snapped as Gabi headed for the door.

"*Dead* serious." She walked out the door.

"He wouldn't have allowed this. You know that." He looked down at me.

"Yeah, well, I'm single now, so I don't have to answer to anyone."

Kalel froze. His focus immediately went to my left hand. He closed his eyes, sighing as he leaned back. "I'm sorry," he said. As he opened his eyes, there was genuine, empathetic sorrow.

“Don’t be. I’m better off alone than with someone who makes me out to be a dramatic diva.”

“I doubt he meant to, Leka.” His voice was soft, careful.

I smiled wistfully. “It seems I don’t know him at all anymore. At times I get a glimpse of a level-headed, loving fiancé who would do anything to protect me and our son, but at other times, the darkness in him surfaces and I don’t know who I’m with anymore or how he will react. I can’t walk around on eggshells forever. I don’t want my baby growing up in that kind of household.”

“I didn’t realize it was that bad.”

“It’d gotten better after...” I stopped, unable to say it aloud. “But about a week later, he sort of snapped at me at an emotional point and I finally snapped back. I gave him back the ring and he took it and ran off.”

He scrutinized me for a minute. “Are you sure you’re up for this mission? She’s going to sense your weakness the moment you walk in the door.”

“I’m hoping to reason with her, not fight with her. I’m taking Kalia with me.”

A single brow rose. “Why?”

“At worst, we can use her as leverage. At best, we’ve made a good faith gesture.”

He shook his head in understanding. “How are you getting there?”

“Plane and then on foot.”

“Do you need me to come back you up?”

I gazed at him for a while. He reminded me of Kai sometimes. He didn't have long hair, but they had the same brown eyes, the same tan hue to their skin, the same gentle gaze at times when they looked at me. "No, thanks. You need to work on yourself right now."

His features twisted slightly before he got a grip on his emotions. "Call me if you need anything." He stood to leave.

I nodded. "I will, thanks." I glanced at my hands still fidgeting in my lap. As Kalel headed for the door, I whispered, "I miss him, you know."

He paused in front of the door, his head bowed in remembrance. "I know," he conceded before he walked out.

As the door closed, my emotions choked me. Tears stung my eyes, nausea rolling my stomach. I blinked repetitively, refusing to cry again. I couldn't keep crying. It wasn't going to bring either of them back. It did nothing but drain me. I knew it was ridding me of the emotions I no longer needed to hold onto, but it was too much for me. Maybe I wasn't ready to let go.

A knock sounded on the door before Derek walked in. "Hey, *primo*."

I plastered a smile on my face, as I turned towards him. "Hi."

He frowned immediately. "Don't pull that fake crap with me."

I stiffened. Maybe taking him wasn't a good idea. I could probably find the property without him. I'd thought about calling Al, but with Kellan and me no longer together, I didn't feel right asking him.

He studied me until I squirmed in my seat. “Listen, I don’t want to talk about it, but I don’t do fake. Be straight with me or we’re done.”

“Fine, I’ll put on my sad face and offend you with my general moodiness.”

“You can try.” He shrugged, collapsing in a chair.

“You’ve had a rough past, haven’t you?”

His expression hardened. He clenched his jaw. “Like I said, I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Alright, then I don’t want to talk about my own reasons.”

“I’m good with that.”

My expression turned sullen. “Is this how it’s always going to be with us? Related, but never close?”

He leaned onto the table, his black t-shirt falling away from his body a bit. “Listen, Lex, I don’t bond with people, I don’t do relationships, I don’t do feelings. It’s nothing personal; it’s just me.”

“Alright.” I guess I had to accept the fact that my aspirations weren’t always going to match up with everybody else's.

“Now, I’m assuming you brought me here for more than a meet and greet, though that was sweet.”

My brows furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“When they found out I was your cousin, they started introducing themselves like mad. Seems you’re a golden ticket in this place, *primo*.”

His connotation didn't sit well with me. "Please don't use me like that. I'll never deny our relation, but don't use it in a negative way."

His gaze dropped down to my baby bump. "Are all pregnant women as sensitive as you?"

"I resent that, mister," I growled.

He snickered. "I'll take that as a yes. Before you get your nursing bra in a bunch though, I meant it as a compliment. They wouldn't regard me the same without your name, which means you've earned their respect."

"Apology accepted. Now can we focus on why I did bring you here? I need a favor."

He arched his brow, an amused smirk on his face. "You're giving me shit and all the while you want something from me? Ironic, isn't it."

I glared at him, pinching my lips together.

He held up his hands. "Alright. I'll hear you out."

I took a deep breath, steeling myself. Derek was clearly a big question mark; he was unpredictable thus far. "I need you to take me - or at least give me directions - to Cecilia's."

He pursed his lips, mulling for a while. His gaze had hardened, but the smirk was still firmly in place, as if he was teasing me. "Alright. But if I get dartered one more time, I'm never speaking to you again."

It was my turn to laugh. I was finally beginning to understand Derek. He put up massive walls around himself for protection. He'd clearly been hurt, and if I had to guess, it was by someone close to him. "You like me. Otherwise,

you wouldn't be here and you certainly wouldn't consider helping me."

"I admit nothing." His eyes sparkled with humor. And like that, one of his barriers seemed to crumble in front of me. "When are we leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

His expression grew solemn. "I expect a private jet and five-star accommodations."

"That'll happen the day hell freezes over."

There was a dark glint in his eyes. "I'm a dangerous man; I never back down from a challenge. I also have a way of making the impossible happen."

"No private planes unless it's necessary and *I* don't even stay at five-star hotels so you can get over that one," I firmly stated.

"I'm definitely chalking that one up to the preggo hormones."

What was up with everyone making me out to be this emotional basket case of a pregnant woman who goes from one extreme to the next? Sure, I'd cried a lot lately, but I had a reason to. "You're on thin ice, buddy." I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Alright. I'll lay off." He sat up in his seat. "What time tomorrow and where?"

"Where are you staying?"

He shrugged. "Around."

I frowned. How crappy would I feel if I found out that he'd been on the streets...?

“I’m not slumming it, alright. I’m not hurting financially, but I’m not loaded either. I can afford a few nights in a room, no problem.” His saucy attitude was back. It was definitely a defense mechanism.

“I could use some company aside from Drex.” I decided to throw it out there.

“Where’s your boy toy?”

“Boy toy?” My face twisted in reaction to the humor of his wording.

“Boy toy. Fiancé. Whatever.” He shrugged.

I grew solemn, averting my gaze. My gut twisted as I thought of Kellan. “We broke up.”

“Oh shit.” His response was a surprised gasp.

“Yeah, so, if you want to come around, come around. If not, I’ll see you tomorrow morning at 7am at Charleston International Airport.”

I stood, grabbing my purse out of the chair beside me. The baby decided to move at that very moment. I glanced downwards. I couldn’t help but smile at seeing his strong movements rippling my dress. I didn’t have Kellan or Kai, but I had my baby boy. That’s all that mattered.

“I’ll see you later tonight, *primo*.”

I looked at him. His features had softened. He didn’t exactly exude compassion, but there was something in the depths of his eyes that had wilted the hardness of him.

I flashed a reserved smile. “See you later.”

—

Chapter Thirty-Five

KELLAN

I knocked on their door rather than barging in. I knew I was welcome, but I was coming to them for something. I didn't feel right walking in and asking them for help as if I expected it.

Her ring burned a hole in my pocket. Its weight seemed to tug every part of me down; it was an anchor pulling my spirit, a chain squeezing my heart.

"Kellan?" My mother frowned as she looked at me. "Why didn't you just come in?"

I shrugged.

She cocked her head, her keen eyes seeing what no one else would. "What happened?" She grabbed my arm and pulled me inside, closing the door behind me.

"Is Dad here?" I didn't hear him.

"In here, son," he called out.

We moved into the kitchen, surrounding the island, just as we had the night Lexi told us she was pregnant. The memory was so vivid. I could still picture her fidgeting; I could still hear her heart pounding in fear, fear that I'd leave her or screw it up somehow...which I did.

I pulled the ring out of my pocket and set it on the island between us all. It said what I hadn't been able to tell anyone.

"Oh, sweetie." She yanked me into her arms, hugging me. Even though I towered above her, even though I was

technically an adult, she somehow knew how to bring me to a child's level and comfort me. Her warmth surrounded me.

When she finally released me, I felt marginally better... until I saw the ring. It reminded me of all I'd lost. I didn't just lose Lexi; I'd lost my son too. I frowned. I hadn't even told them.

I swallowed hard, meeting their concerned faces. "It's a boy."

My dad smiled cheerlessly. "Congratulations."

Tears welled in my mother's eyes. "What happened, Kellan?"

My chest tightened. Somehow telling them the truth seemed like the hardest thing. I'd disappointed them so many times; I knew I was doing it again. "I messed up."

"Talk to us, son." Al placed an arm around my mom's shoulders.

I turned away from them, unable to look at their faces as I confessed my sins to the angels. "I have anger issues. I don't deal with things. I'm impulsive. Those three things collide sometimes. I've lashed out at her."

My mother gasped.

My throat seemed to swell as my gut twisted. "I swear I'm bi-polar sometimes. I can't seem to control it. I've done it in front of others; I have no filter." I shoved my hands in my jean pockets. "The final straw wasn't that bad compared to other times before. I guess it'd been building inside her too."

"What happened?" My mother pressed.

“She was crying over Kai, *again*. She’d been crying all week. I’d been good with her, patient for once. We’d all been sensitive to her feelings. But she just seemed like a zombie. She wasn’t herself. I wanted the old Lexi back. I snapped, sort of.” I shifted, knowing I needed to face them. I took a moment to gather my courage before turning back to them. I couldn't look directly into their eyes, not brave enough to face the disappointment I knew I would find there. “I told her she needed to pull herself together for me and the baby; that she couldn’t cry forever. I guess I made it sound like she was milking it because she went off, lighting up and giving me back the ring. This time I didn’t stick around to make it right. She went to the room and I went to Craig’s.”

“I’m sure you had the best of intentions, sweetie.” My mother sniffled. *Shit. She’s crying.*

“You’ve got to learn to think before you speak. We’re not mortal. We don’t have the luxury of letting go of our sins on a deathbed. We have to live with our mistakes forever.” His words were like a spear piercing my rib cage. I took a deep breath, lifting my head. My mother smiled softly. She wasn’t judging me. *Worse.* She was empathetic towards me.

I met my father’s eyes. He gave nothing away. “How long did it take you to accept who you are? How long did it take you to come to your senses, stop rebelling and embrace your new title as a vampire?”

I immediately knew where he was going.

“When you love someone, son, you’re there for them, even if it means getting caught up in their storm. You can’t control it, the same way you can’t control them. The only thing you can do is be there for them. They may not appreciate you during their trial, but one day, they’ll look

back and respect you; they'll love you even more for never abandoning them, even when they probably deserved it." His eyes reflected the wisdom he had gained from experience.

His words were powerful, compelling, reminding me of all I'd put them through. They had been there through it all. They never shunned me, despite me threatening my father's position in the army because he refused to arrest or detain his own son. They never judged me. In fact, they did the opposite. They'd assured me that they were there and would be there when I was ready to talk, when I was ready to leave it all behind and move into an inevitable future. Their love had been invaluable. I didn't always regard it with appreciation; I'd been a complete asshole. They loved me through it. They loved me through two years of bullshit, yet I snapped at Lexi after a week.

Damn it. Thinking deeper on it, she was probably overly emotional because it dredged up feelings about her parents' deaths too. She was having a compound reaction to everything over the past year. Being pregnant didn't make it any easier.

"I need to get her back. I need help winning her back."

"I love you, son, but I love her too. She's like a daughter to me. With a baby on the way, and knowing what I do after your mother's experience, I don't want you going back to her as you are. You need to work on yourself before you can be, or ever will be, the strong vampire I know you are capable of becoming; the strong vampire she needs."

"Your father is right, sweetie. You can't take a couple days and think you're a changed man. What are you doing, or what do you plan to do, to ensure it doesn't happen again? I know you have good intentions, but intentions aren't actions. Intentions don't equate to perfection." She

watched me carefully, delivering her reasoning with tenderness.

“What do you suggest then?” I was desperate. I couldn’t picture Lexi having the baby and me not being there. I couldn’t picture not seeing my baby smile for the first time. I didn’t want to miss those precious moments.

I also didn’t want to be without her. I never realized the balance she brought to my life. I never realized how much her presence meant to me until I didn’t have it. Even though we didn’t speak, just knowing she was there calmed my spirit. I’d had time to consider it; I’d had time to reconsider my life’s path. It never changed though. My heart longed for her and her alone. My soul was deflated without her. Anger consumed me without her moderate dose of logic. She kept me grounded. She kept me from being the stupid impulsive vamp I otherwise would be. She kept me safe. I hadn’t realized how much she protected me from my worst enemy - myself.

“A schedule,” Al stated.

“What?” I chuckled lightly, confused.

“Routines help minimize the unexpected, which helps minimize your unexpected reactions,” he explained.

“Makes sense, but the unexpected always comes.”

“You need to work time into your routine to meditate, to workout; you need to somehow get your aggression out so when the unexpected arises, you don’t have a build up that erupts under the added pressure. If you want, I’ll go to your place every day at a certain time and we can spar in the open gym downstairs.”

“Other residents will be there.”

“Not before 6 AM. I’m sure we can get a key from Will to use before or after hours.” He was trying. He was aiming not to push me, but to press me still. It was a delicate balance that he mastered.

“Alright. I’m staying with Craig right now at his place, but we can meet there in the mornings around 4:30.”

“We’ll get through this together, son.” He walked around the island and pulled me in for a hug.

“Thanks, Dad.”

He released me as my mother fought her way in.

She squeezed her arms around my waist. “We’ll help you get yourself together, and then we’ll help you get her back. We want this for you as bad as you want it for yourself.”

I breathed deep, quieting the storm of emotions raging in my chest. They were always there. They represented all I wanted to be to my son. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Now,” she grabbed my arm and jerked me towards the living room, “You have to see what I’ve done to the office. It’s so adorable. Now that I know it’s a boy, I can start decorating with blues and greens. I was thinking of painting the wall a true blue. Not a pale wimpy one or a dark morbid one, but a solid blue. I could use accents of green and white, which would make the espresso furniture I bought stand out more. Of course I haven’t selected the crib bedding set yet, and that will certainly have an impact on the color pallet.”

“Good luck, son.” My dad shook his head and laughed, as my mother continued to drag me towards her showroom. It was nice to see her so enthusiastic over her grandson when he wasn’t even here yet.

—

Chapter Thirty-Six

LEXI

“You ready, guys?” I asked as we stepped out of the airport. The cold air stung my skin, sending a shiver through me. Drex took off his jacket and wrapped it around me. “Thanks.”

“Wimp,” Kalia scoffed.

We’d used our vamp powers to give the airline and airport security the idea that Kalia was a prisoner being transported back to Canada where the Canadian police would be waiting to take her in and prosecute her. Not exactly the truth, but it let us keep her in handcuffs and allowed us to bring weapons aboard.

“We’ll have to take separate taxis. Derek, go with Lexi. We’ll take the brat,” Drex said. He yanked on Kalia’s arm, pulling her towards a cab.

I couldn’t blame him. She didn’t shut up the entire flight. She ridiculed us and taunted us. She was trying everything she could to make us crack. She was grating, tiring. “Alright. Have your taxi follow us.”

Derek opened the door to the cab in front of Drex and Christian’s. I slipped into the back seat, immediately scooting over so he could get in after me. He gave the cabby the address.

“How far is it from here?”

“About two hours.”

I sighed. “I hope they don’t kill her by the time we get there.” I glanced backwards. Through the windshield I

could see Kalia squished between Christian and Drexel. Her mouth was going and the guys were glaring forward. I could sense their regret.

“She’s building their character,” Derek said.

“Hmm. More like building the tension. One of them is going to snap. My money is on Drex.” I faced forward as we took off. I rubbed my belly. I hoped I was making the right decision, but in the moment, I couldn’t think past the fear that I’d made the wrong choice.

About an hour into the drive, my phone went off.
“Hello?”

“Where the dickens are you, Jackson?” he barked.

“Dickens? Since when did you become British, Auggy?”

“Don’t get sassy, Lexi. We’re concerned,” Aunt Claire huffed.

“I’m in another country at the moment doing something I need to do.”

“What exactly is that something?” Auggy hesitated; I think he sensed what I was doing somehow. He knew I wouldn’t have left without telling them otherwise.

I took a deep breath, centering myself. “I have to try.”

“Damn it!” he growled.

“What is she doing? Where is she?” I heard the panic in her voice.

“She’s going- Err! Do you know how stupid of a move that is? Jarrod is here with your team so I know you don’t have back up.” His tone was harsh, but it came from a place of worry.

“Auggy, I’m going to be a mother. I lead an army of my own too. At some point, you’re going to have to let go of the reigns with me. I can make my own decisions. I’m not asking that you support them, but you do need to respect them.”

“Don’t get uppity with me, Jackson.”

“Don’t get surly with me, Augustine.”

He huffed loudly into the receiver. “If I have to bury you, so help me God.”

“I have several trusted people with me, Auggy. I promise I won’t do anything stupid.”

“Send me the location before you get there in case you need back up. How close are you?”

“About an hour away.”

“If I don’t hear from you in two, I’m sending my men in.”

“I can handle that. Yay for compromise,” I chuckled.

“Would someone please tell me what the heckle stein is going on?” Aunt Claire yelled.

“Okay, you all have been hanging out with Craig way too much lately. Please stick with English.”

“This isn’t funny, Lexi.” Auggy’s voice was low, controlled. He was scared. The big, tough army commander was afraid.

“I know. Little in life is. We all have to face our enemies at some point though, right? We can’t run forever, and I don’t want to be running with a baby in my arms.”

I heard him breathing. Aunt Claire had gone quiet in the background. "I don't like it, but I do respect it. Just... just come back safe, okay?"

"Okay. I'll talk to you soon."

"I'm serious about that address. If you don't send it, I'll just pull up your phone on the satellite."

"You sneaky bastard. When did you hack this phone? I just got it a month ago."

"Never underestimate me, Jackson." I heard the smile in his voice. "Take care." He hung up.

—

We had the cabs pull along the side of the road about a mile from our final destination. I froze as I watched Christian tug Kalia from the cab. They'd rotated her cuffs so her wrists were clasped behind her rather than in front. I couldn't hide my amused smile as I saw the socks stuffed in her mouth. She was pouting, big time.

Drex stepped out, smiling wide. "How was your ride?" he asked, sweetly. I immediately knew they were his socks stuffed in her mouth. They must have threatened her for her not to be trying to spit them out.

I paid the drivers and waited for them to turn around and disappear down the road. I spun back to my small team. "Alright. First things first. All of us are putting on a helmet. We're walking up in a straight line with Kalia as the leader. If we stick right up against each other and walk straight towards the door, they won't have a clear shot. The head gear ensures that." I unzipped the duffle bag and passed them each a helmet.

They glared at me. "Pink?" Derek frowned.

I shrugged. "It was all I found last minute." When none of them made a move to put one on, I got tough. "It's not a new fashion; it's armor. Stop being babies and put them on. They're to protect you for a short time, not to be worn out and about."

That got them moving. I snapped one on my head before passing them each a dart gun. "They're not lethal, they'll just slow somebody down, so don't get cocky," I warned.

I discarded the duffle bag. I sent up a silent prayer that things went well, so well that I didn't have to run for this bag on my way out.

I swallowed back my fear. I was doing this for Kai. I was doing this for my baby boy. I was doing this so we didn't have to run anymore. I had to face what I was running from in order to avoid having to do it again in the future.

"Let's go," I said. I grabbed Kalia and pulled her in front of me. I fidgeted with the back of her shirt, directing her.

She mumbled something that I understood as, "Don't mess with the duds." Whatever that meant.

The guys fell in line behind me. We all crouched to Kalia's height approaching the house to ensure there were no gaps or points of attack.

As we climbed the steps, the front door opened, revealing a tall, slim woman with short, brown hair. She had an air of elegance to her; regality you didn't find these days. She smiled, her eyes filling with amusement. "Isn't this cute. Five little duckies waddling in a row," she sang. "You can cut the crap. Jewel won't shoot." She focused on

the line leader. "Hello, Kalia, darling. I see you've faired well." Her lips were tight.

We walked into a beautiful, traditionally decorated home. I felt like I was walking into a time capsule. The furniture was exquisite, polished and not a day over two hundred. The craftsmanship was impeccable. If I had to guess, most of it was probably imported; it was made of the finest, quality materials.

"I must say, the pink is adorable on you men." She smirked as she closed the door behind us. "Come along." Her heels echoed on the hardwood floors as she led us into a sitting room. She must have seen us coming, because she had exactly six chairs set out.

She sat down, immediately crossing her legs as she stared at us. "I must admit, it's a pleasure to finally meet you, Alexa."

Her manners were disarming. Based on Kellan's experience, I knew better. "Hello, Cecilia." I sat in the chair across from her, removing my helmet.

The guys followed my lead, claiming chairs of their own before piling their helmets on the floor. "Don't stand there like an idiot, Kalia. Join us," Cecilia ordered.

Kalia glared at her. I could see the socks effectively quieting her. Hm. I guess they didn't threaten her. She really couldn't get them out.

"Fine. Please release her." Cecilia looked at each of us imploringly.

I nodded to Drex. He frowned, but complied with the request.

The moment Kalia's hands were free, she ripped the socks from her mouth and beat Drex with them.

He was quick, capturing her wrists with one hand before yanking the weapons free from her grip.

"Kalia, don't be petty. I'm sure you got your digs in," Cecilia lightly scolded her, as if she was a child. She came across levelheaded; calm.

They both sat down, allowing the focus to return to the important stuff.

"The infamous Alexa Jackson is finally here," she cooed. I couldn't tell if she was patronizing me or not. "To what do I owe this splendid visit?" There was something charming and engaging about the woman, but equally terrifying; like a mental patient with manners.

"Why am I a threat to you?"

Her smile was tight. "My, my. Someone is awfully cocky."

"Why are you coming after me then?"

"I'm not going after you, dear."

"Fine. Why are you sending other people after me?" My patience was wearing thin already. I was trying to be polite, to not piss her off, but I was so close to the edge. I'd lost Kai because of her and her crap. I was being forgiving. I was being far more lenient than I thought myself capable of when all I really wanted to do was rip her throat out to avenge Kai's death.

But that wouldn't bring him back.

"You have ruffled my feathers, dear. You're corrupting the minds of my people, making them believe that

vampeens and vampires can exist together.” She eyed my baby bump. “That they can procreate together.” She didn’t bother to hide her disgust.

“Why shouldn’t they?”

“Vampeens were never meant to exist. You’re an abomination to the religions of the world.”

“And vampires aren’t?”

“No! We are God’s beautiful creatures, the closest thing to his image that exists, with all His glory.” Fire blazed in her eyes. Her entire body stiffened as she glared at me.

I started to grind my teeth. “Sounds like someone is turning themself into a false god.”

“Blasphemy!”

I rolled my eyes. “What about Kalia then?”

“Her father saw the error of his ways and made her right in time, the way all vampires ought to. A vampire having sex with a human is the worst kind of bestiality in our worlds.”

“I don’t see it that way.”

“Of course not,” she scoffed. “You are lost, my dear child.”

—

Chapter Thirty-Seven

This wasn’t going where I wanted it to go. We were getting angry. We were pulling away rather than uniting together. We were arguing rather than finding common ground.

“Do you believe gays and lesbians should have the right to marry?”

Her head spun towards me quickly, her brows dipping inwards as she narrowed her eyes at me. “Tread carefully,” she warned; her voice was low and tight.

“Some believe marriage is a liberty that everyone should be able to have and to enjoy. Others believe same-sex marriage is an atrocity and that by simply allowing such a thing to exist, they would in essence be condoning sin. My point is, they have opposing opinions and views, yet they both exist in the same world, concurrently. Your opinion that vampeens are abominations is just that, an opinion. You’re going to exhaust yourself trying to stop us from existing; the same way the Knights of Columbus exhausted themselves in trying to pass Proposition 8 in California, fighting against same-sex marriage rights. They fought to refuse a privilege, to a specific group of people, in a country built on freedoms. It’s not going to erase the gay, lesbian and transgender population from the Earth. Inevitably, it’s only going to delay progress towards equality. The same way you’re trying to fight a race that will never be extinct. As long as vampires and humans exist, so will vampeens. I’m not saying you have to support the procreation of our kind, or even support our existence, but at some point you’re going to have to, at the very least, accept it.”

She folded her hands in her lap, meeting my gaze head on. “Why?”

“Why not?”

She shrugged, her brows rising and falling in unison. “I have no reason to.”

“Aren’t you tired of fighting?”

“No. Because I’m not the one out there fighting.”

Kalia’s head snapped back. “What?” she snarled.

“Don’t get yourself worked up.” She quickly dismissed the young girl. “You see, Alexa, I don’t have to fight. I have others who do it for me. I suppose you would probably compare me to the pastor sending his church out to campaign against gay and lesbian rights rather than going himself.”

I searched my mind for a new angle. Any other angle. This wasn’t working. This wasn’t working and I was slowly slipping behind a quiet rage. Cecilia had no remorse. She ruined lives and didn’t care. She acted as if she was being a good citizen, but...

“Where’s Jewel?” Derek asked, with a knowing grin on his face. He winked at me.

Cecilia’s face pinched as she glared at him. “That’s not your concern.”

Jewel? That was definitely a female’s name. *Tread carefully.* Practically spearing Derek for asking about her. Cecilia was... “Cecilia, are you gay?”

“That’s no concern of yours,” she said through a clenched jaw.

“Then who is Jewel? You obviously care about her a lot to react like that.”

She rose up from her seat. “You’ve got two seconds to get out of my face before I do something crass,” she stated.

I stood in front of her, though I was a good six inches shorter, I didn’t back down. “Female vampires can’t have children. That means she is your lover, or at least someone *you* love.”

She growled. "Enough!"

"You are a selfish lover if I ever met one then because, if you stopped this big radical venture of yours, your lover could walk free. You keep her under wraps because if people knew she was yours, then her life would be in danger, wouldn't it be?"

"You don't know what you're talking about." She grabbed me by the neck. "One wrong move and you're done."

The guys moved in on her, but I immediately held out my hands to stop them.

The storm brewing in her eyes told me the truth even when she didn't.

"You want a wrong move? Your people killed a man I loved, the same way the woman you love is going to end up: dead. You know how I know that? Because he's proof!" I lit up, electricity sparking on my surface. I couldn't hold back my emotions anymore. I couldn't fight my fury when it needed to be released. I would never get over Kai's death; I could never accept it knowing others would face the same fate in spite of it.

She dropped me in a split second, shaking out her hand.

I inched closer to her, allowing my rage to intensify, giving it free rein on my surface. I reveled in the way she leaned away from me. "You think you're protecting her here? Not on your life, sister. You can't escape fate, and fate dictates that you will fall under your own sins. The war you're starting over something we can't change is going to have your enemies at your doorstep ensuring she's killed. And let me tell you, *sweetie*, you can't bring her back to life! She'll never come back, and you'll have to live with

that guilt for the rest of your life. Because it'll be *your* fault. All. Your. Fault.

“Instead of accepting vampeens, knowing they can't change what they're born as or born into, is an ignorant mentality for a gay person considering you can't change the fact that you were born this way with this longing yet are ridiculed just the same. So congratulations. You got your wish. You stole a man I loved. But you forgot one thing. Karma's a bitch!”

My heart pounded in my chest, my pulse thumped erratically. My baby boy's heartbeat reflected my own. Shit. I needed to calm down.

I took a step back from her. She hadn't moved and merely continued to glare at me like I was the abomination she claimed.

I focused on taking deep breaths.

“That's it, baby cakes. She's not worth it.” Drex met my gaze, reassuring me, encouraging me with his eyes.

Slowly, I returned to a normal state. The blue dissipated as quickly as it'd appeared. I rubbed my belly, trying to calm my son.

Cecilia sat back down in her chair, crossing her legs and cupping her hands in her lap. She lifted her chin. “The theatrics were unnecessary.”

“They were only unnecessary if you would have listened without them. You clearly didn't.”

“Yes, well. I do hate being disproved.”

I took the seat across from her again. “Listen, I'm beyond pissed at you for what you allowed to happen. But in good conscience, I couldn't do the same to you. That's

not to say someone else won't. So if you do love her, you'll choose her over this ruthless war. You'll choose to accept the things you cannot change and focus on what you can. Why not fight for your rights instead?"

She studied me up and down before addressing Kalia and the men. "Excuse yourselves. Now," she barked.

Kalia immediately skipped away, looking thrilled to be free. The guys all scrutinized me, ensuring I was comfortable with this.

I shook my head, telling them to listen and go.

They shot a look of warning at Cecilia on their way out the front door.

"She doesn't love me back. Our love is not mutual in that way."

"But your love still endangers her, regardless of whether it is reciprocated," I reasoned.

"She has been taken before." Her voice was hard, devoid of emotion, as if she was afraid to let go and relive what she felt in that time.

"At least you got her back."

"It was a group of vampeens from the very army you control that took her." She pressed her lips tightly together, looking at me expectantly.

"I'm sorry about that. I can assure you the vampeen army is run very differently these days."

"Hm. So I've noticed."

We sat in silence for a minute. She wasn't making any strides in accepting me, but she also wasn't piercing me with her eyes anymore.

She sighed. "What do you want from me?"

"Commitment."

She smirked, her eyes dancing with sarcasm.. "Sorry, dear, pregnant women aren't my thing."

I gasped dramatically, clutching my hand to my chest. "I'm shocked!"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm sure," she droned.

"I'm not asking you to change your beliefs or even respect the existence of vampeens. I'm asking you to accept it. I'm asking you to stop punishing us for something we can't change."

"And *that*?" She pointed at my belly, awkwardly.

"Was made out of love. You should know better than anyone that you can't control who you fall in love with, even if they don't love you back." I couldn't hide the sadness in my voice near the end.

"I should have hired you to negotiate my assassin contracts. You make too much sense to deny."

"So, you'll sign a peace treaty?"

She remained silent, watching me, observing me. Finally, she extended a hand. "Against my better judgment, I will work with you. However, should any vampeen cross me or threaten the ones I love, all previous arrangements will become null and void."

"Limit it to just the ones that come after you and we won't have a problem." I shook her hand.

She sighed. "I suppose you'll want me to come back with you."

“I have reps from every group here so you don’t have to.”

She glanced back towards the stairs. “She’s been asking to get out for a while. I keep her cooped up most of the time, in fear that someone will...” She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. “I will tell Jewel the good news and be packed shortly.”

“How long has she been with you?”

Cecilia got a starry eyed look as she stared into the distance. “Long enough for me to love her when no one else did.” She smiled wistfully. “She had a hard childhood that, I’m proud to say, I saved her from.” Her smile faded into a frown. “Though judging by the prison sentence I issued her here, I suppose I shouldn’t be so boastful.”

“Give me just a minute.” She stood and I quickly followed.

Cecilia disappeared through a door under the stairs. Less than a minute later, a young woman came flying through the door screaming in delight. She nearly knocked into me.

She abruptly stopped, allowing me to get a good look at her. She was beautiful in a rare, exotic sort of way. I couldn’t pinpoint her ethnicity, but that seemed to only add to her inexplicable charm when she smiled. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware we had company.”

“It’s alright. I’m fine,” I assured her.

She cocked her head, as if I looked familiar. She glanced back at Cecilia, who was watching her closely a few steps behind. “Is this-?”

“Yes.” Cecilia cut her off.

She turned back to me, her eyes beaming with appreciation. “Whatever you did, thanks. I’ve been dying for a vacation. Now, if you’ll just excuse me. I need to pack.”

“Of course.”

She rushed upstairs like a child that’d been told they were going to Disney for the first time. Excitement carried her away to a different world.

“Please have them prepare the documents. I’ve decided to take her to several other destinations afterwards. She deserves a break.”

“I’ll make the call now.”

“Very well.” She bowed her head before ascending the stairs, presumably to pack.

I pulled out my phone and called Auggy.

“Where the hell is that address Jackson?” he grumbled.

“Stop whining and prepare the treaty docs.”

“Wh...” His growl was abruptly punctuated. He chuckled softly. “Well I’ll be damned,” he muttered, mainly to himself it seemed.

“See you soon, Augustine.” I smiled as I hung up.

I opened the front door, and Derek nearly fell on top of me. They tried to play it off like they weren’t ready to barge in if I needed them. “Let’s call a taxi, boys.”

—

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Two weeks later...

His cologne left a faint trail in the hallway outside our condo. He'd been there, probably to get clothes. My heart immediately tensed. It'd been almost a month since I'd seen him. As much as I wanted to forget him and move on, he would always own a large part of me. They both would.

My hand shook as I unlocked the door. The moment I opened it, his cologne assaulted my nose. The baby fluttered about, as if it sensed his lingering presence. The condo was too quiet.

"Go ahead, baby cakes." Drex was right behind me, gently coaxing me.

I ambled forward and around the corner, abruptly halting. I gasped, my hand flying to cover my mouth. Tears sprung as he came into view.

He'd never looked more handsome. He wore a traditional tuxedo; his hands were clasped behind his back, as if he was waiting at the end of a wedding aisle. His hair was spiked the way I liked it; his emerald eyes were sparkling with love, the love that I always knew was there, even when he treated me bad.

I knew other people were there, but I couldn't take my eyes off him. He enraptured me; he spoke to me on every level with his silent gaze. My heart was soaring; my soul was crying out for him. I couldn't get to him soon enough.

"For crying out loud! I freaking stuck a needle in my heart to surprise you and held my breath. Will you at least

run towards each other like in every sappy movie?” Mel interjected.

I couldn't move past the tears. They streamed openly down my face. I didn't realize how much I'd missed him. My chest felt tight, my lungs barely expanding as I took him in.

Slowly, I pulled myself together enough to glance around. Everyone was there. Old and new friends filled the living room, though there was one person notably absent. But it wasn't just a loss of one; it'd been a loss of many over the past year. I just couldn't see past the one. None of the others compared to Kai, even my parents, but Kai was never Kellan. No one could take Kellan's place.

Hesitantly, I moved towards him. I didn't bother hiding my tears or trying to stop them. I stopped a few feet in front of him; in front of everyone. I swallowed hard, trying not to choke on my emotions anymore than I already was. “What are you doing here?”

He handed me a bouquet of red roses. “Happy birthday, babe.”

“Oh. My birthday. Right,” I faltered, my tears instantly halting. That's all this was. He couldn't be seen not giving me something for my birthday without seeming like a jerk. I gnawed on my bottom lip, unsure of myself.

He stared at me, long and hard. He slipped his hand around mine, bringing it towards his chest, towards his heart. “This is about more than your birthday. I brought everyone here because at some time or another I've disrespected you in front of these people. That wasn't right.” His nerves showed as he shifted. “I've made a lot of mistakes; we both have. I can't promise I'll never piss you off again, but I can promise that I'll never take you for

granted again; I'll never treat you as if you don't matter, because you do. I didn't realize how much you mattered to me. My world isn't right without you. This probably makes me a dick, but I'm so glad Kai took the fall. Without him, I wouldn't have had the chance to make things right with you like this."

His words hit me hard. They were all I'd longed to hear. We both had to take responsibility for where our relationship ended up.

My breath hitched as he dropped down to one knee. He pulled a ring from his pocket and held it in front of my left ring finger. "Lexi, Leka, I love you. While I can't promise you perfection, I can assure you and our baby boy happiness. If you'll marry me, I'll be the best man I can be, the best vamp I can be, and the husband you deserve. Will you allow me one last chance to be all you deserve?"

I smiled wide, unable to speak as the tears returned, sitting on the edge. I hated crying so damn much, but this time I had a good reason. I nodded. "Yes," my voice cracked.

Cheers and sniffles erupted around us as he pulled me into his arms. Someone took the flowers from me so I could hug him back.

"You look so handsome. I love the tux." I squeezed him to me, the baby pressed between us, completing our little family.

He nuzzled my neck. *"I've missed you."*

I leaned back and cupped his face, searching his eyes. *"I've missed you too."*

"Woohoo! Let's go, people!" Aunt Claire declared. "We have a flight to catch."

I turned towards them. “Where are you rushing off to?” I riled her.

“Not me, all of us. We’ve got a destination wedding to plan.”

My eyes widened, immediately going to Auggy. “You finally popped the question?”

“Hell no. She’s gotta work harder for that title.”

Aunt Claire slapped his chest. “Don’t get fresh, Augustine.”

“Then whose wedding are you running off to plan?”

“Ours,” Kellan replied. “We wouldn’t be together if it wasn’t for *him*, so I decided we should get married in Hawaii. But I don’t want to wait anymore. I want you wholly mine in every world, if you’ll still have me.”

A single tear trailed its way down my cheek. “Of course I will.” The baby chose that moment to kick around, knocking Kellan and me both.

He chuckled. “He’s going to be a damn good fighter. He’s already got good combat skills in there.” He pulled away enough to rub his hand over my baby belly.

“Let’s go, Lex!” Mel squealed.

“I know! Stop holding us up. We have a ton of work to do these next few days.” Gabi extracted me from Kellan. “You’ll have the honeymoon for the mushy stuff.” Gabi looked around the room. “Beth, Claire, Francesca, let’s go ladies. We have no time to waste.”

In the midst of the women stealing me away, I caught Kalel’s gaze. He stood with his hands tucked into his black pants. He was so different from Kai, yet similar enough for

me to immediately see the resemblance. He offered me a small, wistful smile, but the pain was evident. He still hadn't let go. My heart ached for him.

Will walked up to him and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, squeezing it. I could tell he wanted to be angry with the man for allowing his brother to go through with this, but the logical part of him told him that Will couldn't have stopped him. No one could have. Kai made his choice. He chose love. He chose to love me more than I could ever love myself. He chose sacrifice. He chose to sacrifice himself as the greatest show of love.

I was pulled around the corner towards the door. I frowned. "Um, guys, I need to pack a bag."

"We took care of it, sweetie." Beth smiled, her face glowing with delight. She was happy for us. "I'm so happy you two worked it out."

—

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"You look beautiful, honey. So stinking beautiful." Tears stained Aunt Claire's eyes.

"Kellan is going to die. Seriously, Lex, you're gorge." Mel gave me a hug, being mindful of my baby belly.

"I'm jealous, but so happy for you, *chica*." Gabi gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Flowers are here," Drexel announced. He held a box in his hand as he came into the bridal suite at the resort. He passed a small white bouquet to each woman. He stopped in front of me, his eyes sweeping over me. "He's a very lucky man." His eyes sparkled.

I smiled, feeling color flush my cheeks. "Thanks."

He handed me my bouquet, larger than the others, with an array of flowers in white and cream. "You're welcome, sweetie."

"Can you all give me a minute with Lexi, please?" Aunt Claire grabbed a tissue from the box on the vanity and dabbed the stray blood-red tears before they did any more damage to her make-up.

The others filed out of the room, giving us some privacy.

She openly gazed at me, swallowing hard, as if she could swallow back her emotions. I knew all too well that they always came back up. "I never imagined that it'd be me here alone with you today. We always thought it would be both of us sharing in your special day. This is a memory I know she was looking forward to." She took a deep breath.

I struggled to keep the memories at bay. I didn't want to open that floodgate, not today.

"You're so beautiful, honey, and I'm so proud of you and Kellan. You've done amazing things together; one of which is in your belly right now." She smiled as she rubbed my belly. "I know your parents are looking down on you right now and they're so happy for you, bursting with pride and overwhelmed by the woman you've become. You're going to be a wonderful wife and mother. And don't think for one second that because I didn't give birth to you that I won't be playing the role of grandmother to that baby or that I won't be there for you through it all. I love you. I love Kellan, and I love that little miracle inside you."

I was on the verge of losing the little bit of control I'd summoned not to break down. The gaping hole I'd grown accustomed to feeling seemed to become a vortex, sucking all of my strength, sucking all I had inside. I missed them;

all of them. I was sad to know they wouldn't see me today; I was brokenhearted to know they were missing so many moments, that they'd sacrificed so much for me to have these moments and then they weren't here to share them.

"I love you too, Aunt Claire. You've always been there for me when I needed you and I really appreciate it. I know Mom would be proud of the woman you've stepped up to be; so would Gran."

Without warning, she hugged me, her tight squeeze making it impossible to breathe. I emphatically reciprocated nonetheless, relishing her love. That was one thing I was grateful for. I had lost people I loved, but the love never stopped coming. I was surrounded by love; I was *in* love.

A sharp knock sounded on the door before Auggy burst in. He fidgeted with his button-up shirt.

"I'm damn near suffocating in this stuffy outfit," he grumbled.

Aunt Claire released me, and both of us appraised the burly man. She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. It's a pair of khaki pants and a nearly sheer white linen shirt. You've damn near uncovered your elbows in the thing and no one wants to see that much of your chest. Button a few more buttons. You're lucky we're not stuffing your feet in alligator shoes; it's not every day a girl decides to have a barefoot wedding."

He mumbled something as he fastened a few buttons, leaving two open at the top.

"I'll see you outside, sweetie. You look beautiful." Aunt Claire kissed my cheek. She stopped by the vanity, quickly retouching her make-up. She slapped Auggy on the chest.

“Stop complaining and compliment the beautiful pregnant woman you’re about to give away.”

He scoffed, as Aunt Claire strolled out, closing the door behind her.

Auggy slowly lifted his gaze to where I stood. His hands immediately fell away from where he was still fussing with the shirt; his eyes crinkled in the corners. His chest ceased to rise and fall for a minute as he looked at me.

I tugged on the dress, trying to cover more of myself. It was a white dress that made me feel like I was wrapped in silk. Layers of smooth linen surrounded my body, tight against every part of me from chest to knee. A cream colored bow spanning half of my width sat low on my back, giving the appearance of all those layers of silk fusing, ending eloquently there.

Aunt Claire had bought me a platinum necklace with a single pearl dangling on the delicate strand, representing the most important person I’d lost. Lastly, she gave me Gran’s pearl earrings, the same ones my mother had worn on her own wedding day. My chest cracked open, my aura darkened at the thought of them both. Would the pain ever disappear? Would there ever come a day that I didn’t mourn the loss of someone?

Auggy slowly approached me. His lips curled up as he grabbed my hand. He kissed the back of my hand. “Kellan’s a very lucky man.” He winked. “You look breathtaking. Any man would be fortunate to have you.”

I felt my cheeks warm. Auggy wasn’t a mushy man, but I knew he was the right man to walk me down the aisle. “Thanks.” Tears welled again. I felt like a leaky faucet; the tears never seemed to leave.

“Awe. Don’t cry, Lex. I don’t do tears too well.” He let go of my hand and grabbed a tissue from the vanity.

I took it from his extended hand. “Sorry. I’m going to blame it on the hormones.”

He chuckled as I wiped the tears away, for now. “I’m glad I’m not a woman.”

“I don’t think the world could handle you as a woman. You’re moody enough without the PMS.”

“Do you want an escort or not, Jackson?”

I rolled my eyes. “You can’t fool me, Auggy. I know you love me.”

He pursed his lips, lifting his chin slightly as if to consider me. “Just this once, but only because you’re pregnant and I want you to stop crying, I’ll admit it. I love you like you were my own. Somehow you got around all my defenses and beat the grouch out of me.”

“Thanks, Auggy.” I hugged him, planting a kiss on his cheek.

Mel opened the door and nearly leapt into the room. “It’s time, Lex!” she squealed. Gabi and Aunt Claire were right behind her, bouquets in hand.

“Let’s go, honey.” Auggy held out his elbow for me to slip my arm around.

I picked up my bouquet and let them lead me towards the beach.

—

KELLAN

Soft music played in the background. An intimate group of people we loved stood in the sand, waiting with me for her to walk down the aisle. Craig stood beside me, just as anxious as I was. Kalel rubbed his hands together beside Craig. It was hell waiting. I didn't know how I was going to survive labor, and I wasn't even the one who had to suffer through it.

My mother came over, pretending to fix my shirt. "You look so handsome, sweetie." She patted the side of my face. Bloody tears reddened her eyes. "When did you grow up? It seems like just yesterday I was picking up after you."

"Oh, Mom." I kissed her cheek. "I'm not moving away. I'm just getting married."

"Yes, but that's a big step in life, Kellan."

I met her gaze. "I know. I wouldn't be doing it if I wasn't ready."

She smiled as she nodded. "I love you, sweetie. You're going to be a good husband." She gave me a hug and made me bend down so she could kiss my head. She quickly sauntered back to my dad's side.

He smiled and nodded towards me. Al was a man of few words, but I never doubted his love for me. I knew he would do anything for me, and he would always be there to support Lexi and me.

Suddenly, the music changed. I saw Drexel escort Claire down to the makeshift front row on the right side. Gabi walked down next. Her tan skin looked beautiful next to the blue of her dress. I didn't know much about women's clothes, but it fit her shape well.

Then Mel came forward. I heard Craig's breath catch as he watched her, mesmerized by her beauty. Mel winked

at me as she passed to stand on the other side of the preacher.

I heard the waves crashing against the shore behind us. Everything slowed in the moment she stepped forward. Emotions splitting my chest; the Earth turned on its axis as she came into view. I'd never seen anyone more beautiful. She took my breath away. I knew in that moment what it was like to feel your soul dance, to feel a dead heart race as if it were human again. Her hair fell in curls around her face, framing her flawless luminescence. She radiated in white; silk fabric wrapped her up like a gift just for me.

I didn't realize I'd forgotten to breathe until I gasped for air, reaching for the unattainable, feeling as if I was floating through air, as she smiled at me. This was what I'd been blessed with for all of eternity; it was an indescribable love with an indefinable woman that I was committing to today. She was my reason to keep breathing; her soul breathed life into me every day that I spent with her. Life would be hell without her I learned.

Auggy placed Lexi's hand in mine. Her eyes shimmered as she gazed up at me. There was no one but us; we were alone in the world for this one moment in time. I caught movement along her dress, and smiled wide, recognizing the moves of our baby boy. Apparently, vamp babies were a bit stronger in the womb than human ones. Luckily, Lexi wasn't as fragile as a human. She was tough and tender; vigilant and breathtaking.

The ceremony was a blur; I was lost in her...lost in the affirmations of our commitment.

"Do you Kellan Alejandro Phoenix Bancroft take Alexa Lorryne Jackson to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

I smiled at her, feeling the weight of my words in my chest. "I do."

"Do you Alexa Lorrayne Jackson take Kellan Alejandro Phoenix Bancroft to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

She smiled at me, her eyes watering. "I do." A single tear fell down her cheek.

"By the power vested in me by the state of Hawaii, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Kellan, you may kiss your bride."

I yanked her to me, one arm cradling her back, the other caressing her face, as I crashed my lips down upon hers, craving that closeness. The planets aligned as our souls collided; every part of us seemed to stitch together in that second, proving that marriage was more than just a piece of paper. It was a commitment that signified our unity; that transcended our unity.

Her lips melted into mine; the taste of her, the essence of her, rolled over me. She was soft, pliable; strength at its gentlest. I felt her heart beat against my chest; I felt our baby rolling around in her stomach against me. For the first time, it felt like we were fully connected. She was officially more than the love of my life; she was my family.

I felt her energy flowing through me, surrounding me. She was a deep-rooted part of me; she was at the core of me. She and our baby were the center of my world.

I slowly lifted away from her becoming aware of gentle gasps and whispers around us. I opened my eyes, fear constricting my chest for a brief moment. Lexi and I were swathed in her electricity. When I caught the stricken look on her face, I panicked. I knew she didn't mean to do it. "Thank God this is a private beach," I chuckled lightly. I

was grateful for the High Authorities insistence that they rent out the entire resort for the event.

“I’m not hurting you, am I? I mean...you...you’re not in pain, right?” Her brows drew together as she worried her bottom lip.

“The only thing that could hurt me would be you leaving me.”

She smiled, sighing as she threw her arms around me.

I hugged her, waiting for her emotions to settle, waiting for the blue to fade. Abruptly, I felt a sharp jab. Air escaped her in a groan.

“He’s not even here yet and he already knows how to kill the mood.” I frowned, waiting for her to look up at me so I could make sure she was okay.

“Maybe some food would make him happy.” She smiled up at me.

“Then let’s go eat.” I kissed her lips, laced our fingers and led us into the swarm of well-wishers.

—

LEXI

My belly was full and my baby had calmed. Kellan stood and extended his hand towards me. “May I have this dance, Mrs. Bancroft?”

“Always.” I beamed.

I stood and let him lead me to the middle of the dance floor. As if sensing that this song was just for us, the others watched from the sidelines.

“I picked this song just for you,” he said, pressing a kiss to my lips as he pulled me into his embrace.

Our eyes locked as the music flowed around us; the lyrics embracing us in a moment of assurance, a rebirth of our vows strung together in a beautiful melody.

*I have never been so sure of anything before,
Like I am in this moment here with you
Now for better or for worse are so much more than only
words
And I pray everyday will be the proof
That I mean what I say when I say 'I do'
Yeah I mean what I say when I say 'I do'*

Every girl dreams of finding Prince Charming, though her definition of him may vary. I felt like a princess, living the dream Disney sold. With my arms stretched up and my fingers firmly gripping Kellan’s neck, I was in a perfect position to get lost in his beauty. His arms wrapped around my upper waist, ensconcing me and our baby together. Our bodies swayed; our souls swirled together as our hearts intertwined.

No words were needed; just the feel of him against me, just the unbarred look into his soul through his emerald eyes was enough. Love was perfect, but lovers weren’t. We were the ones that marred love's purity with discrimination, with politics, with insecurities. I felt it deep down, I saw it reflected in his eyes; assurance rocked me. I didn’t love Kellan; I was *in* love with Kellan. I was one with Kellan. There was little perfection in our world today, but one thing I knew for sure was that Kellan is perfect for me. I couldn’t wait to spend every day of forever with him, allowing every day to be the proof of our commitment.

Love isn’t just a word; it’s a series of feelings, a series of actions that define your use of the word and a level of

existence that embodies your commitment to the word.

“I love you.” I leaned up to kiss his lips.

“I mean every word. I love you.” He cupped my face; I felt the tremble of his emotions through his limbs.

Marrying Kellan was nothing short of magical. I felt so lucky to have him. We didn’t have a perfect past, but I knew without a doubt that we were committed to a better future.

—

Chapter Forty

We laughed and partied with the company of guests. Everyone danced and celebrated with us, even Laurence and Felipe. They celebrated us in a way they never had before. Everyone ought to have this experience. Everyone is *entitled* to experience this.

Shortly after midnight, we all went outside. It seemed like the stars were dancing in the sky above us now as we stood beneath them. I’d saved the orchids, candles and jars of sand Kai had left. I’d given every wedding attendee one. In unison we lit the candles and illuminated the shoreline. One by one, we laid the orchids in the water, allowing the tide to sweep them out to sea. We scattered the sand along the beach, representing the spreading his ashes, symbolizing us bringing a part of Kai and his life back in Charleston home to Hawaii for him.

Tears stung my eyes as I reached out and squeezed Kalel’s hand before releasing it. Francesca was tucked into his other side, much like I was in Kellan’s. He smiled pensively and turned back to the ocean. I knew this was a bittersweet moment. It was my way of honoring Kai, of validating his contribution to our lives, to my relationship with Kellan.

The salty tears rolled down my face as I looked out at the floating orchids. They say that for every life taken, another is given. Mother Earth is all about balance; our lives are cyclical with a beginning and an end that brings us fully around, that gives us the chance to reflect on our journey starting at the beginning.

Kalel was there from beginning to end. I was selfish to have stolen his chance to properly grieve his brother. I glanced over at him. He'd been so strong, a solid rock for me when I should have been that for him.

I let go of Kellan and grabbed Kalel's hand again. I met Francesca's gaze, asking her permission. She glanced at Kalel before looking back at me. She nodded her head once and released him.

I led Kalel into the ocean. We waded out until we caught up with the orchids. I turned our bodies so we faced the shore. It was even more breathtaking from the new vantage point.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Kalel. I'm sorry that you lost your brother, your best friend and the last of your family."

I chanced a hurried look at him. He was clenching his teeth, flexing his jaw as he surveyed the shore. While his eyes pointed at the shore and his ears were listening to my words, I knew his mind was wandering. I saw the emptiness in his eyes despite what was in front of him; the tension in his body despite what was surrounding him.

I jerked him towards me, grabbing his other hand so both of ours were connected. "Close your eyes." He hesitated, but complied. I closed my eyes. "Take a deep breath; inhale the scent of the salty ocean. Catch the hint of coconut that will quickly follow it. Kai always smelled

woody and earthy, but it was this smell that defined him for me.”

I took another breath. “Listen to the palm trees rustling in the wind and the waves crashing on the shore. Every day I went to the lake house I heard these sounds coming from his bedroom; these were the sounds of home to him. They were his comfort.”

I opened my eyes. Silent tears were streaming down Kalel’s face. “He’s all around us, Kalel. And do you know what we’re all leaving in the sand right now? Footprints. He took a part of us with him, Kalel, but he made sure to leave a part of himself behind for us whenever we need him, whenever we miss him. We can never replace him; we’ll never forget him. But that’s exactly his point. The ocean isn’t going to disappear, but hopefully, the hole in our hearts will slowly be filled. New footprints are made in this sand every day. Every day we need to take new strides, and we’ll do it together.”

Kalel’s eyes flickered open and immediately met mine. “You’re never truly prepared.” His voice was weak, the weight of his pain crushing him.

I hugged him and he wrapped his arms around me. I felt his body shake, felt the quivering of his silent sobs. I now understood how helpless Kellan must have felt. How unbearable the pain is to watch someone suffer and know there is nothing you can do about it. To know there is so much you want to do, yet nothing you are capable of doing. Sometimes we have to accept that being there is enough. It doesn’t erase the pain, but it offers immediate comfort in spite of it.

After a few minutes, Kalel disentangled himself from me. He flashed a small smile. “I can see why he loved you.”

I chuckled. “You won’t be loving me when I send you the bill for this wedding dress, which has been ruined by the saltwater.”

“Egh. It’s a small price to pay.” He grew serious. “Thanks, Leka.”

Hearing the name, he called me while being surrounded by him in every element was difficult. I put on a brave face, smiling in spite of the stinging in my chest. “As much as I love the view of the shoreline from here, it’s a little spooky to be standing in the middle of the ocean so late at night.”

He laughed at me. “Come on. I wouldn’t want your new husband to think I’m making passes at you in the water. He’s become quite the assassin.”

I looked at Kellan, pride soaring through me. “I know.” He’d been amazing the day we’d lost Kai. He was a different man, a better vamp.

Kalel hugged me again once we reached the shore and kissed my cheek. “Don’t let the past rob you of your joy today. Kai would want you smiling, not crying today.”

“Thanks, Kalel.”

He nodded, and headed back to his future wife. Francesca immediately enveloped him, capturing his lips. I looked away and focused on my own future. Kellan watched me carefully a few feet away. His hands were stuffed in his khaki pant pockets; his gaze never deviated from me.

I stood frozen in the sand, lost in him. His white shirt hung untucked. Several buttons undone at the top revealed his smooth chest. His jaw line held hard angles, leading to soft lips. His emerald eyes twinkled in the moonlight. So

much emotion was wrapped in his voice; so much love was radiating off my strong vampire husband.

He moved a single hand, stretching it out towards me. The beginnings of a smile curled the corners of his lips as he considered me.

I closed the distance between us, all too willing to be in his grip. This was home; wherever we were in the world, as long as I was with Kellan, I was home. As long as I had Kellan, I would always have comfort; I would always have hope. He was my safety net. He was my fortress of strength when I was depleted. He was my rock, my heart, the life riveting my soul. He was my soul mate. He wasn't perfect, but he was perfect for me.

Lovers aren't perfect, but love is. There is no such thing as a perfect relationship, but a perfect commitment exists. When you love someone like I love Kellan, you'll fight till the end of the world to keep him; you'll embrace the word commitment in sickness and in health, in wealth and in poverty, in the good times and the bad times. You'll never walk away over angry words, over differences of opinions. You'll never allow your bond to be severed, your heart to let go, or your soul to be solemn in his presence. Love is recognizing that you're better with someone than without them, and a commitment is embodying your love, never allowing words, actions or sins to destroy it.

Love is pure. Love is innocent. Love is happiness at its best. Love is easy. Commitment is what takes work. Remaining committed is what takes heart and soul.

I was only sixteen, but I understood the depths of a marriage. I knew what it would take to survive in a world that strived to divide. I knew without a doubt that Kellan was worth every ounce of effort. To be without him would be like trying to breathe without air. He was embedded in

me; his love was what expanded my lungs with each breath, his strength was what pushed me to be the female vampeen I was, and his support was what allowed me to thrive, to take chances and to dive into the ocean unknown.

I was only sixteen, but I understood that what we had was a once in a lifetime thing. I was only sixteen, but I knew Kellan was my forever. He was the vamp I wanted to spend every day of eternity with. Love doesn't know age, race, or preference. Love is merely love.

The beauty of freedom is only viewed when it lives up to its definition. We all have the freedom to change what appears to be concrete. We all have the power to change our destiny, to rewrite our future if we truly strive for it. Nothing is set in stone. While God has a plan for us, an intricately laid out map, containing a destination and a purpose, there are multiple routes we can take to get there. We choose what path we take. *We choose.* We have the freedom to choose. Kai chose. I chose. Kellan chose.

Now, it's your turn to choose.

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And now a sneak peek at the next book in the Vamp Chronicles series, Vigilante.

Note: There is a short story that falls between Darkness Falls and Vigilante titled: Reflections. It should be treated as an extension of Darkness Falls.

VIGILANTE

When tragedy strikes, Mel, best friend to Vamp Chronicles lead, Lexi, leaves her entire life behind, including her heart.

Fate delivers her in New Orleans, a city with a big vamp problem. Teaming up with the local authorities was the last thing she expected to do. She ran so she could be free of all ties, not to form new ones.

Everything happens for a reason though, and the more time she spends helping others, the more she realizes she needs to help herself. After all, a new city doesn't mean a new life, and absence doesn't erase the memories, good and bad.

—

Vigilante: *Mel's Story*

Preface.

KYLE

You don't wake up at ten years old thinking today is going to be your last day on Earth. You're thinking about the newest video game, that new movie you want to see, maybe a test at school or how your gym teacher actually smells like a dirty gym sock. My point is, I didn't think it'd be my last day. No one ever does I don't think.

The biggest tragedy wasn't that I never transformed into an awesome creature of the night; it's that I had to lose my life over someone else's cruelty. Had the kid never been picked on for being a little overweight, had he not been tortured for being an unpopular outcast or teased for not having the money to buy the coolest new gadgets, he never would have taken the one thing his dad did have money for: a gun.

—

MEL

My heart thundered in my chest. Terror squeezed my lungs. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see. Everything was a blur before my tear stained eyes.

My pulse rushed, it thumped loudly, echoing in my head, drowning out the report from the local news anchor. It couldn't be true. They had to be mistaken. It just- I couldn't fathom another loss.

—

"Hey pip-squeak." I ruffled Kyle's hair.

"Leave me alone!" He swatted at my stomach.

I held him away at arm's length. I had just enough height over him to avoid his retaliation. I leapt away from him at a delicate human sprawl. "You totally missed me, bro." I tossed over my shoulder as I walked away.

"Melly?" His voice was small, weak. He was no longer my annoying little brother in that moment. His vulnerability had me spinning around, ready to protect him from the world.

"What's up, little man?"

He fidgeted, unsure of himself. "Do you ever think about Mom?"

I studied him, watching as his brown eyes looked anxiously at me. He was nearly as tall as me already. His mopyy brown hair hung down over his forehead.

"Sometimes. Why?"

"I miss her sometimes." He shrugged his shoulders, trying to be coy. He considered me for a minute. "Would you miss me if I died?"

My heart stopped beating for a moment, the unfathomable idea wrenching me. I wanted to dismiss his question, but his voice was too earnest; he was truly concerned that I could somehow forget he ever existed. "I'd miss you more than Mom."

Needing a reprieve from the weight of the subject, particularly with my mother's death still fresh, I pushed forward. "You're so going to outlive me, bro. So you need to remember, I want a pink glitter casket lined with purple roses and I want like a gazillion Hello Kitty stuffed animals thrown in for good measure."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, like I'm gonna pay for all that."

"Oh ye of little faith. I was planning to leave you a cool mil." I smirked.

He rolled his eyes again. "By doing what? Dressing up Barbie dolls?" He scoffed.

"Something like that." I winked. I ruffled his hair again. This time he didn't fuss. Rather, he surprised me by pulling me into a hug. A hug that had us both entwined, hearts beating in unison as if we were connected by more than blood for that single moment.

How could I let all that go? How could I ever forget that? How could I ever forget my brother, my little man, the boy I spent half my childhood raising.

I couldn't. I wouldn't. Ever.

—

I stared blankly at the TV. Panic surged within me. It couldn't be true. It just...

The female anchor was so professional, so factual...so removed. She clearly didn't have any children at the school. She was stoic, cold, as if this was just another news bulletin to read without inflection, without emotion, because God forbid if the press proved to be more than robots spewing facts.

“So far, authorities have confirmed one teacher and ten students injured with one teacher and two students reported dead on the scene at Ft. Sumter Elementary. The shooter was allegedly an eleven-year-old male student in one of the fifth grade classrooms of the local school. Authorities have yet to release a name although the student is apparently in custody. Low Country police officers have...”

“Mel? Love?” I heard Craig’s voice in the distance, but nothing registered.

I opened and closed my mouth several times, fighting the tremble in my chin. I knew I needed to sprint into action. I knew I couldn’t stand there helplessly. I had to do something. I had to see him. I had to... “I...We...Fuck! Go, go, go!” I screamed, pulling myself to the present, to the possibility that my brother, my innocent little brother, may be injured...or worse-

I frantically searched for keys.

Craig seized my arms, steadying me in front of him. His sun kissed locks were in spiked disarray; his reflective eyes revealed my harrowing expression. His brows furrowed, concern etching his forehead as he studied me.

Tears stung my eyes as I gazed at him; my chest constricted as the unknown snaked through me, draining me of warmth. For the first time, I truly felt out of control.

My body was disconnected from my mind; I was running as a true vampire: on instinct.

My heart was barely working; my pulse rocketed, raging with a thunderous pulsation, banging against my sensitive flesh from its liquid filled lines.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the keys on the side table. Without a second thought, I lunged for them before speeding out the door. I didn't care what my neighbors thought of me. I didn't care if they discovered my secret identity in that moment. I had one goal.

"Melanie!" Craig whisked after me, leaping into the passenger seat as I put his car in reverse and peeled out of the driveway. "You don't even have a license! What the fiddle is going on, love?"

I heard the fear in his voice, but I had my own to deal with.

Oh, God. Please, please, please. I'm begging you; I'm praying to you for the first time in forever because I'm desperate and I don't know what else to do. Please, let him be okay. Please, don't let me lose anyone else. I don't know if I can handle it. I don't know if-

Craig gripped my hand and squeezed. "Mel, love, you're scaring the boggles out of me. Please, tell me what's going on so I can help you."

I swallowed hard, but my serum continued to rise. "Pull out your phone and Google Fort Sumter Elementary School."

"Kyle's school?" I didn't have to look to know his features were scrunched in confusion, yet, perhaps, a tiny bit of knowledge was seeping in. He had to know I wouldn't

ask him to search unless something was wrong, unless something had happened.

I merely nodded my head, unable to speak, unable to voice the possible truth, that my brother, the only sibling I would ever have could be-

“Fudgeballs.” The word fell breathlessly from him.

The drive to the school was a blur. I couldn't recall any portion of the course if my life depended on it.

Crowds gathered around the perimeter of the property. Throngs of parents, of neighbors, pooled together in groups; nothing united communities like tragedy. It disgusted me. It shouldn't take misfortune to bring people together like this.

I gazed around helplessly. My short stature made it difficult to see through the masses. Before I knew what I was doing, I was using my brute strength to push my way through. A man went flying sideways; women fell to the ground. I didn't care though. In the back of my mind, I knew they had to be suffering on some level. I knew we were all going through this together; hence the unity. But I only cared about one person on that campus: Kyle.

When I reached the front line, I found barricades set up by the local police force. Officers, firemen and EMTs occupied the schoolyard; the lights from their vehicles flashed in the background. Students hugged their parents as county workers escorted them from the school. As the scene unfolded before me, as I got my first glimpse of the situation, tears sprung; it felt like an anaconda was squeezing my entire body, crushing me. Worse, it felt like my soul was being flattened, diminished to a black speck.

It was a scene out of a movie. It wasn't happening. This was somehow a dream. This wasn't reality. This didn't

happen in my community. This didn't happen here. It happened in other states, other places, but not here.

It couldn't happen to my baby and me.

I gaped forward, lost in their actions, consumed by my own emotional reaction...until he appeared.

I lurched forward, flying over the barricade. I was by his side in a split second.

A swift once-over proved something was wrong though. Why was he struggling to breath? What was all this blood spilling from him?

"Ma'am! Ma'am! I need you to step back." Someone was spewing these words at me in the distance because he could, because it wasn't his child, his sibling, on this stretcher.

"Melanie!" I felt Craig's arms circling my waist, trying to detain me, but I'd be damned if anyone pulled me from his side.

My entire body began to shake as I studied his lifeless form. *How? Why?* With shaking hands and tears streaming down my face, I swept my fingertips against his pale cheek. He felt cooler than normal. Not quite cold, but cooler than normal. He used to feel warm to me. He used to be my blanket when I got cold. He used to be my baby; I didn't give birth to him, but he was mine.

His lips were changing, loosing their rosy red color. His complexion seemed to be fading as more blood seeped from his chest, soaking his shirt and the blanket the paramedics had draped over him.

"Ma'am!" It wasn't until the paramedic yelled at me that I realized that my other hand was clinging to the

stretcher, preventing them from moving forward, preventing them from taking him from me.

I felt detached in a way. This was happening, but I couldn't seem to wrap my mind around it. My eyes saw and my heart reacted, but my psyche, my soul refused to accept it. Idly, I realized, if I let him go, he would be gone.

No. I wouldn't let them take him. They couldn't take him. It- They- "No!"

"Mel, love, baby." Craig held me tight. His tone was soft, his thick accent soothing, yet his goal grated me. He was trying to appease me, but no one could make this right.

Children didn't deserve to die this way. My brother didn't deserve this! Where the hell was God? Why wasn't He protecting these kids? Where were the school superintendents? Why weren't precautions in place to *prevent* this? I didn't care what they did after. It should have been prevented. Why did this world progress only in reaction rather than forward thinking actions?

Why?

I gathered Kyle's hand in mine. I studied the shape of his fingers, of his nails. I smiled wistfully, fresh tears falling, at the dirt smeared on them. He always was an outdoor kid. He enjoyed getting dirty.

—

"Give me a hug, sis," Kyle teased as he walked in the front door. Grass stains and dirt covered his soccer uniform. Mud was slicked to his sweaty flesh. He was a ruffled mess, but he wore the biggest smile. It lit up his eyes.

"I don't think so." I shook my head, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Come on. You afraid I'll give you cooties?" he taunted.

"Heck yeah. I don't know what you and those other rugrats did in that dirt."

He snickered. "Wimp."

I pursed my lips, narrowing my eyes on him. "Catch me if you can," I challenged.

He beamed, his boyish need to torture girls with things we despise being met.

I took off for the backyard, slowing my pace to a decent human speed. After a good ten minutes of running him ragged, I let him catch me. I knew it would be the end of my white shirt, but his happiness was worth the sacrifice.

He threw his arms around my waist, immediately rubbing his grimy face into my shirt.

"Ew! Cooties! Germs! Yucko!" I feigned disdain.

He squeezed me tighter. "Shut up! You love me so you have to love my germs too."

I laughed, returning his embrace. "I guess."

Pulling back, I roughed up his hair.

"Hey!" He jumped away from me. He turned for the house. "Think Dad'll let us have pizza again for dinner?"

I smiled, my heart warming. "I think we can talk him into it."

“Kyle.” I shook his hand, jiggling his arm in turn.

“Ma’am! You have to let go or I will have to take you in.”

“Mel, love, listen to the officer, doll.”

I shook my head negatively, trapped in the impossible. Darkness clouded my judgment; desperation licked my conscience. “He’s mine. You...you...you can’t take him.” I ground my teeth as hysteria crushed my chest. Tears welled quicker; fell faster. My lungs refused to expand. “Nnnnn...ooo. No!” My lips curled.

I squished Kyle’s hand, but he just lay there. He didn’t move. He didn’t hug me back. He would never hug me back again...

“Love, sweetie, darling, doll, please, baby. We can dolly with them to the hospital, but you have to let him go for now.”

“But...” My knees gave out. For the first time as a vampeen, I felt weak and helpless. My soul shrouded in blackness as they all fought me, as they attempted to force me into surrender, into acceptance. “I can’t lose him. They can’t take him, Craigy. Don’t let them take him from me. Please.” My voice grew in volume, in octave, in panic. “Please,” I cried.

He pried my fingers from the stretcher; from around Kyle’s limp hand.

I shook violently, my entire body reacting to being ripped from him, from being required to let go of yet another person.

The paramedics surged forward, immediately taking him.

I collapsed into Craig. He held me fiercely to him, his muscles ensconcing me with the strength I didn't have.

I sobbed, unable to contain my pain. I was losing him. I was losing everything. I was losing my whole world. Lexi went off and married Kellan. She was having a baby. She was a different person. She wasn't the same best friend who was always there like before. Craig was always there, but he couldn't be there the way I wanted him to be, the way I needed him to be. My dad was in and out with the Vamp Army, lost beneath a mountain of responsibilities that had never before included his kids. That left Kyle. He was the one I could count on to be all I needed and more. He was mine. He was my everything. He was the one who'd gotten me through. And now, he was...gone.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Christin Lovell was born and raised in Charleston, SC, but now lives in the hottest place on earth: Orlando, FL. She has three beautiful children who keep her running non-stop, but would love to adopt a few more. When she's not juggling life and kids, you'll find her huddled away somewhere writing her next book or happily reading someone else's. Like most authors she's come across, she's a coffee addict, owns far too many books than she can fit on her shelves, and she goes to work in her pajamas a lot.

CONNECT WITH HER HERE:

www.christinlovell.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/authorchristinlovell>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/christinlovell> OR @christinlovell

Instagram: <http://instagram.com/christinlovell>