

BOOK 1

VAMP CHRONICLES

CHRISTIN LOVELL

*Diary of a
Vampire*

Vamp Chronicles
DIARY OF A VAMPEEN
Book One

Christin M Lovell

DIARY OF A VAMPEEN

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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!)

DIARY OF A VAMPEEN

Imagine living a human charade for fifteen years and never knowing it. Imagine being provided less than a week to learn and accept your family's true heritage before it overtook you. Alexa Jackson, Lexi, is abruptly thrown onto this roller coaster and quickly learns that she can't change fate, regardless of how many lifetimes she is given. She will be transformed into a vampeen on her sixteenth birthday, she will be called upon to fulfill a greater destiny within the dangerous world of vampires, and she will have to risk heartbreak and rejection if she ever wants a chance at love with Kellan, whether she likes it or not.

This book is dedicated to my daughter, Kali. May your life be as rich as Alexa's. I love you.

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

II Corinthians 3:18 nasb.

Diary of a Vampeen

Preface.

I'd always wondered if the myths were true. Who got it right; who didn't? Were most recent Hollywood portrayals correct? Were all vampires gorgeous, pale specimens to be swooned over? Did they all have the same eye color and choice of human or animal blood for survival? Did they sparkle in the sun or were they prohibited from soaking up its rays due to a fire hazard?

Further back, when we relied on books, were the authors more accurate in their details? Did vampires sleep in coffins and wake only at night? Were they forbidden from entering churches, touching crosses and eating garlic? Was I truly safe in my home if I didn't invite them in? If I put a mirror in front of them, would a reflection be visible?

The list went on and on; so many questions I never assumed would be answered. They simply sat in the back of my mind; a slow curiosity that didn't agitate me, but I'd have loved to kill it.

Perhaps that's their appeal though. Because there was no conclusive evidence I could manipulate the image of these immortals (the only consistency in all the books and movies) to be whatever was attractive to me. My imagination was allowed to love an Edward, a Dracula or Lestat because nothing was concrete, factually speaking, about vampires... until my sixteenth birthday, when I learned all but one of the above is inaccurate.

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Chapter One

I knew he was different from the moment I laid eyes on him. Not different in a paranormal or supernatural sense; just different. I could tell he wasn't superficial like the majority of high school students. He had a better grasp on life than most of us yet I didn't understand how or why.

He was gorgeous standing there in all his glory. A buff body; strong, angular features that made his beauty harsh; he was hard, dark. He held mystery and intrigue. He was far from approachable yet his eyes, the most beautiful emeralds I'd ever seen, drew me in. His aura called to me yet his body language pushed everyone away. A red i-Pod Nano was attached to the bulk of his bicep, a lure to his strength. It was pumping music through his earphones as our eyes locked from opposite sides of the hall.

"Hello? Earth to Lexi!" Mel frantically waved her hands in front of my zoned out face.

He looked away, breaking eye contact with me. A second later he closed his locker and walked away leaving my heart racing. It took me a good minute to clear my head.

"Hello? Lex!" Mel practically screamed my name for the entire world to hear and know. She's my best friend; I love her, but patience isn't her strong suit.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Yeah, yeah. Let's go so we're not late for class!"

"I'll see you later, babe," Mike said, planting a quick kiss on my cheek. I instantly blushed.

I was still adjusting to the idea that fat, four-eyed, less than perfect skin me had a boyfriend. A wonderfully devoted boyfriend who called me beautiful while others announced my hips down the hall. I was curvy. Okay, so I was extra, extra curvy with a side of cottage cheese. I guess that explained the nickname 'Hungry Hippo.'

Cooper River High School is like all others. It has your jocks and preps, the kings and queens of the school who flaunt their perfection daily and make your inferior comparison public knowledge. Jason, the all American dream boy, a.k.a. the quarterback for the Riverdogs, and Jenny, the teen queen, a.k.a. the captain of the cheerleading squad, thought it was appropriate to attach the board game *Hungry, Hungry Hippos* to my locker with cement glue. I was mortified. I guess you can understand why I decided to forgo the locker this year.

"Babe?" Mike prompted, interrupting my memories, while studying me closely. His brows furrowed in appraisal.

A smile slowly crept on my face as I looked in his eyes. "See you later."

"Oh God. Can we cut the mush and get going?" Mel tapped her foot expectantly.

"I'm coming," I droned.

"Wow. There is a God." She rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Oh stop! I thought you were happy for me," I teased.

"I was...until you started subjecting me to regular p.i.a." We were power walking to class by this point.

"P.i.a.?"

"Yeah, p.i.a.: puke inducing actions."

"Ugh, gross." I felt my face wrinkle in response to her twisted acronym.

We raced through the door just as the final bell rang.

As I scurried towards my desk, I froze. There, two desks back from mine, was *him*. My breath caught and I knew, had I needed to speak, I wouldn't have been able to. As cliché as it sounds, he took my breath away.

Mel came to my rescue tugging me down in the seat behind her. "What has gotten into you today?" she scolded in a rushed whisper as Mrs. Henderson, our ancient, highly eccentric teacher, approached the front.

I was irritated. I had never been stunned into a statue before. There was something about this new interest that stopped me dead in my tracks. I literally lost all train of thought, simply caught up in the glory of him. That alone was highly unusual for me. I was never affected by outward beauty, which was all I had to go on at this point. I'd learned the hard way that unless you were openly and equally accepted by society as an ideal model of physical perfection, you never stood a chance.

I never stood a chance.

So I forced myself to be blind to the beautiful to avoid ever making a fool out of myself.

The rest of the period passed. Regardless of what I did, I couldn't shake Mr. Emerald Eyes from my mind. Fear momentarily reared its nasty head at the somewhat obsessive analyzing my thoughts were doing over him. I'm certainly analytical by nature, perhaps overly at times, but not to the point of insanity, which was the steady job my dear head was angling towards over this new boy... no, man? It didn't fit him. I could tell he was an old soul, but I couldn't define him properly.

By the time I packed my stuff, Mike was waiting by the door.

"Hey, babe," he beamed. "Mel." He spoke her name with disdain clear on his tongue.

"Don't start," she snapped.

"So...you two going to Barnes and *No-bell* tonight?" he asked as I walked towards the door.

"Of course. You know we always go on Thursdays." I angled myself towards him, meeting his gaze momentarily.

"Hmm. I'm thinking I could be in the coffee mood tonight," he smirked.

Mel rolled her eyes. It was justified though. Despite him being my boyfriend, when it came to outside social events, Mike was unreliable. I didn't mind since I was never invited, not that I would have attended if I were.

The only event I regularly attended was my weekly date with Mel. Every Thursday night, come rain or shine, Mel and I went to Barnes & Noble. It was a ritualistic gathering we'd been addicted to since our first trip in sixth grade, exactly one year after we'd met.

Apparently I'd left my body again because I returned to Mel and Mike arguing with me in-between.

"You are such a cocky bastard!" Mel crossed her arms and harrumphed.

"Sounds like you're jealous of my confidence." Mike smiled deviously at her; his brown eyes were lit with amusement as he watched the irritation wrinkle her features.

"More like majorly turned off!" She glared at him.

"I didn't know you were attracted to me like that." His grin broadened.

"I'm not, you jerk!" She was steaming pissed. I could tell her patience was dwindling quickly. She was about five seconds away from exploding, unleashing all her untapped fury upon Mike.

And I wouldn't feel sorry for him.

Mike knew how to push buttons; not only buttons, but also boundaries, and for some reason he found Mel the most amusing to push around.

"Mike, please. Don't start," I pleaded, angling my eyes mirror my words.

"Yeah, *Michael*, don't start something you can't finish," Mel tossed in.

"Guys," I groaned. They were always fighting. I would have pulled my hair out by now if they each hadn't confided that they enjoyed the banter. They bickered like siblings all the time.

"Sorry, babe." Mike shrugged, not the least bit phased by the scene they'd created. He pulled me in closer as we breeched the bus lines.

"Mel, is your Mom dropping you off or do you need my dad to pick you up?"

"I think she said she's dropping me off after she picks up Kyle from practice."

"Okay. I'll see you later." I gave her a swift hug, only partially embracing her.

She pulled back with a smile on her face. "Later, gator." She turned and walked towards her bus. Ironically,

she and Mike rode the same one.

It was me who was alone; I was left to be tortured by the neighborhood kids, who reinforced the 'Hungry Hippo' byline. My saving grace was the occasional times that Justin, a nice, if not nerdy, acquaintance I'd shared freshman English with, rode the bus home. I was able to get lost in conversation with him rather than be forced to listen to their jeers.

"Want me to ride home with you, babe? I can call my mom to get me later." He pushed my hair away from my face; his lips were slightly pursed as he considered me.

"Thanks, but I'll be okay." I tried to plaster the best smile I could manage, but it was meager at best. He didn't talk about it, but Mike knew the way people taunted me. I was just grateful that he tolerated it while holding my hand.

"Okay. I'll call you." He softly kissed my lips before leaving to rejoin Mel.

Every time he kissed me, little butterflies fluttered about inside me. It wasn't an overwhelming passion that burst through my soul, but rather a simplistic enjoyment that kindled.

I angled towards my ride home, my gut tightening as I stared at the large yellow vehicle. Kids were ambling into it. They were always loud, so rowdy; I'd never told anyone of the anxiety they induced. They were unpredictable. They were unruly. They were unrelenting.

Dread coiled in my chest, making every step towards my appointed bus a thousand times harder. Taking a deep breath, I ascended the stairs to board. I let out a sigh of relief at the sight of him. Luck was on my side today as

Justin sat, three rows from the front, waiting for me; his book bag saved the space beside him.

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Chapter Two

“Mom, are you home?” I called, walking through the front door.

“In the kitchen!” she yelled. I dropped my backpack and slid off my shoes by the door before skipping through the living room to our large open kitchen.

My mother was already preparing my dinner. We never ate the same meal or shared an evening at the dining table. It was our routine to go our separate ways. I took my plate into my room, usually chatted through my consumption on the phone with Mel, while she ate in the company of my dad downstairs when he returned home. By the time I retreated from my room my parents were typically snuggled together on the couch watching their crime shows.

After school was the official time I interacted with my mom daily. I normally sat at a barstool nestled to the granite-covered island while she cooked my dinner. We discussed random topics pertaining to our day, reflected upon the one-offs of our lives. Despite our age difference, and her formal approach to most subjects, I could talk with her about almost anything. The one exception to this would be boys.

She’s a part time real estate agent and my dad an engineer. I’d always been close to my mom since my dad tended to work long hours.

“So how was school today, honey?” she interrupted my thoughts while stirring the contents in the pot.

“Egh. Same stuff, different day. We reenacted the start of the Civil War today in history. Coach got smacked a few

times with our paper bombs, which was assumptive with the project.”

“How did you do on your Spanish test?”

“Mom, I speak better Spanish than Mrs. Watson.” She clearly picked up on the twinge of mockery.

“I guess I should know better by now.” She beamed with approval.

“Of course,” I smiled. “Oh, Mel’s mom is dropping her off tonight so Dad doesn’t have to pick her up on his way home.”

“You may want to text him so he doesn’t go out of his way,” she advised. It still sounded strange to hear her mention the word text let alone imply it as an action to or with my dad. Since when did this communication form leak into the adult world anyways?

“Yes Ma’am!” I saluted. I quickly sent the text.

My mom, Sharon, was always a beautiful woman. I’d never met a woman with the same stature and beauty hold her mass appeal. I suppose the closest relation would be the late Princess Diana. She was dignified and classy yet still down to earth and approachable. I assumed that was how she sold so many houses, but her perfect body added to her success as well - most of her clients tended to be rich bachelors.

She carried an exotic aura physically that was muted by her size four, Joan Clever-esk appearance. She wore long dark brown hair that slightly waved as it fell, light skin and dazzling green eyes to match her full pink lips. It was in that moment, observing her beautiful eyes, that he popped in my mind. I had to suppress a shiver just at the thought of him. His face manifested; his eyes so vividly and

intensely stared at me within my thoughts. I shook my head, clearing him from my mind, as I returned to studying my mother again.

I'd always envied my mother's looks. Everywhere we'd go, people stared at her and complimented her every move. As a result, I harbored body issues over the constant comparison. She's the epitome of a m.i.l.f. according to Jason Kelly. *I wish he'd never seen her, but couldn't help that she sold his parents their house.* And I was the definition of a fat blob, or so I felt most of the time.

I was the odd one out in our family. My dad had an athletic build that matched my mother's. His hair had peppered with grey the last two years but remained as thick and full as the day he married my mom. Add in his brown eyes, nice farmer's tan and flawlessly balanced profile and they were the picture of perfection as a couple.

Every now and then my mom would try to do a 'buddy workout,' she called them, with me, but it never transferred into a routine. Though she's concerned about my health, she never pushed me or hurt my feelings with overly ambitious attempts to guilt me into a diet. I loved that about my parents. They loved me but never smothered me with parental nonsense.

I chatted with my mother while eating at the kitchen island. It was a good change in scenery over my room. She mindlessly cleaned as she described her newest client - a former NFL player, recently divorced, and searching for a waterfront retreat near Folly Beach. She thought it odd he didn't choose Myrtle Beach or Hilton Head, but she never faltered when it came to giving her clients what they wanted.

An hour after I emptied my bowl of veggie pasta, Stewart, my dad, walked through the front door mid-

conversation with my mom over reality TV.

“Ready to go, kiddo?” he asked as he strolled into the kitchen. He greeted my mother with a kiss.

“How did you know I was in here?” I pursed my lips, eyeing him as he approached me.

“Lucky guess,” he winked.

“Okay, well let me find out where Mel is. She should have been here about ten minutes ago.” I hopped down from the bar stool and dialed her number.

Two rings later Mel answered with, “Open the door.”

“Hey. What took you so long?” I blurted as soon as I cracked the front door.

“Kyle’s practice ran late.”

“You could have called you know,” I scolded as I dangled my phone towards her.

“Yeah, yeah. Tell me something new.” She pushed past me into the house, but was visibly squirming, ready to escape.

“You ready to make like a banana and split?” I smiled, entertained by Mel’s impatience. She never could stay still for long.

“Okay, really, that line definitely has to go,” she grumbled in mock horror.

I chuckled. “I’ll work on it; scouts honor.” I held my hand up three fingers, flexing my thumb over my pinky in the formal scout sign. Dropping my hand, I ushered us partially through the front door. “Now let’s go. Starbucks is calling my name.” I turned back to yell for my dad, but he was already shooing us out the door towards his car.

Naturally, with the money my parents had, they drove nice cars. My mother was partial to her 2006 white Mercedes CLK500 but my father recently upgraded to the new Mercedes GLK SUV. I'll admit, they were very nice, but they felt overrated. A car was a car to me. If it got me from point A to point B without hesitation, then I was sure to be satisfied. Who needs a built in navigation system when you have a cell phone with GPS these days?

We loaded up and sat quietly as my dad drove us to the store. Routinely he dropped us off and then entertained himself at Best Buy down the road; they came to know his name as every Barnes & Noble employee knew Mel and me. But tonight, he opted to go back home for a bit. I sensed something was off, but chose to hold my tongue.

"Call me when you're ready," he said as Mel began to exit the SUV.

"I will, Dad." I gave him a quick peck on the cheek across the threshold before we strolled into the store and straight up to the Starbucks counter.

"The usual tonight, ladies?" Sam asked. She was the local barista every Thursday evening when we came in. She's a college student with a punk-rock flair to her. She's always friendly, melodramatic at times with her shared derision of the prepsters in our town. She tended to spark conversations with us as she prepared our drinks. Mel and I thought of it as the start of our night and our formal "Welcome to Barnes & Noble."

"Of course," Mel responded promptly.

"It's on me tonight, remember?" I swiped the debit card my parents gave me. My dad cautioned it was for emergencies only, but slowly they had placed a generous allowance in the account for me. Sort of sad, I suppose,

since I'd never thought to touch the majority of the funds. I only used the money for literature, the occasional meal with Mel, and Starbucks.

"Drinks are up! Enjoy!" Sam called.

"Thanks," we said in unison. We unwrapped our straws and began sipping away.

"O.M.G! This is heaven on earth, I swear," Mel sang as she swirled the ice around in her cup.

"Definitely," I agreed. "Should we go books or magazines this week?"

"I'm thinking magazines. We need to get some good ideas on what to do for your birthday next week. Aren't you excited? You're going to be sixteen! I bet your parents are going to give you a car. What do you think?" Mel squealed; she tends to ramble when she gets excited. I don't mind though. It's part of her charm.

"Um, I guess." I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm not sure what they're getting me. They've actually been acting sort of weird lately. My dad has been home a lot more and my mom is just, well, I don't know." I shook my head negatively, cocking it as I racked my brain for the right words to make her understand. "Something is off with them." I had made this observation over the past few days, but questioned myself, since I had a tendency to overanalyze things.

Perhaps they were simply nervous about how fast I was growing up. It must be hard on a parent. And to make matters worse, I would be of the legal age to drive. My mother had always been keyed up to teach me, but my dad was scared silly over the whole idea; he looked ready to have a heart attack every time my mother or I mentioned it.

As we continued to walk, browsing the magazines, I couldn't stop myself from thinking of *him*. I could still picture his face as if he were right in front of me; his eyes pierced me like beautiful green daggers. I could still see the red iPod Nano engulfing his muscular bicep; the two together depicted his strength and withdrawal perfectly. I felt obsessive, almost, in the way my mind could easily and perfectly recall him after only one day, less than twenty-four hours. That immediately turned to guilt when I saw the car magazine Mike was addicted to.

"Lex?" Mel had stopped and was openly watching me, a few tiny creases present in her forehead.

"Yeah? Sorry," I mumbled.

She rolled her eyes, sighing irritably. "What do you think is up with them? You think they could be planning something?" she repeated, slowing her speech to ensure I caught her questions entirely.

My parents. She was asking about my parents.

"Um, I don't know. They haven't been secretive, that I've noticed, just overbearing in some ways. It's nothing close to your mom, but more than usual." I expelled a defeated breath, giving up on the subject. "Oh well. I guess I'll find out soon enough, right? I only have a week as of tomorrow."

"True." She was surprisingly fast to accept my topic dismissal. "So what do you want to do next Friday?"

I paused to think a bit as we continued to browse the magazine racks. I took too long apparently because Mel began rambling again. "I still can't believe you aren't having a sweet sixteen party! I mean your parents have money. It could be awesome, and not just awesome-awesome, but like party of the century awesome. We could

always do a belated sweet sixteen party, though. What do you think?"

"Are you serious?" I half checked and half scoffed.

"Of course I'm serious! You only turn sixteen once. That, and I still have another five months till my birthday. So for now I have to live vicariously through you." She beamed and pranced about as she spoke the words with a matter-of-fact sarcasm.

"Mel, when have you ever seen me go to a party in the last five years, let alone throw one?"

"See, you're long overdue. And I'm sure, if you agreed to it, your mom and me could plan it all. You wouldn't have to do anything but show up."

"Thanks, but I think I'll pass." I scrunched my face.

"You're such a buzz kill sometimes." She pouted her bottom lip.

"Yeah, yeah. Talk to me in five months when it's time for your party. Have you given it any thought yet, Miss 'I always plan ahead'?"

"I've tossed a few ideas around, but until my mom nails down the budget, I've got nothing but air to work with."

We picked up a few fashion magazines and walked back to the café. We settled into our usual table against the wall closest to the counter. Mel could never keep quiet for long; I was amazed she lasted the entire drive without a peep. So it didn't shock me when the magazines became an afterthought to our conversation.

"Okay. So back track for me and re-explain why you think your parents are being weird on you," she prompted.

“I don’t know. They’re just off.” I shrugged, continuing to flip the pages of *Teen Vogue* on the table in front of me.

“Off, like how? Like in a weird-you-out kind of way, or in a ‘oh our baby’s growing up’ way?” She tried to clarify, but I was lost on an exact description.

“Sort of both, I suppose. My mom has been looking at me with this gleam in her eyes lately, as if she’s anticipating something. That could be because I’m turning sixteen and she still wishes I was six though. And my dad, well, he’s weird to begin with, but he’s been home a lot more. Oh and last night he gave me a hug before bed but he didn’t let go for like five minutes. I had to practically pry him off of me. Saying it out loud, I guess that could be in line with how old I’m going to be too.” I sighed and stared into space, recalling their actions over the past few days. They were different versus what was considered normal in our home, but not so far off base that I should have been suspicious of anything drastic. They both stared at me with an anxious beam; perhaps it was merely fear of my impending birthday though.

“Come to think of it, they are acting like I am going to turn sixteen and move out or leave them. Or maybe they’re planning to send me away.” I frowned, sitting up straighter in my chair. “Oh! I never thought about that. Gran sent my mom away for a year when she turned sixteen; she sent her off to boarding school somewhere.” I knew my expression registered the alarm I felt. “You don’t think they would do that to me too, do you?” Suddenly I was choking with unease. Could it be possible? Would they really send their only daughter away to boarding school? I’d been such a good child in comparison to my classmates. I never whined or asked for anything above a weekly Barnes and Noble visit. I was open regarding my activities and life events. I

talked to my mom instead of hiding away in seclusion like most teenage girls.

“Calm down, Lex. I’m sure you’re overreacting. Your parents wouldn’t send you away. These are different times than the one your mom grew up in. I don’t even know of any boarding schools that still exist. Plus you’re their only daughter, and no offense, but you’re so not cut out for the whole Catholic school from afar thing.” She must have seen the worry lines I felt fanning across my forehead because she quickly added, “Okay. So maybe they could send you off to boarding school, but I really don’t think they will. And if they do, then I will personally harass them every single day until they bring you back.” She shuddered. “I don’t even want to think about life here without you.” She puckered her lips, as if she had a sour drop in her mouth.

“Thanks.” I couldn’t help but smile at the idea of Mel harassing my parents with all her emphatic annoyances.

I flipped through a few more pages, sipping my coffee Frappuccino between glances. It took me a moment of utter silence to recognize the strange feeling that came over me. It felt like someone was watching me. I looked up and scanned the nearby tables, but found nothing out of the ordinary. There were no wondering eyes in our direction. I quickly gave up and returned to my fashion guide.

“That new kid is so strange.” Mel furrowed her brows.

“Who are you talking about?” I asked, cocking my head in confusion.

“The new kid. You know, the one from Spanish class. He’s sitting over there in the corner.” She tilted her head with a quick nod in his direction.

I turned to look at him and immediately blushed. It was the same guy from the hall and English, who, as Mel

pointed out, also shared Spanish class with us. It was the one who'd haunted my mind randomly throughout the day and even moments ago. He was a quiet guy from the little I'd observed; he didn't interact with any of the other kids, and aside from the whole tortured soul vibe, he was a good-looking guy. He stood at nearly six feet with dark brown hair. His eyes, again, the same bright green as my mother's, though hers hinted towards hazel and his were more emerald. His jaw was taugth and sharp in angle, but not offensive or too direct. There was just something about him that drew me to him; something about him that I couldn't resist.

I started drifting into a daydream while my eyes lay fixated on him. He must have felt my gaze because he lifted his head and peered directly at me. There was no hesitation in his move, as if he had a sixth sense. After one second of a locked stare I returned to Mel.

"Yeah. He's definitely weird," Mel mumbled.

"Maybe he's just shy. It's his first week; cut him some slack." I couldn't believe I was defending him. I didn't even know him, hadn't even said so much as 'hi,' and was already speaking for him. Where was this coming from?

"Whoa. Someone's a little touchy. Could that be because you have a crush?" Mel smirked, her blue eyes shimmering with humor.

"Um, yeah, I don't think so," I replied laying the sarcasm on thick to throw her off the trail. Truthfully, he was attractive, but I didn't know him. All I knew was that he was gorgeous; he's weird yet alluring. Regardless, I had a boyfriend, and Mel knew that.

"What is he doing? Is he really coming over here?" Mel interjected in a rushed whisper. Her brows drew further

upwards the longer she focused on his direction.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught him approaching our table. It was a Kodak moment for the expression on Mel's face. I really wish I could have captured the pure divulgence her eyes depicted. She looked upset, cocky, shocked and shaken, while retaining a friendly overlay. It would go unnoticed to the eyes of a stranger, but with me, I uncovered every hidden emotion her controlled glare gave.

"I have no idea," I whispered back. He made his way to the table without hesitation greeting us with his eyes and a restrained smile.

"Hi, I'm Kellan." A slight wave of his hand accompanied his introduction.

Mel was still unconscious, lost in her daze of shock and confusion, so I politely responded on our behalf. "Hi. I'm Lexi and this is Mel." I spoke confidently...too confident. *What's wrong with me?* I usually clammed up around boys; I was shy in their presence. I didn't even speak to Mike until Mel forced me into the conversation two months after our first introduction.

"Nice to meet you," he replied. He studied us as inconspicuously as possible as he stood before us.

I awkwardly stared at him, and that's when it happened. I was lost, caught up in the magnification of his beauty up close. It would only be a matter of time before my throat closed up and my body finally realized that I was talking to *him*, the one dancing in my thoughts.

Mel snapped out of her momentary fart because I heard her say, "Do you like everything so far?"

"It's not too bad, just different. Weather's nicer here."

“Where did you move from?” She inched forward on the table, leaning into him ever so slightly.

“Seattle.”

I couldn't even begin to fathom the look on my face as their conversation continued. I was waiting in terror for the shaking uncertainty to hit me, yet it didn't. I only survived non-choked conversations with gay men, Mike, Justin, and, of course, my dad; I was comfortable with them. Could it be possible that I was comfortable with this stranger before me? That's never happened to me before, but what else could it be?

Why was I comfortable with him though? He obviously belonged with the popular crowd based upon his looks, yet he was much nicer than they were. His eyes, I couldn't get past his eyes. They were the only thing approachable about him and shined in the same palate as my mom's. Maybe it's the relation between the two that controlled my confidence around him.

“Lexi! Lex, snap out of it!” It took me a several long seconds to realize Mel was speaking to me. I really needed to work on this whole over-rationalization of my thoughts in a daydream type manner.

“Sorry.” I offered with a quick shrug. I looked up to see Kellan watching me with interest. I felt myself blush and began running my fingers through my long, dark brown hair to avoid his direct gaze.

Mel shook her head in dismay, rolling her eyes as she did so, before continuing the conversation I obviously missed the majority of.

“So Lexi can't seem to decide what she wants to do next weekend. She's said no to a party.” She was quick to cut me slowly and dramatically with her eyes before

resuming. "I personally think a party is an awesome idea, but to each their own."

"Oh my gosh. You are so not going to let go of this thing are you?" I frowned.

"Nope," she taunted with over exaggeration of the 'p'.
I sighed in defeat. "I'll consider it."

"Well good luck with planning everything. It was nice talking to you both. Have a good night."

With that, Kellan gave a quick nod and walked away. As he drifted away from us I couldn't help but stare again. His form was ideal with each stride as his body emulated a model's performance. He's proportioned in a magnificent way. No part of his figure was out of balance like mine, and his voice melted away every layer of protection surrounding me. It was masculine, slightly husky, but still soft and melodic; it's soothing yet manly. A soothing voice coming from a mouth of pearly white teeth and pouted lips that weren't too big and weren't too small.

Snap out of it, Lexi! I couldn't believe I was doing this. Here I was daydreaming of a guy I didn't even have a chance with, not only because he was ten times better than Jason in every way, but because I already had a boyfriend.

That's when it hit me.

...maybe he liked Mel. That had to be it; he must have found her attractive. Why else would he have approached us here? I couldn't blame him. She's beautiful with long blonde hair, a golden tan, and sapphire blue eyes upon a petite girly frame. If she wasn't my best friend I would be jealous with hate towards her.

“Attention, Barnes & Noble customers, the store will be closing in approximately thirty minutes,” Sam announced over the intercom.

“I suppose that’s my cue to call my dad.” I reached for my phone, prepared to dial, but was prompted to answer. “I guess he beat me to it.” That same, niggling feeling in my gut returned. “Hey, Dad.”

“I’m outside waiting when you girls are ready,” he stated rhetorically, though I hadn’t asked any questions.

“Um, okay. We’ll be out in a minute.” I closed the phone, scrunching my features.

“What’s wrong?” Mel’s gaze scrutinized my face.

“Well, it’s like I said earlier, they’re just acting weird. My dad is already outside waiting for us. He said we don’t have to rush but...” I trailed off.

“Stop overreacting. Nothing’s up.” She stood up, grabbing her nearly empty cup. “Let’s just go. We need our beauty sleep anyways.”

I quietly sighed as I shoved out of my seat, conceding, “Yeah, you’re probably right. Let’s go.”

—

“How was your night?” my mother asked as soon as I walked through the garage door.

“It was good. Met a new kid from school.” I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Oh,” she instantly perked up. “What’s his name?”

I stopped, mid-action and focused on her. Her eyes were bright, her brows lifted with eagerness, as she

watched me. The feeling resumed in my gut, tightening further. “How did you know it was a guy?” I asked.

She gave me an easy smile, fidgeting in her spot. She never fidgeted. She was the epitome of patience and good manners, which fidgeting was not a part of.

“Just a lucky guess,” she replied. Again, the feeling that something was off flared within me. “So what is his name?” she pressed.

“Kellan.” I studied my mother. If I didn’t know here, I would say she was nervous, which was very unlike her. “Are you okay, Mom?”

“Oh, yes.” She waved my concern off.

A cursory glance at my dad showed him just as awkwardly fidgeting where he was standing by the sofa. He didn’t look at me; he merely stared at his shoes as he jiggled the keys in his pant pocket.

“Um, okay.” I felt my brows dip inwards as I looked at them. “Uh, I’m going to bed. ‘night.” I gave them both a hug and retired to my room.

My phone buzzed right as I closed my bedroom door. I didn’t need to check the caller ID to know it was Mike.

“Hey,” I cheerfully answered.

“Hey, babe. Have fun with Mel?”

“Always. What did you do?” I asked, sifting through my drawers for a pair of pajamas.

“Laid around and thought of you.”

“Nothing like laying it on thick.” I chuckled lightly.

“I’m only speaking the truth,” he continued. I knew he was exaggerating, but it was flattering nonetheless and gave my wilted ego a tiny boost.

“Give me a sec to change,” I said, setting the phone down before he could respond. “Okay, I’m back.”

“Missed you.”

I rolled my eyes despite the smile splitting my face. “You’re going to spoil me with compliments.”

“I’m trying.”

“I’m going to go to sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“kay. Sweet dreams,” he lulled, his voice taking on a husky quality.

“You too.” I hung up with him and plugged my phone into the charger.

Mike was a good boyfriend, though I didn’t have any others to compare him to, but when I closed my eyes, he wasn’t the one I saw; and he certainly wasn’t the one I dreamed about that night.

—

Chapter Three

“What a crazy night that was last night, right?” Mel chatted on our way to second period: Spanish.

“Yeah.” My thoughts immediately went to Kellan. He’d officially taken over my focus from the moment I woke up. I felt guilty with Mike because another man occupied my mind as we kissed that morning, but I couldn’t shake this mysterious stranger. He was taking over my sanity.

“I wonder if Kellan will talk to us today now that the ice has been broken,” I absently pondered. I was silent in my curiosity, but loud enough for her to hear.

“Ooh, I’ve got a crush on you,” Mel sang reading between the lines of my comment.

“Oh, stop.” I shook my head discouragingly, hoping to dissuade her.

I secretly was hoping he would talk to us again. He had this lure about him that was inescapable. I longed for his masculine arms to embrace me and never let go, and I desired the touch of his soft supple lips with their faultless pout in a way that was certainly criminal. I hadn’t craved the touch of a male in, well, never, to this degree. The alienation of the guys around me had left me sexually dull and lust-less, until Mike stepped in, and, regardless of what any adult says or believes, teens have desires that cannot be subdued or redirected with education. Puberty and peer pressure are only part of it. Given my appearance though, and my label as an outcast, I hadn’t acted on anything; I submerged it deep inside. The most Mike and I had done was kiss. We hadn’t even progressed to groping while kissing.

As we walked through the door, I instantly scanned the room for him, but he wasn't there. Amazing how a night of clambering over a person could make you recall the tiny details overlooked every day. I would be lying if I said my heart didn't sink slightly at this realization.

Immediately, guilt overwhelmed me again. Mike was wonderful with me and treated me well. He didn't deserve the betrayal I felt I was giving him in some way, though I'd barely spoken to Kellan. I couldn't help the instinctive attraction I had to him though. I couldn't help but feel drawn to him. I had yet to decide if this was simply a lust lored symptom or if there could possibly be more to him, but I knew I couldn't pursue it without hurting Mike in the process.

Mel resumed the conversation as we sat down. "I kind of hope he doesn't. I got this weird vibe from him. Something is definitely off about him."

"I didn't sense anything off or weird with him. I found him rather nice."

"O.M.G. You so like him!" Mel yelled way too loud in the confined space of the room. She grinned wide. "I'm right, aren't I? You like him!"

"Shh! Lower your voice!" I demanded in a low hiss. "Even if I do, which *I don't*, but if I did, I wouldn't want the whole world to know about it. Plus, I already have a boyfriend, remember?" I fumbled with my defense. Mel knew me better than anyone and had already clued in on my new interest though.

"Okay," she smiled smugly.

The final bell rang and we settled into our seats.

"*Buenos dias*, class," Mrs. Watson greeted us.

“Señor Bancroft, how nice of you to join us. Sientate, por favor.” She regarded Kellan with irritation as he rushed through the door. He was running but didn't appear winded.

Mrs. Watson immediately began babbling on in Spanish about the proper use of verbs and adverbs in advanced sentence structuring. This lesson was nothing new for me since I lived in Spain for two years as a child.

My parents weren't expecting me so soon after marriage. They had planned to travel for the first few years. My mother decided that my arrival shouldn't stop them. So the first three years of my life were spent traveling.

We went everywhere from England to Chile to Russia. Australia was my dad's favorite, but my mother fell in love with the quaint seaside area of Basque, Spain, and that's where I spent the next two years of my life.

I was three when we settled in and beginning to speak, so my mother drowned me in the language and culture. Every two years my parents went back to the little village for two weeks. They had visited just this past summer; I stayed with Mel for those weeks. We'd never had so much fun together; of course, Kyle never wanted to see me again after the fifth day straight of pranking him.

“Senorita Jackson, de donde eres?” Mrs. Watson inquired amidst her lesson.

“De aqui, en Carolina del Sur,” I responded promptly. I was born here in Charleston, and therefore was a 'low country native,' as they called us.

“Muy bien, gracias,” she noted before continuing on to another student in the back.

I settled back in my seat, but instantly sat up when I caught sight of Mel. “What’s wrong?” I whispered. I couldn’t tell if she was mad, sad or frightened.

She lifted her finger and pointed towards Sasha beside me. My gaze drifted towards the girl but found nothing out of the ordinary. She was doodling in her binder, but most of us did that at some point in class.

I turned back to Mel, her brows now furrowed deep as if she were concentrating on a strong thought. I didn’t bother asking but rather followed her eyes beyond Sasha to... *Oh my!* Kellan was staring at me with a smirk on his face. It was a taunting yet inquisitive glare that didn’t settle right with me. Now I knew why Mel was so uneasy. I squirmed in my seat the rest of the period and was grateful for the reprieve of the bell.

“What was *that* all about?” Mel demanded the second we entered the hall.

“You ask me like I should know.”

“I couldn’t even figure out if he likes you or not. One minute I thought he was mocking you, the next crushing on you and then *poof!*, he was studying you like a math problem he didn’t understand,” she blurted.

I shrugged it off, though she was pretty accurate in her description.

I felt the buzz in my pocket from my cell phone. I checked the halls for any teachers before slipping it out to check. “It’s my mom,” I announced. She would never call during the day unless something was wrong.

Mel yanked me into the girl’s bathroom right as I answered. “Is everything okay? What’s wrong?” I panicked.

“Calm down, sweetie. Everything is fine.” Her voiced appeased me instantly.

“Oh. Okay. Did you need something?”

“Well, yes. You see we know Kellan and his family, so I was hoping I could rely on you to take him out.”

“Out, as in...” I was cringing, on pins and needles, as anxiety mounted within me.

“Perhaps you could invite him to the mall or show him the highlights of downtown,” she offered.

“Let me get this straight. You called me in the middle of the day, sent me on red alert for a favor? And that favor happens to be to ask a really cute guy that I barely know out? Did I get it right?” I laid the sarcasm on thick with a bit of dread stitched in.

“Oh, sweetie. You make it sound horrible. Kellan is a very nice young man.”

“Mom, he’s going to think I’m asking him out on a date. Do you know how embarrassing that would be? Not to mention I already have a boyfriend.” Okay, maybe I was whining just a bit, but her favor was social suicide. What if he said no? What if he didn’t? No. I couldn’t do it.

“Alexa.” My name was a scold.

I sighed, bracing myself. I knew it was coming.

“I wouldn’t ask unless it was important. We’ve known Kellan’s family since you were an infant. This request is coming from his mother, not me. And you have a wonderful heart; you’ve always been welcoming to everyone. I know you will do a great job with Kellan. It doesn’t matter where you go with him, just that he gets out of the house for a little while.”

Well, there you have it. She went in for the kill and won. How do parents do it? How are they able to perfectly twist the words to guilt you into doing what they want?

“Alright,” I officially surrendered.

“Thank you, sweetie. I’ll talk to you later. Love you.” She perked up before hanging up the phone.

“Tell me you did not just agree to what I think you did,” Mel immediately cut in.

“That depends. What do you think I agreed to?” I felt my forehead wrinkle as I faced my best friend, stress working its way through me.

“To ask some strange guy out on a date as a favor to your parents.”

“Oh, well, then you would be right,” I stated.

“O.M.G. Wow. I totally feel your pain. That is the worst kind of punishment out there, and you didn’t even do anything wrong.” She winced, pity reflecting in her eyes.

“Let’s just get this over with. Hopefully Kellan is at lunch.” I turned on my heels to leave the bathroom.

“Wait! It’s him?” she nearly screamed.

I glanced back at her and nodded my head.

“I think we need to skip lunch and pray. Please tell me you carry pepper spray, Kung Fu moves I don’t know about, anything...”

“Shut up.” I laughed pushing open the door and nearly running straight into *him*. My eyes popped open in shock as I froze in place. I felt Mel trying to force me forward as she slid around me to see why I’d suddenly become a statue.

“Oh,” was all she said.

I began fiddling with my hands and rocking back and forth from side to side as if I didn't just use the restroom before coming out. I was already embarrassing myself yet hadn't spoken a single word to him. His green eyes just stared back at me expectantly. *What happened to being comfortable around him?*

“Uh, sorry about that. We really- Um. Let's get to lunch, Lex.” Mel grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the lunchroom.

When there was a good distance between him and us, I was finally able to relax. “Ugh,” I groaned. “I totally botched that up.” I frowned.

“You owe me.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” I turned back towards the bathrooms, but he was gone. The hall was empty though we'd walked less length than what remained on his end to leave, and I certainly would have heard the bathroom door from where I was. We were the only ones in this part of the building. He couldn't have gotten to the exit that fast. Could he have?

By the time we got to the cafeteria our table was already full. Only two seats remained for us. I took my spot next to Mike and Mel sat across from me and next to Sara.

“What took you so long?” Mike asked once I settled in.

“Um. I'm sorry. Are you my new dad?” I responded sarcastically, on edge and upset at how I'd handled the situation with Kellan minutes before.

“No, I was just wondering.” He backed off like a rebuked child.

“Well, to kill your thirst, my mom called and then me and Mel were chatting. That’s all.” I was always a sucker with remorse and I instantly felt rueful given his expression after my sarcastic chide.

“You mean Mel was talking and you were listening like a good friend, right?” he edited with a mischievous smirk in Mel’s direction.

“No, I mean we were both talking back and forth. Isn’t that how chatting works?” I came to my friend’s defense.

“It does online. Not so much with you and Mel though.”

“I hold my own just fine, thank you.”

He cut his eyes at me, a flash of flagrancy visible in them. “Okay. Whatever you say, babe,” he chuckled humorlessly. His reaction left off kilter, slightly confused. He almost appeared angry that I’d defended Mel.

Luckily he changed the subject, stopping me from over analyzing his response. “So what are your plans for the weekend?” he asked.

“Um, well I don’t know. I have to do a favor for my mom.” Guilt swarmed my chest. I suddenly felt like I was on trial for murder; perhaps my conscience already felt blameworthy over agreeing to betray Mike, in a roundabout way, as a favor to my mom.

“Her mom is making her commit social suicide by asking Kellan out.” Mel laughed, and edge in her voice as she threw the statement at Mike. I shot her a dirty look. I couldn’t believe she blabbed to him of all people. It sounded wrong. It made it sound like I blatantly planned to cheat on him.

“Who’s Kellan?” He rounded on me, his brows creasing.

“Just a new guy in a couple of our classes,” I answered. “Apparently our families go way back.”

“Well is this a group thing or are you two *exclusive*?” Mike’s voice held a bit of angst, yet he lifted his brows suggestively.

I softened my voice. “Mike, you know it would just be a friend thing. Please don’t make this any worse than it already is.”

“So it’s not a date then, right? I don’t need to go grab my boxing gloves.” He sounded off; add yet another person to the list of odd balls as my birthday approached.

“Not technically,” Mel clarified.

“It’s not a date at all and you both know it,” I corrected.

“Gosh, Mel, why do you always have to gossip lies?” Mike jabbed towards her with a quick slap on the table.

“Oh give it a rest, Mike,” she shot with clear, unstated frustration in her voice.

Mike turned back to me. “So you wouldn’t mind if me and a few others join you then?”

“Of course not.” I shrugged my shoulders. “It’s just a friend thing like I said. I don’t even know if he’ll agree to go but I have to at least ask as a favor for my mom.” I was ready to change the subject. This conversation was only amplifying my anxiety over the situation.

“So where are you going to ask him to go?” Mike pressed. I glared at both him and Mel.

“You started this,” I growled, pointing a finger at her.

“Yeah. I’m sort of regretting that now.” She looked apologetic enough. She faced Mike. “Mike, be nice,” she ordered.

He rolled his eyes at her. “I’m always nice.” He smirked. To make up for being difficult, he pulled me into his arms and kissed my cheek. I can’t explain why, but it didn’t feel right anymore.

Mike stood a tall six feet and was built something similar to Kellan, but not as chiseled. He had a farmer’s tan thanks to many hours in the sun skateboarding, and his clothing style matched his past time. He had brown eyes, medium brown hair that was grown out long enough for him to do a faux-hawk at times, and uneven lips; his top lip was smaller than his bottom, but still soft and defined.

The rest of lunch was rather uneventful. Sara and Sasha made plans to go to the mall Saturday, Mike talked aimlessly with Jared about something sports related, and Mel chatted with Justin over the fall play coming up at the end of the month. He was playing the lead in ‘Antony and Cleopatra.’ It’s a modernized version without all the nays and shalls though.

History flew by despite my lack of focus. My concentration was torn between Kellan and Mike. Kellan was ahead for the obvious reasons; I was extremely nervous about agreeing to ask him out. I was already wishing I’d never agreed to it, and I hadn’t even suffered through the rejection yet.

Though we sat next to each other in history, Mike didn’t say anything. Each time I snuck a peek his way he was staring at me. It wasn’t offensive, but made me uneasy. In all the time we’d known Mike, he always seemed like a

loose cannon. His spontaneity was one of the things I loved about him though.

The bell rang and I rose to gather my blank papers. I was mentally occupied with my life and therefore had neglected the lecture entirely today. I slid my arms into my backpack and turned towards the door. I suddenly jumped back startled to have almost run into Mike.

“What’s up?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Um. Well...” he paused looking to be gathering his thoughts.

“Well?” I prompted cocking my head to the side a bit as I peered up at his seemingly dazed face.

“Well, I guess I’ll talk to you after school. I mean I’ll call you,” he fumbled to piece together.

“Okay. I take it you’re not walking me to my last class?” I chuckled softly. Why was everyone acting so weird?

“Um, did you want me to?” He seemed so unsure of himself. He usually walked me to every class with the exception of second period and that was only because his class was on the other side of the school.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll talk to you later,” I offered as I made my way out the door to catch up with Mel.

“What was that all about?” Mel inquired once I was within range.

“I have no idea. Between my parents and Mike, even Kellan, I don’t know who’s acting more eccentric at the moment. It’s just been a weird day for me. Well, a weird two days if you count last night,” I noted.

“True. They all do seem a tad off when I re-examine the situations.”

“Is there a full moon tonight or something?” Even I was beginning to act strange. I was searching the halls and on the prowl for anyone else out of place or acting out of character.

“Not that I know of. Maybe the birthday gods are in motion right now,” she suggested with a smile. I chose to ignore her.

Moments later we took our seats having carefully avoided eye contact with any part of Kellan. I looked up at the clock to see how long I had before the final bell rang; I had roughly three minutes. Just enough time to ask him yet would be saved by the bell should he refuse.

I stood up and made my way to his desk. I started fidgeting with my hands right away out of nervousness. I’d never asked any guy, friend or not, out.

“Uh, hi Kellan,” I said.

“Hi,” he replied, staring up at me expectantly.

“Um, so I guess your parents know my parents and well my mom called me and I guess your mom wants you to get out more and so I was just wondering if you wanted to do something this weekend...” I slurred everything together in one breath as an extra-long sentence. I couldn’t even look at him. I looked everywhere but into his brilliant green eyes. I felt my cheeks color as I waited for him to answer. My heart was about to beat out of my chest. I was mortified. My mother definitely owed me after this.

A smirk crept up on his face as I continued to wait. He checked the clock and made me stand there and wait until seconds before the bell when he finally said, “Sure.”

I knew he'd done it on purpose. He had to have seen how uncomfortable I was. I cut my eyes at him as the bell rang and I made my way back to my desk. I was definitely ready for school to be over.

"Okay, class. Today we are doing something slightly different. No new lessons; I am instead giving you this entire period to get a head start on your monologue due next Thursday. I don't mind if you bounce ideas around in groups but there is to be no copying or plagiarism," Mrs. Henderson stated sternly. "You may begin now."

Mel turned around in her seat to face me. "So do we really need to buddy up on the monologue or are you ready to talk birthday party planning?" she inquired with a raised eyebrow.

"How about neither?" I suggested hopefully.

"Oh come on Lex. It'll give you an excuse to buy a new outfit," Mel tried to reason with me in her whiny, antagonistic voice.

"I don't want a new outfit, and if I did I wouldn't wait for a party to buy it. Plus you know I hate shopping."

"Such a waste," she grumbled. "At least tell me how it went with Kellan," she urged.

"It was painful, torturous, every adjective you can think of along those lines. My mom couldn't pay me to do it again," I sighed.

"That bad?"

"Worse."

"At least it's done and over with and you have an obligation free weekend," she beamed.

“Oh no, he said yes. I don’t know whether that’s good or bad at this point.”

“Yikes,” she winced. “You’ll have to let me know how it goes.”

“Of course,” I said before she turned back around in her seat.

I sighed turning my attention to my notebook to begin my assignment. Caught in the moment with Mel, it took me by surprise when Kellan spoke.

“So how do I get a hold of you? You know so we can meet up,” he interrupted my gaze for that all-important pry.

“Oh, um. Here’s my cell,” I fumbled while writing my phone number on a piece of paper and passed it to him.

“I’ll call you later tonight then,” he confirmed before returning to his desk. As soon as the coast was clear Mel turned towards me again.

“Hmm. Why do I have the feeling there is more to this than meets the eye?” she grinned.

I rolled my eyes dramatically. She chuckled and turned back to her own papers though I doubt she was actually working on the assignment.

—

Chapter Four

Surprisingly the last hour seemed like eternity but I was finally free to start my weekend. I tossed off my tennis shoes and dropped my backpack at the door.

“Hey Mom!” I yelled as I walked towards the kitchen. When I received no answer instantly I called again, “Mom, are you home?”

As I reached the kitchen I saw the note attached to the fridge.

Lexi,

Your dad and I have gone to Myrtle Beach for the night. I deposited extra money in your account for pizza; the number is on the post-it by the phone. We should be back by 11am tomorrow.

Call me if you need anything!

Stay Safe! Love you, Mom

I sighed and looked around the empty space. I never enjoyed spending time alone in my house the way most teenagers pined for. I secluded myself most of the time but I felt secure knowing someone was nearby.

We had a rather large house for the neighborhood. It's a grand two-story home with a colonial design spread over thirty-five hundred heated square feet. There were five bedrooms and three and a half bathrooms. Two bedrooms were on the first floor, my parents' master and another they reconfigured into their office. I had the upstairs master and adored having my own attached bathroom. The other rooms were set as guest quarters though we'd had zero guests in the last seven years actually stay here.

Reluctantly I made my way to the phone and ordered my pizza. The guy said thirty minutes for delivery so I trudged upstairs to my room. I grabbed my MacBook and plopped down on my king size bed. I checked my e-mail prior to the daunting task of updating all of my networking sites. How did these things become so popular again? MySpace, Tagged, hi5, Facebook, twitter... it feels like a chore!

I quickly logged my activity in Facebook, Tagged, hi5 and twitter. Last was always MySpace. Never failing in consistency were my friend requests from new foreign bands claiming to be local or upcoming rappers messaging event invites galore - unavoidably annoying! And don't even get me started on the survey bulletins of random unimportant questions. Who cares what you're first thought is when 'yellow van' is mentioned? Ugh. Needless to say I saved the worst for last I guess; at least it's a million times easier to navigate than Facebook, but the equivalent to being entertained by a dog sometimes.

I logged in. Surprise, surprise! - new friend requests. "What band is it today?" I asked out loud as I clicked on the 'new friend requests' alert.

"Oh," I gasped. Kellan sent me a friend request. I quickly accepted and clicked to view his profile. His background was a woodsy landscape of forest and mountains in a dark setting under a full moon. His 'about me' section was simple reading:

My name is Kellan. I'm from Seattle and just moved to Charleston, SC. I'm quiet. I enjoy the peace I have within my mind. If you want to know something, just ask me.

I clicked his photos link; he had five photos posted. The first was of Kellan along a jogging trail it looked like, though he clearly wasn't jogging in jeans. I gave him the

benefit of the doubt though; Seattle is far different from Charleston. The second was him and, I was guessing, his best friend in Seattle; attached was the caption 'Me & Craig'. He was just as gorgeous as Kellan, the same build and beautiful blue eyes matching messy wind-blown blonde hair. The third picture was of Seattle, a cityscape with the space needle. The fourth pic was of Kellan in the backseat of a car, I assumed it was his parent's. The caption read 'On the drive from Seattle to Charleston'.

The last picture was a group photo. The description read 'Family Reunion - August.' I looked at his family. Everyone was beautiful. Aunts, uncles, cousins, they all stood flawlessly on the page. They seemed related in some fashion; their features were different yet united. They all adorned the same flawless complexion despite the dark and light hues of their mostly toned bodies.

It took me a minute to recognize the pair. I gasped. There in the back row were my parents. Unmistakably my dad had his arm around my mother, as did many of the other men with their spouses. *That's impossible though. Mom and Dad were supposed to be in Spain. This doesn't make any sense. Why would they lie to me about Spain?*

I jumped at the sound of the doorbell. I checked the time on my phone. Sure enough it had been half an hour. I scurried down the stairs to open the door.

I decided to watch TV as I ate my pizza in the family room. I flipped through channel after channel on the satellite finding nothing of interest. I eventually settled on the classic movie 'Roman Holiday' with Audrey Hepburn. I enjoyed classic shows and movies; the new stuff was entertaining but just doesn't compare to the wholesome appeal love carried in earlier decades.

I grabbed a second slice of pizza as my phone rang. Without checking the caller ID, I answered, "Hello?"

"Hey babe, what's up?"

"Not much. Eating pizza and watching a movie," I replied. "What about you?"

"Just chillaxing," he stated hesitantly. There was a good two minutes of silence before he spoke again, rather reluctantly. "Lex, can I ask you something without you getting weird on me?"

"Sure. What's going on?" I was trying to be nonchalant but my interest was piqued if only by his strange aura today.

"Um. Well, I'm not really sure how to word this right so I'm just going to ask it," he explained.

"Okay. Just spit it out," I encouraged.

"Do your parents like me?" I knew he was building to something.

"As far as I know," I offered in slight confusion.

He sighed quietly before continuing. "I don't want to sound like a prick but why did your mom push you to ask another guy out? That's just shady shit parents pull when they don't approve of their daughter's boyfriend."

I instantly understood and felt guilty. I couldn't blame him for his perspective; it made sense when dealing with most families, but not mine. My parents weren't like that, particularly my mom. She didn't have a problem expressing her disapproval and, thus far, she'd shared none over Mike.

"I know how it looks and I don't blame you for thinking that, but my mom isn't conniving. My parents have known

Kellan's since I was a baby. I really do believe it's just my mom's way of helping welcome them to the area. I don't think she meant any harm. Plus, I agreed that we could make it a group thing. It's nothing Mike, really. I promise."

I could feel his tension start to slip away. I knew he didn't completely believe me, but it did no good to push further. My parents hadn't done or said anything to make me think Mike was right in any way. Likewise, he didn't know of anything they'd said or done to imply he was right so we were at a dead end.

"Sorry. I just, well, I didn't expect any competition I guess."

"What's that supposed to mean?" My heart sunk a little. I knew he didn't have any competition. He never did and probably never would, but hearing him say it hurt. I felt like he'd just stabbed me with a short, sharp blade and awaited my reaction.

"Hey! That's a trick question."

"How so?" I sat up on the couch, having abandoned my pizza long ago, anticipating his reply.

"Okay, so I maybe stuck my foot in my mouth back there. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I don't expect to keep you forever-" he fumbled before I abruptly cut him off.

"Come again!" My mind was reeling. I was struggling to take in his whirlwind of misguided destruction.

"I, damn it," he huffed in frustration. "I just meant that I didn't expect any competition so soon. I thought I'd have you to myself for a little while before I had to fight for your attention again."

Well, he did come up with a nice save. It still didn't erase the unease I felt inside. We usually say things we mean when we speak without thinking; they just tend to get us in more trouble because they lack the editing that softens the blow or avoids the point.

It had me questioning how he truly felt about me. I mean I knew Mike cared about me to a certain degree, but even the best of friends could be the cruelest of judges.

"Um, I think I'm just going to go for now."

"Babe, don't go. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean it; you know that," he pleaded.

"It's okay. I'm not mad." It was the truth. I wasn't mad; I was upset and disappointed. Mike was always the one lifting me up, never cutting me down. He'd never made a joke about my weight or offhand comment about my imperfections. Until now, I thought he liked me just the way I was, but now I was wondering if he liked me simply because he knew no one else would. Men are territorial, just like dogs. *Am I just a pissing contest to him?*

"I don't believe you."

"I'm fine, really. I just want to watch the rest of my movie. I'll talk to you later." I tried to inject as much enthusiasm into my tone as possible praying it would be enough to convince him.

"Uh, okay. I'll call you later?" he asked rather than declared.

"Sure. I'll talk to you later."

I quickly hung up the phone to avoid any more awkwardness. He'd officially destroyed the confidence I'd had in our relationship. I knew it was sad that one phrase

could demolish a month of dating and five years of friendship, but I was weak. Okay, perhaps I was more pathetic than weak. I just didn't have any solid reasons to believe in myself and questioned my once concrete beliefs in the idea of 'us,' especially now that Kellan was absorbing most of my mental concentration.

I felt even worse when I started to cry. It wasn't even that time of the month, but I felt overly emotional over the situation. Maybe I put Mike on too high of a pedestal. He'd always been the picture of perfection as a boyfriend. He walked me to three out of four of my classes, was openly affectionate with me regardless of the audience, called me every night to wish me sweet dreams; he reassured me around every corner and solidified my belief in the idea of love and a happily ever after, and I fought hard to believe it, but no one person can truly live up to that image forever. No one person can solely hold up a relationship, and lately I'd been questioning ours.

I'd just started to regain control over my heaves when my phone rang. I wasn't familiar with the number, but on the off chance it was my parents calling from the hotel, I answered it.

"Hello?"

"Um, hi Lexi. It's Kellan."

"Oh, hi" I answered trying to clear the lingering effects of crying from my voice as I quickly wiped the last of my tears from my cheek and allowed one last quiet snuffle to escape.

"Did I call at a bad time?"

"Oh no. No. It's fine; I'm fine. Sorry," I stumbled.

“Are you okay?” I was surprised at the genuine concern that lit his voice.

“Yeah. I’m good, thanks. Want to catch a movie tomorrow?” I changed the subject. I was trying to sound chipper, but the chip never quite made it.

“I like horror. Are you up for ‘Diary of an Axe Murderer’?” he asked.

“That sounds okay.” I fidgeted for a minute knowing I needed to warn him ahead of time about the others I’d inadvertently invited through Mike. “I hope you don’t mind, but I sort of agreed to this being a group thing.” I felt bad springing that part on him last minute. I always felt uncomfortable in group settings, but could only imagine the magnitude if everyone was a stranger.

“It’s cool,” he replied casually.

“Good. What time’s best for you?”

“It’s a requirement that all horror movies are viewed at night.”

“Okay. I’ll check the times and text you. Are you okay to meet at Barnes & Noble across the street?”

“Sure. See ya then.”

“Okay. Bye.”

The second I slid my phone closed it went off again. I checked the caller ID, but it was Mel.

“Hey,” I answered expectantly.

“Let me just cut to the chase.”

“Thanks for the greeting. Proceed.” I smirked. Only Mel could get away with such rudeness.

“So apparently your boyfriend was a you know what and said something that put him in the pound, but he felt so bad and knew you were upset enough to come groveling to me. The only reason why I’m calling is because I love you and am officially volunteering to kick his ass if you’ll just say the word.”

“Thanks,” I chuckled, taken aback by her bluntness. That wasn’t anything new for Mel, but she never ceased to amaze me with her epic blurbs. “I think I’m okay though. He apologized and I’m sure you already dragged him through the ringer when he confessed.”

“Of course, but he could handle a second round.”

“I’ll pass. Hey, what are you doing tomorrow?”

“What do you think?”

“Babysitting.” I didn’t even have to guess. Mel was her mom’s built in babysitter ever since her divorce a few years ago.

“As if I had anything better to do on a Saturday,” she sulked.

“Sorry. Any idea when she’ll be home?”

“She never gives a time. She’s home when she gets home.” I heard the frustration in Mel’s tone. She was used to the situation by now, but the bitterness never left.

“What’s on the agenda for tomorrow?”

“Movie with Kellan and Mike plus whoever else Mike intends to drag along.”

“You still inviting him after what he said.”

“We’re still dating. Plus, I’m not really mad at him, just a little hurt. Everyone hurts you at some point though; even

those you love and trust the most inevitably betray you in some way so I won't hold it against him."

"You are such a drag sometimes."

"Gee, thanks. I love you too."

"I know you do, but I have to go. I just heard my mom come in. Call me and let me know how it goes tomorrow. I want all the juicy details so remember them all!"

"Okay," I laughed. "Night."

"Night Lex."

With that I closed the phone letting out a deep sigh. With nothing left to distract me, the picture from Kellan's MySpace page jumped back to the forefront of my mind. How exactly did my parents know Kellan? If he's a family member, then why didn't my parents announce his arrival here in Charleston? When my Aunt Claire moved here, my parents made a big deal of it. For an entire month we gave her tours of the city. They were insistent on spending time at every landmark, and there are oodles of them here. Why didn't we do the same with Kellan's family?

Wait. It dawned on me. If he's family, then that meant there was definitely no chance of him being interested in me and that should definitely cut off any curiosity on my part. Perhaps this explained why he mocked my discomfort when I had to ask him out; I was his family... *Oh my!* Had I gone off the deep end? Was I crushing on a distant cousin?

I decided I couldn't wait any longer; unease was rising rapidly within me. I dialed my mom's cell. She answered on the first ring jumping to the wrong conclusion since I usually didn't bother them while they're away.

“Lexi, are you okay? What’s wrong?” Her words flew off her tongue in a fury of fear.

“Nothing’s wrong, Mom. I’m okay, just have a question for you,” I quickly deterred.

She lost the frantic tone in her voice and calmly replied, “Sure sweetie. What do you need?”

“Well I asked Kellan out like you asked and just so you know he was completely amused by it. Anyways I saw you and dad in his family reunion picture from this summer and was wondering how we’re related,” I stated more than asked, but my mother understood.

“We’re not technically related. We met his family while living in Basque Country when you were little. His family revisits Spain the same time as your dad and I every two years,” she explained.

“Oh, okay,” I stuttered somewhat dumbfounded at her explanation.

“We’ll talk more when your father and I return tomorrow, okay?” She clearly wasn’t comfortable with the subject, which left me feeling more knotted than before.

“Okay, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you too. Bye sweetie.”

There was definitely something strange here. If his family was like family to us, then why did she have me ask him out as if it were a simple gesture? I was missing information, vital facts because it didn’t add up to me. I didn’t remember his family growing up. My mother was very detail oriented and told me practically everything, why would this be the exception? *Oh well, I might as well give*

up on it for now. I would have to wait until tomorrow for the remainder of my questions to be answered.

I placed the pizza box inside the fridge before dragging myself back upstairs to my room. I had a whole night of nothing ahead of me, not even my best friend to keep me entertained. Feeling philosophical on life, I put on my glasses, pulled out my worn copy of Plato's *Republic* and began reading.

I must have fallen asleep because when the phone rang I sprung up out of bed into a dark room. The light of the phone guided me as to where to reach. I groggily answered, "Hello?"

"Hey Lex, it's Mel. Did I wake you?" she inquired apologetically.

"Um, yeah, but it's okay. What's up?" I asked still trying to piece together how long I had been unconscious.

"Oh, well I just had this bad feeling and wanted to check on you."

"Oh, thanks. I'm okay though. No worries. Are you okay?"

It took me a hazy second to realize Mel hadn't responded. "Mel?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Just... I don't know. I have this feeling like you're keeping something from me. Are you sure you're okay?" Mel knew me better than anyone. I hadn't even discussed Kellan with her to the degree I was analyzing him and hadn't even thought about mentioning how deeply Mike's words cut me today, yet she knew. Somehow she knew.

I sighed, mentally debating whether or not to take the plunge.

“If you don’t want to talk about it; it’s fine. I just wanted to make sure you were alright.” Hearing the genuine concern in her voice broke me.

“It’s nothing serious. It’s just that Mike’s words today have really made me stop and think about our relationship. The way he said it, it made me wonder if he was with me just because he wasn’t ready to compete for another girl, like he decided to be with me because I was the easiest person to get with and would require the least amount of work and effort.

“I don’t know. You know how I was... How I still am,” I quickly amended. “No guy has ever shown any interest in me before and I guess I’m holding out, waiting for this all to turn out to be some kind of joke still.

“As much as it pains me to admit this, he really does like you. And beneath his obnoxious exterior, Mike’s a great guy. I know you haven’t had a boyfriend before and you’re still a little insecure and leery, but if you could have heard the things he said about you, you would just melt.”

“I know. And Mike is a great guy. I guess... Well, I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Why do you say that?” Her voice held concern instead of accusation.

“I thought for sure Mike liked you for the longest time so it took me a while to adjust to the idea that he could like me. Plus, look at me. I’m fat, I have a couple pimples on my face, and I have to wear glasses sometimes... I’m just not the kind of girl guys like him go for. I feel like it’s impractical for me to believe that he actually likes me. I don’t feel totally safe letting my guard down yet.”

“Lex, how many times have we had this conversation? You are a great girl, and regardless of what you say, you are beautiful. I wish I had your boobs and butt! Please! I have nothing compared to you. So you have a little more around the middle than I do; it’s all in the right places to guys even though you feel like it’s in the wrong places,” she confusingly attempted to salvage her point. “Listen, you are great Lex. You’re better than you give yourself credit for. You really do have a lot to offer. I know it’s taken boys a lot longer to recognize that in you but did you ever stop to think that maybe you’re worth the wait?”

“I know. I’m just not comfortable with me. I’m never going to be a size two and even if I do get to that size I will never have my mother’s beauty or your bubbly personality,” I wallowed in self-defeat. I knew I was being pathetic, but couldn’t muster the strength to snap myself out of it.

“Listen to me Lex. Put your stupid personal BS to the side for a minute. Mike likes you. No, he adores you. The boy freaking idolizes you for crying out loud! Put aside your insecurities for one minute and just think about it. Hasn’t Mike, aside from his words tonight, been an ideal boyfriend?”

“Yes, but that’s also the problem. No one is perfect. It’s almost as if he’s trying too hard to make it work and I’m just not sure if I want it to; if I’m ready for it to.” I sighed.

“Why?” She was in lawyer mode now, or as I sometimes referred to it as: intimidation 101. Mike was her client, and I, the defendant, therefore had to explain why with every generic answer I provided.

“Because after a month of dating, I still don’t feel confident around him. I’m comfortable, but not in a way that makes us more than friends.” I realized I was having an epiphany.

“Isn’t this what you have been wanting for the last three years now?” she questioned in frustration.

“Yeah...”

“So?” she pressed.

“So I don’t know. I just have a lot on my mind, a lot to consider. I don’t want to hurt Mike, but I also don’t want to get hurt.”

“Lex, in love there is always a risk of getting hurt. You’re trusting your most valuable possession, your lifeline, with someone else. That’s a big deal. I will say though that your insecurities with your relationship are a sign of trust issues. You don’t trust him, even after all these years of friendship. That’s sad Lex. Honestly though, I don’t think you trust anyone outside of me and your parents, and I have no idea why.”

I could hear her edging towards the slippery slope of surrender when it came to reasoning with me. Her insight was spot on though. I didn’t know why I didn’t trust Mike; I didn’t know why I was so closed off. I just was.

“I don’t know why either,” I sighed.

Deciding to get it all off my chest, I relayed my curiosity over Kellan and his family. I told her about the picture, the conversation with my mom and the intense pull I felt towards him for no explained reason.

“I don’t know Lex. You sound tense about it all, but really don’t have much to work with. I would say just give it time. The truth is always revealed, and time will tell you what your heart has yet to figure out with both guys.”

“Thanks. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Let’s not even try to fathom it.” I heard the smile in her voice.

“Sounds good to me.” Somehow our conversations, regardless of how deep, always came full circle. We never hung up on a bad note it seemed.

“Okay, I better hit the hay. I need my beauty sleep and the rugrat likes to get up at the crack of dawn.”

“’kay. Night.”

“Sweet dreams bumblebee,” she giggled.

I reached over to turn on the lamp on my nightstand. I looked around my room while reflecting on my conversation with Mel. I hopped out of bed to grab some pajamas deciding a shower was in order. There is nothing like a hot shower to melt away my anxiety.

Finally gaining enough gumption to call Mike back and smooth things over, at least until I could mentally get a grip on what I wanted out of our relationship long-term, I reached for my phone to dial, but found it ringing already. I looked back at the clock - 11:56pm - before answering, “Hello?”

“Hey Lex, it’s Mike.”

“Oh, hey. I was just about to call you.”

“Oh, well I couldn’t hold out any longer though,” he explained.

“Oh, okay,” I replied. “I guess I did have something that I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Really?” he perked up instantly.

“Yeah. I’m really sorry about before. I really like you Mike. It’s not you, it’s me.”

“It sounds like you’re trying to dump me.” A quick nervous laugh escaped him.

“No. I’m just trying to explain why I reacted the way I did. I just... well, I don’t look at myself the way you may look at me. I see myself as a fat blob with too many physical imperfections. I guess I sort of feel like this could be some colossal joke because I don’t see myself as attractive if I’m totally honest,” I attempted to be as detailed as possible in my perspective. “So when you said that you didn’t think you would have any competition, it brought my insecurities to the surface I guess. I’m sorry.”

“But that makes you even better babe. You aren’t pompous or full of yourself like the majority of the girls at school. You’re you and don’t try to fit in where you don’t. You’re rare in our world.” I lightened up a bit at that. I’d never heard those words from anyone before, let alone a hot guy.

“You really think so?”

“Why would I lie about something like that, babe? You’re forcing me to look like a total retard right now making me be all mushy and honest.”

I laughed at that and for the first time I felt a tug at my heart as if this was how it was supposed to be. That love was able to touch everyone, even the fat girls who felt like they weren’t worth the extra effort.

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Chapter Five

I woke up in a daze, trying to figure out if last night even happened. I rolled over, still tucked under the warmth of my sheets, to the little alarm clock on my nightstand; it read 10:46am. I yawned and stretched before rolling out of bed, grabbing my cell phone as my feet hit the floor.

I slid my perfectly manicured feet – Mel insisted on the activity last weekend and I like to remain kempt – into my slippers and headed downstairs. Upon reaching the kitchen I fumbled around gathering the supplies for a bowl of cereal. I sat at the island to indulge in my hearty breakfast still contemplating all that I was now sure had happened the previous evening.

Merely minutes after taking my first bite, I heard my parents rustle through the garage door.

“Good morning sleepy head,” my dad greeted as he walked into the kitchen to kiss my forehead.

“Morning Dad. Where’s Mom?” I searched behind him for her.

“I’m right here sweetie,” she answered for him. She walked over and gave me a half hug as I was still sitting on the stool munching away at my breakfast. She awkwardly stopped and stared at me. I felt the heat of her eyes on me and began to fidget under her gaze.

“How was the beach?” I finally broke in.

“Beautiful as always,” she smiled, slightly jostling her head before walking away.

“Where did you guys stay?” I asked curiously since the trip seemed last minute.

“Your dad surprised me with accommodations in a gorgeous turn-of-the-century bed and breakfast on the beach. It was just perfect,” she gushed giving my dad a kiss at the end.

“Nice job Dad!” I cheered.

“Thanks. I do try,” he said, slightly embarrassed. “I’m going to unpack and take a shower,” he announced as he exited the kitchen.

“How was your night?” my mother inquired turning towards me to put the milk and cereal away.

“It was okay. Kind of boring,” I admitted. “I did make plans for later though. Me, Kellan, Mike and a few others are going to the movies. This way Kellan can meet more people too.” I eyed her curiously amidst the last line, studying her closely. For what, I wasn’t sure. I just still felt strange when it came to the Kellan situation.

“Sure,” she stated with a bit of hesitation. “This is surprising and certainly not the activity I had in mind since you haven’t been to the movies in almost a year.”

“Well, I figured a movie was perfect since conversation wouldn’t be forced in the beginning and it would also give us something to talk about afterwards,” I quickly defended.

She nodded her head in understanding. “Do you need me to drop you off?”

“Um. I’m not sure yet. I’ll let you know.”

“How do you like Kellan so far?” she inquired trying to feel her way into him it seemed.

“He’s nice. Kind of quiet; keeps to himself. I think I’m the only person he’s talked to so far with the exception of Mel for like a minute.”

“Be sure to include him. I’m sure this must be overwhelming for him. Charleston is very different from Seattle.” She played his advocate under the circumstances. Little did she know he didn’t need one.

“I will.”

“I know. You’ve always been warm and welcoming with others,” she beamed approvingly. “Now let me go help your father unpack. If I don’t he won’t remember where he put anything.”

“Okay.” She gave me one last extended glance before leaving to tend to the suitcase.

I hopped up to wash my dish right as Mel called. She was eager to hear about my conclusions over what we’d discussed last night. Considering I hadn’t made much progress, we didn’t linger on the phone, but I agreed to call her later with all the details of my evening. I text Mike and Kellan to meet me at Barnes & Noble around 5:30 since the movie started at 5:45 just across the street.

I checked the clock on the microwave anxious over the upcoming night’s events. *Ugh*. It’s only 11:30am. I settled on finishing my monologue for English, though I was nearly done already.

Thirty minutes was all it took to complete my masterpiece. I closed my binder, set my glasses aside and pranced to my walk-in closet to decide my outfit for the day. I had to be the only girl to boast a huge walk-in closet that wasn’t even a quarter of the way filled. I only owned four pairs of shoes – a pair of Nike tennis shoes, a set of brown and black heels, which I rarely wore, and my favorite pair of tan Vans flip-flops.

Limited in choice, I resolved to go comfy-casual with my favorite pair of XL blue Victoria Secret Capri sweats

with an imbedded rhinestone design at the bottom on each side where they gathered - they hugged my body perfectly to accentuate my good parts yet were relaxed not squeezing any part of me - and a navy blue tank top which would be covered by my oversized red Aeropostale hoodie. I grabbed a clean pair of panties and a bra on my way to the shower.

I stepped out of the shower and stared at my hair while dressing. I chose to style it simply by throwing my dark locks into hot rollers adding a nice thick wave. Upon completion, I stood peering at myself in the mirror for a solid five minutes. I looked different, almost pretty in a way, but couldn't determine the reason why. My sweats still fit right so I hadn't lost weight; I'd styled my hair this way before so my face was framed the same. Then I recognized it. My blemishes were gone. My face was smooth, flawlessly illuminating my fuller cheeks and accenting the honey in my brown eyes. I ran my fingers over every part of my skin in awe. Could this be possible or was I dreaming?

I was leaning over the counter right up to the mirror patting my face when I heard a startling knock on my open bathroom door. I jumped back and looked at my mother, whose face was wrinkled with worry. She came to stand behind me tousling my hair and gazing at my mirrored reflection.

"The change is already starting," she whispered, lost in my mirror image.

"What are you talking about Mom?" I questioned with raised brows. She continued to stare lost in a daze of emotion. I'd never seen my mother cry, but she looked ready to in this moment.

"Mom," I prompted again, beginning to worry.

Hearing the concern in my voice, she peered away from the mirror. "You're changing into a beautiful young woman much quicker than I'm ready for; that's all sweetie."

She attempted to pacify me with her response but didn't succeed. *Could me getting older really be the cause of such an intense moment?* I pondered a bit more trying to view things from her perspective as a mother.

Maybe I was wrong before; perhaps I was suspicious over nothing. My mother did seem to be struggling with my transition into womanhood; that's probably why they had been watching me with awed eyes this week. Their only daughter was growing up so fast before them.

Not wanting to dive deeper into the idea, I requested an early drop off to the bookstore. I could easily lose myself in the books and magazines for a few hours before the others arrived. My mother agreed and disappeared to pull the car out of the garage.

I slid into my flip-flops and threw my wallet and phone into my jacket pocket on my way out. A shiver ran through me as I opened the front door. A gust of cool October wind bounced against me. I let out a chuckle acknowledging mentally that only a true southerner would wear flip-flops and a jacket.

The drive there was filled with radio music, for my mom didn't say anything and I feared her almost downpour would erupt had I initiated a conversation.

"Have fun," she said as I got out of the car.

"Thanks Mom. See you later," I called back. I walked inside and straight to the Starbucks counter.

"Hey Sam," I said as I approached the front of the line.

“Hey Lexi. Where’s Mel?” she asked looking past me for my friend.

“She’s at home with her brother today.” It did feel odd being in our hang out spot without her.

“Cool,” she nodded. “The usual?”

“Actually, I’m gonna do a hot chocolate. The weather got to me.”

“Sure thing. You look different today,” she observed as she started preparing my drink. I mindlessly ran my fingers over my face still unable to process my perfect complexion. It was the most amazing feeling looking in the mirror that morning.

“Yeah, my face finally cleared up,” I admitted with a smile.

“You look good; refreshed,” she said. Sam didn’t go around offering compliments to people. In fact, I’d never heard her compliment anything outside of a ‘rad shirt’ once.

“Thanks.”

“Here you go.” She handed me my drink.

“Thanks. See you later.” I took a sip and advanced towards the classic books section.

I browsed through the greats like *Moby Dick*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Huckleberry Finn* before drifting towards the religious section. I’d always been solid in my Christian beliefs with the Bible, but enjoyed studying the theories behind other denominations and religious forms.

As I approached that part of the store I was surprised to see Kellan standing there lost in a book. He held a thick

black book seemingly ancient in design titled 'Vampyres and Demons'.

"Hey Kellan," I announced my presence with a smile. I must have startled him because he slammed the book shut and jumped back.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," I quickly added. His reaction jolted me; he acted like a child who stole and nearly got caught.

"You didn't scare me," he laughed anxiously as he placed the book back on the shelf.

"Vampires and demons, huh? Anything good?"

"Egh, not really." He stuffed his hands into his jean pockets.

"Do you enjoy myths and legends?" I inquired trying to learn more about this mystical new arrival.

"Yes. Most of them I've found to be true," he answered with a disturbed yet poetic undertone in his seductive voice.

He looked directly at me as I began to daydream again. I get lost in his amazing green eyes every time. Their depth is mesmerizing, almost hypnotic. He smiled his perfect grin, and for the first time, I noticed he has a small dimple on his left cheek. His beauty made me smile in awe. I probably looked so stupid with my crooked smirk reflected towards him, but it's worth the sacrifice to admire him a few minutes longer.

"You look...beautiful today," he interrupted my admiration of him to say. "Your skin is glowing now; you're going to be perfect," he added, still gazing at me.

I broke my concentration taking a deep breath as I adjusted my glasses. *Wait, did he say I was going to be perfect? Perfect for what? Oh, who cares? He said I looked beautiful!* This model of a man who was in front of me admired my hidden beauty in some way. I wished he would make a pass at me then. I could only imagine the non-exonerated feeling I'd receive in kissing him. I immediately began scolding myself at the thought. I was with Mike, and I'd agreed to give our relationship a chance.

Not knowing how much time had passed in my mental debate, I quickly stated, "Thanks," nonchalantly. I glanced back up at him. He was still staring at me and looked to be debating something as well.

"Want to go sit down for a bit?" I asked motioning towards the café.

"Sure," he gave a quick nod before making his way in that direction. We sat at the table and stared at each other again until he began the conversation.

"So how long did you live in Spain?" he started, softening his previously intense gaze.

"Two years. We returned to Charleston when I turned five." I took another sip of my drink. "How about you?"

"Four years. My parents moved to Seattle shortly after I turned seven."

"Maybe I was too young, but I don't remember your family," I prompted hoping he would elaborate.

"I only saw your parents a few times when I was younger. They never brought you around our kind," he stated. He furrowed his brows as if he was pondering something.

“And what *kind* are you?” I pressed in confusion.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” he answered sternly. I hated this riddle; I didn’t like stuff being withheld from me. More upsetting was the fact that he said my parents knew, but they hadn’t said one word to me regarding any of this.

“So are you dating anyone?” he swapped subjects, a prime method of distraction and avoidance.

“Um... yeah,” I replied still trying to process his previous response. *What did he mean “our kind”? Maybe that’s why my parents didn’t mention him. Except why would they say he was like family but then distance me from him?* The more I thought about it, the more frustrated I became. It simply wasn’t adding up right... I finally gave up returning to the conversation. Kellan looked at me warily.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No. It’s okay. I’m just confused. Everyone has been really weird with me lately and it just doesn’t add up,” I shrugged. No matter how hard I tried to push this aside, it was an itch that wouldn’t be scratched until someone caved and finally communicated with me outside code.

“No, it’s my fault. I know you’re analytical. I can just tell. So I shouldn’t have mentioned it.” He seemed sincere. Even if he wasn’t, I couldn’t say it was him I was upset with. It was my parents. I didn’t understand why they would keep secrets from me. And if Kellan was the wrong kind before, he apparently was the right kind now since it was okay for me to go out with him.

“Are you able to explain any part of it to me?” I asked hopelessly.

“I’m really not the right person to ask.” He offered me a small sympathetic smile.

“What am I missing?”

He sighed. “As soon as you know, I’ll tell you everything. I promise.” Oddly, I believed him.

“When will I know?” I pressed.

“Within the week.”

Great. “*Within the week?*” Did that mean my world was going to come crashing down in a week? It just didn’t make sense. He’s not making sense. Nothing in my life seemed to be cohesive. In forty-eight hours my world had turned upside down.

I stared at him. Despite my frustration over the brainteaser he’d given me, and despite the fact that I was dating Mike and Kellan was under the forbidden label, I still longed to embrace him, to place my body against his. Beyond the physical attraction I bore for him, I felt oddly secure and trusted him. He’s a total stranger I lusted after yet trusted, dare I say, more than my own boyfriend at that point. What was wrong with me? I was baffled by my attitude. He acknowledged my concerned expression.

“I know you’re scared and concerned, but it’s nothing, really. Don’t worry yourself with that stuff today,” he stated in his soothing voice while relinquishing the full hypnotic power of his eyes on me.

“O...okay,” I stuttered.

“Everything’s going to be fine Lexi.”

“I just don’t like feeling confused,” I admitted breaking his gaze to sip again.

“Do you like scary movies?” he asked, breaking the tension.

“As long as they aren’t cheesy,” I smirked.

“You’re not one of those girls who screams every time the music begins are you?” he jeered with a laugh.

“Not usually,” I blushed, embarrassed to admit I could be at times. He caught on though and chuckled.

“You’re caught.”

“Damn,” I smiled not caring that he knew my humiliating reaction.

“So tell me about this boyfriend of yours. Is he coming today?”

“Oh, yeah. His name is Mike. We only started dating recently.” I came to a halt, fidgeting with the lid on my cup. I felt comfortable talking to Kellan. I felt like I could openly talk to him about anything, but the situation with Mike, while smoothed over for the moment, still held a question mark.

“You don’t sound too sure about him,” he stated hitting the nail on the head.

“Um, well... It’s all still new. That’s all.”

He nodded not commenting further on my clear hesitation. “What is your ideal guy then?” He was asking me, but I felt like he already knew. It felt like he knew a lot about me for not truly knowing me.

“I’m really not sure. Don’t laugh, but... well, I’ve never had a boyfriend before Mike,” I admitted feeling my face heat up simultaneously. I immediately regretted my brave blabbermouth moment, but couldn’t take it back and trying

to explain or provide some lame excuse would only make it worse. So I did what I could: I braced myself waiting for hysterics at any moment... but they didn't come.

"I've never had one either. A girlfriend I mean. I've dated around, but nothing serious," he offered. I looked up in shock.

"Really? But you're hot." I blurted before thinking. I instantly felt my cheeks heat up and put my face in my hands. I went from bad to worse; a fate I didn't know was possible in that moment.

"Thanks. I appreciate that. You're, uh... pretty too," he chuckled. It sounded like an awkward, uncomfortable release though.

"You don't have to say that," I mumbled within my hands.

"You're right, but I said it because I wanted to. Because it's true." I peered up at him to discern whether he was lying to make me feel better, but he seemed sincere.

"Thanks," I whispered.

Moments later Mike approached the table where we sat.

"Hey Mike," I welcomed him with a short wave. "Mike, this is Kellan. Kellan - Mike," I introduced gesturing my hands appropriately. They didn't shake hands merely nodding at each other and saying hello. Mike quickly turned his attention back to me.

"Wow babe, you look great!" he commented. He stood beside the table and ogled me until I started to squirm.

"Thanks," I blushed.

“You guys ready to go?” Mike asked checking his watch.

“What about the others?” He never told me how many he’d invited or any names.

“They’re all flakes.”

“Oh. Um, okay. I guess I’m ready to go. You?” I checked with Kellan.

“Yeah,” he nodded.

We got up and followed quietly as Kellan led the way to his car. He’d agreed to drive us over to the theatre earlier. I didn’t know what to expect, but I was shocked and impressed by what I saw. He walked up to a black BMW M5 with barely legal black tinted windows and matching black rims. It reminded me of a car Batman would drive as he fought viciously against his attackers in Gotham.

“Nice ride,” Mike remarked, eyeing the car from front to back.

“Thanks,” Kellan replied as he opened the passenger door for me. Mike shot him a look of discouragement, but he didn’t acknowledge the expression as he closed the door behind me.

The drive across the street took less than three minutes, the majority of which we were stuck waiting on a light to change. This time Mike opened the door for me and took my hand to help me out, though it really wasn’t necessary. I immediately broke contact; again, it felt wrong with him now. We each bought our tickets and headed into the theatre.

As we entered the theatre, reality hit me. Darting back and forth with my eyes, I realized that the guy, my

boyfriend, who liked me would be on one side of me, and the guy I was increasingly liking more than my boyfriend would be on the other side of me. I stifled a groan as we took our seats in the upper rows.

The movie was just as obdurate as I feared. I did scream a few times; Kellan laughed and Mike took my hand to comfort me. Mid-way through the movie Mike put his arm around me at which Kellan again chuckled. I was able to shrug it off towards the end but that didn't erase the uncomfortable vibe of the situation.

I was struggling, fighting internally. I liked Mike, but couldn't determine if I actually liked him as anything more than a friend. The more time I spent with Kellan, regardless of communication, I felt less and less inclined to Mike. I didn't want to share any physical touches with him in front of Kellan. I was questioning my motives behind that one. I felt obligated to be loyal to Mike because he was my first boyfriend; he was the first guy to acknowledge that I was beautiful, but I was only using him if I couldn't reciprocate the gesture.

It was still early so we strolled across the street to the mall. Naturally we ended up in a bookstore, Books-A-Million to be exact. Kellan and I browsed books quietly while Mike flipped through car magazines. Mike was identical to Mel; he wasn't comfortable with silence and often forced conversation, however, Kellan was serene with silence, which made me less anxious with him.

Ten minutes into browsing Mike came over to us.

"Hey babe, you want to go down to FYE?" He threw his thumb in the air towards the general direction of the store.

"Um..." I looked at Kellan to see if he wanted to leave yet. He nodded once in agreement so I turned back to

Mike. "Sure. Let's go."

Mike led the way; I wandered shortly behind him and Kellan walked beside me in synch. As we approached the exit, we all filed side by side to saunter towards FYE. I still felt uncomfortable and constantly being between the guys made it worse.

The store was a short distance from Books-A-Million but Mike intended to make the most of the trip. Seconds after leaving the bookstore, he reached over to clasp my hand. He entangled our fingers delicately and gave me a small squeeze. It felt nice, yet wrong. This unexplained anxiety surged through me as I glanced up at him. He turned in that precise moment to beam a smile at me as we continued walking.

I turned my attention to Kellan, who was parallel at my side with his hands tucked in his pockets. I wanted to reach out and take his hand, but resisted the urge, unsure of what his reaction would be. Looking at him made me feel guilty; I was forcing him into the third wheel role I remembered so fondly.

I was instantly relieved when we arrived at our destination. I freed my hand and started browsing. Mike headed towards the rock/punk section while Kellan and I flipped through movie soundtracks.

"What kind of music do you like?" he asked, breaking our silent streak.

"I listen to pretty much anything; it depends on what mood I'm in as to what I listen to." I never followed the mainstream music scene diligently.

"And what are you in the mood to listen to now?" he probed casually.

"Hmm," I mumbled flipping through the cases in front of me. "Ah-hah!" I stated holding up the West Side Story soundtrack. He laughed shaking his head slightly.

"You're in the mood to listen to Romeo & Juliet sing?"

"Forget the lyrics, the musical arrangements are genius. Bernstein and Sondheim are gold."

"If you say so," he remarked with disapproval.

"What kind of music do you like?" I asked a bit sarcastically detesting his response to my choice.

"Classic rock is my favorite but if you're asking about soundtracks it's 'A Hard Day's Night'. You can't touch the Beatles," he replied in a strong assured tone.

"I've never even heard of that one."

"You're definitely missing out then," he advised with a heart-breaking smile. I momentarily melted.

"Hey Lex," Mike called as he loomed toward us. "My mom just called and she's outside so I have to go," he announced. I picked up on my cue.

"Oh, okay. Well I'll walk you out," I offered returning the disc to its rack.

"I'll come with you." Kellan hurried on my heels. We walked through the food court and out the exit. His mom's van was parked at the curb.

"I had a good time babe. We should do this again soon," he suggested purposefully excluding Kellan.

"Sure," I replied in agreement. And then it happened, the thing I was somewhat dreading. He gave me a hug and leaned in to kiss me. Preconceiving this possibility, I was prepared and gave his lips my left cheek. After one peck, I

gently pushed away careful not to hurt his feelings in the process. "I'll talk to you later," I smiled taking a giant step backwards to create some distance between us.

"Umm, night babe," he said caught off guard by my brush off. He turned and got into his mom's car. I waved as she drove off. I released a sigh of pure embarrassment and perhaps a bit of frustration was entwined too before turning back to Kellan.

"I guess I should call my mom to come get me."

"I can take you home," he offered. "Plus, it'll be nice to see your parents again."

"Are you sure?" I checked.

"Yeah. Let's go." He immediately started walking around the mall back in the direction of the theatre.

A chill ran through me as I felt the night air for the first time though I'd been outside for five minutes now. I shrugged deeper into my hoodie but received no warmth or protection from the fall air. As we rounded the corner he removed his zip-up hoodie and placed it over my shoulders.

"Thanks," I replied to his gesture. Inside I was screaming with excitement yet remained calm on the surface. "You're not cold?" I glimpsed at his bare arms with their blatant muscle definition gleaming off the moonlight.

"I'm okay," he smiled softly. The twitch of his lips didn't quite reveal his dimple, but I still basked in it.

He again opened my door for me. I pulled his jacket to the front of me, resting it like a blanket. He turned on the heat as soon as the car was started. I shivered as he began driving, still not feeling the heat quite yet.

"You would never survive Seattle weather," he commented.

"Thanks for the warning." I rolled my eyes sarcastically and gave him a smug smile. He just chuckled quietly as my stomach growled.

"Hungry?" he queried with a raised brow.

"Yeah. Aren't you?" I scrunched my face shyly realizing I hadn't eaten since this morning. I quickly remembered he hadn't either that I'd observed.

"Not hungry, just thirsty," he smiled a full, devious grin. "Want me to stop somewhere?"

"No. I'm okay. I'll just eat something when I get home." I was already embarrassed that my stomach was growling and his wasn't. The last thing I wanted was to prolong that sort of humiliation, even if it was for the purpose of squashing it.

In half the time it should have taken we were in front of my house. I stared at him with a puzzled expression since I hadn't given him directions. *How did he know where I live?* He looked over at me and must have read my face.

"I know your parents, remember?"

"Yeah, but you haven't seen them since Spain in August, right?" I both accused and checked.

Kellan grinned sarcastically, if that's even possible, and without skipping a beat was opening my door. I unlocked the front door to the house and made no hesitation in walking towards the family room when I heard the sound of the television.

"Hey Mom, Hey Dad. Look who came to visit," I announced whisking past them into the kitchen. They

turned and greeted Kellan. My father shot a warning look to him as if he was a troublemaker while saying hello. My mother, ever warm and accepting, got up and gave him a hug.

"You hungry, Kellan?" I asked as I pulled out the ingredients for a turkey sandwich.

"No thanks," he replied.

"What about a drink? I know you said you were thirsty in the car," I offered. He looked at my parents; they seemed to be communicating though no words were spoken.

"I'm okay for now."

"Suit yourself," I shrugged taking a bite of my freshly prepared sandwich. I put the assembly line of ingredients away.

"How was the movie?" my mother asked.

"Cheesy. The same blood and gore story as all scary movies," I said as I closed the fridge.

"You screamed pretty often for such a cheesy movie," Kellan teased.

"I screamed like twice and I wasn't scared, just surprised," I explained in defense, brushing off his absolutely dead on assumptions. Kellan rolled his eyes and laughed. I wanted to melt into a puddle, even with my parents around, feeling the flutters of giddiness in my stomach.

"How are you parents?" my mother asked Kellan.

"They're good. Busy planning a trip to Italy in February."

"We were thinking of attending as well," she stated.

"What's in Italy in February?" I interrupted.

"It's another family reunion," my mother advised. The unwary feeling returned in that moment. They were definitely hiding something, but I was clueless as to what it could be. The Bancrofts weren't family yet my parents were attending their reunions?

"Oh. So soon? Are you and Dad planning to go?" I hoped she would elaborate but knew better. Since they hadn't said anything prior, chances were against them to pick that time in front of Kellan to initiate the discussion of our family secrets.

"We're not sure yet. I'll be sure to tell you if we decide," she promised. I was right. The subject was closed.

"Well, I better get going," Kellan stated.

"Oh, okay." I was a little perplexed. He'd been in my house all of two minutes and was rushing out immediately. I really wished he would stay, but I couldn't ask him to, especially in front of my dad after his initial reaction.

"Have a good night," he waved to my parents.

"It was nice seeing you again," my mother incited.

"I'll walk you out," I offered. I grabbed his hoodie off the stairwell and handed it to him. "Thanks for letting me use your jacket."

"No problem. I had a good time tonight Lexi," he added laying the jacket over his arm.

"So did I." I tried to smile but couldn't. I was a little upset that he was leaving so abruptly and couldn't understand why. I didn't do anything that I knew of and neither had my parents.

"See you Monday?" he verified.

"I'll be there."

"Night" he said as he opened the door. I shrugged internally. I found myself becoming more and more agitated and easily exasperated. I waved as he stepped out on the porch. I stood there and watched him go to his car.

My heart was pounding. I didn't want him to leave. I just wanted him to hold me all night, to hypnotize me with his beautiful eyes while embracing me. Mike was dying to do that with me, but I was slowly realizing that he wasn't who I wanted.

What was it about Kellan? I'd never felt this way before. He fascinated me. He's like a mysterious beauty. He's open with me yet so reserved, obviously hiding beneath his exterior. He seemed so in control of himself while I felt so out of control dreaming, longing for just one intimate moment with this dark attractive creature.

Hearing the rev of his engine as he sped off, I returned to the kitchen to finish my sandwich. Still hungry, I grabbed a slice of cold pizza and a coke from the fridge.

"I'm going to call Mel," I announced already heading towards the stairs.

"Okay, sweetie. Good night," my mother called after me.

I dialed Mel and revisited the events of the night with her leaving out Kellan's bookstore secret. She reveled in every element despite the negative outlook I now held over my relationship with Mike. Amidst her commenting though, her mom walked in the door.

"Got to go for tonight Lex. My mom just got home. I'll talk to you tomorrow," she promised. I could tell by her tone that she was upset about missing the outing. Mel had a complicated living situation with her mom and brother. I was the only person she was allowed to spend unlimited time with, but even that had its restrictions.

"'kay, night," I replied.

By the time my conversation ended with Mel it was 11:30pm. I lay back on my bed. Although things were awkward at points, overall it was a good night. I still couldn't get a handle on my attraction for Kellan; we had some strange connection I couldn't describe beyond the physical. With one look into his eyes I desired more; my self-control went out the window and I was clay in his hands. But emotionally, mentally, I was drawn into him, lost in him as if he were a stimulating piece of literature.

Then there was Mike. He was a good-looking guy. While he was annoying at times, I was pretty sure his intentions were pure. Consequently, there was so much to consider, especially when you added in the secret Kellan almost shared. I was exhausted just entertaining my mind with it all, and quickly fell into a light sleep. I began to dream of Kellan, but just knowing I could do everything I desired with him in my dreams, I allowed myself to slip deeper into sleep.

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Chapter Six

I woke up in a daze, again questioning the events of the night before. I glanced at my bedside clock, surprised when it read 12:32pm. I must have been exhausted; I never slept more than eight hours so it definitely was not like me to sleep twelve.

I felt my phone buzzing beside me, still attached to the charger. I unplugged it and was immediately bombarded with alerts. I had two missed calls from Mel, a text from Mel, a text from Kellan, a missed call from Mike and two text messages from Mike. I checked Mel's text first - 'Call me ASAP! Mike is on his way over!' Kellan wrote 'Text me when you're up.' Mike's first message read 'Good morning', and the next asked 'Got any plans today?'

I text Kellan back quickly, 'I'm up.'

Then I text Mike, 'no plans so far, but then again I just got up.'

Before I could even dial Mel's number my phone was buzzing; it was her.

"Hello?"

"O.M.G. Lex! Where the heck have you been?" she yelled.

"I just woke up. What's going on? What happened?" I immediately panicked at her tone despite being groggy still.

"Mike is what happened," she stated firmly.

"I don't get it. What's going on?"

“Lex, open your bedroom door and listen downstairs,” she instructed.

“NO! He isn’t!”

“Lex, I’ve been trying to warn you. I talked to Rando earlier. Apparently Mike was talking a lot of crap last night and this morning since you gave him the brush off in front of Kellan. The scary part is he sounds obsessive Rando said. It’s like he’s hell bent on marking his territory. He wasn’t like this before, I swear. I didn’t even know this side of him existed. Rando said it was like he snapped. Oh my gosh, I would never have encouraged you to have a relationship with a potentially abusive stalker. I’m so sorry Lex. Please say you forgive me,” she pleaded amidst explanation.

“I haven’t even been awake for five minutes and already my day is upside down,” I whined. I sighed, debating what to do. What could I do really? He was downstairs, which meant inevitably he was talking to my parents. “What am I doing? I’ve got to get down there! I’ll call you later Mel,” I exclaimed and closed the phone before she could answer.

Not bothering to change or even brush my teeth, I stomped downstairs to make my presence known. I didn’t care how I came across; I just wanted him to know that this was not acceptable. I reached the bottom of the stairs expecting, well, I don’t know what I was anticipating, but it’s not what I heard. I heard laughter; Mike and my parents were laughing. This was beyond my mental capacity in my fuzzy state.

I rounded the corner with hesitation observing everyone’s body language. My dad sat on the end of the sectional with his feet up on the chaise lounge, my mother sat beside him and they both were looking at Mike, who was sitting next to my mother telling them some story

about who knows what. I felt like I was dreaming. There was no other explanation for the scene in front of me.

“Good morning sleepy head,” my dad greeted.

Mike turned around and looked at me for a minute before breathlessly stating, “Morning.”

My mother watched the two of us, and, weary of my expression, felt the need to explain. “Mike hasn’t been here long sweetie. Did you sleep well?”

I remained frozen in place, staring at all three of them in disbelief.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” my mother asked, concern dipped in the tiniest and only crease on her forehead.

“I’m fine, Mom,” I finally replied. “Just didn’t expect to entertain a crowd the moment I woke up,” I grumbled harshly while sneering at Mike. Did I mention that I’m sometimes a bear when I first wake up? Like just returning to the world from hibernation, at first I take in the scenery, but can quickly attack without a moment’s notice if crossed. He was brave. He got up and walked towards me.

“Sorry babe. I know I should have waited for you to call, but I couldn’t wait to see you.”

I sighed, ignoring his gesture of cause, and walked towards the kitchen. I grabbed the ingredients for my bowl of cereal and sat at the island acting as if he wasn’t there. He sat beside me, ignoring my signs.

My mind was reeling with the information Mel gave me. I expected Mike to be aggressive, overly animated in a creepy way almost, based on Rando’s recollection, but saw no signs.

“Um, your mom and I are going to run some errands. We’ll be back later. Will you be okay, kiddo?” Dad asked.

“I’ll be fine. Have fun,” I mumbled dismissively, taking my first bite.

“It was nice seeing you again Mike,” my mother cited as my parents scurried out the room.

“You too,” he smiled diligently.

I couldn’t believe they were doing this. They were leaving me here alone, with a guy, and not just any guy, my boyfriend, on purpose. Was Kellan really that bad? They seemed to love Mike today, yet Kellan was supposed to be like family to them. I’m an intellectually advanced girl; I’m observant, analytical to a fault. What was I missing? None of it made sense. Why did they adore Mike yet despise Kellan in a silent sense? Then again, why the heck did my mom push me to ask Kellan out somewhere period? And why the heck was Mike at my house without an open invitation?

“What do you want Mike?” I asked taking another bite and trying to mask my mounting frustration.

“I told you. I wanted to see you,” he replied cheerfully. Wrong attitude to have with a grumpy bear.

“Well, you’ve seen me now.”

“Listen babe, I know I’m not the first person you wanted to see when you woke up this morning and I know I should have waited for you to call before I came over. Hell. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’ve never been this way with a girl before. I like you a lot Lex and can’t help feeling like I’m losing you after last night, so please try to be understanding over my sudden insanity,” he begged.

I can't explain the generosity that consumed me, but I actually felt compassion for him. Ironically, Mike was one of my first crushes. Back in sixth grade, when Mel and I first met him, I was infatuated with him. I liked him probably to the degree that he did with me now. The only problem was I didn't feel the same anymore. I'd come to that conclusion as I fell asleep the night before.

I looked over at Mike, sitting beside me with an anxious expression. Some time had passed since he talked and I knew my lack of response was causing him anxiety, so I finally spoke. "Did Mel ever tell you that I had a crush on you back in sixth grade?"

He smiled wide, inspiring a small grin from me. "No. She didn't."

"Well I did, but don't let it go to your head," I warned. "I liked you the entire year," I continued. "Okay, like is a little weak. I was obsessed with you. I wouldn't shut up about you. Mel used to loathe you because of me," I laughed.

He chuckled. "Really?"

"Yup. I gave up on you though in eighth grade when I decided you liked Mel," I admitted. So the bear could be tamed...

"Ouch. That one stung a bit," he stated.

"Sorry. Just telling the truth," I replied. I finished eating my cereal and got up to place the bowl in the sink. He got down and followed.

"So what did you think of the movie last night?" he asked.

“It was okay, kind of cheesy though,” I shrugged. I walked over toward the sectional. I had no other place to venture since he was still in the kitchen and I wasn’t quite ready to show him my room given my attire.

“You screamed quite a bit for someone who thought the movie was cheesy,” he teased.

“That’s exactly what Kellan said! Ugh. I was not that bad.”

“Yeah, you kind of were,” he smirked.

“Ugh. Whatever,” I said throwing a pillow at him.

“Hey. Watch it!” he warned. He tossed the pillow back onto the sofa as he came and sat about a foot away from me.

“Or what?” I pushed.

“Don’t think I forgot that you’re ticklish.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I taunted giving him my best dark look possible.

“That’s what you think,” he said before reaching across, closing the gap between us to tickle me. His hands were all over, gently brushing my body in all my weakest points. I was gasping for air between laughs and cries.

“Stop!” I pleaded still in hysterics as my body squirmed into a lying position. He huddled over me without smothering me, but enough so I couldn’t escape his torture.

“What was that? You want more?” he grinned, still hunched over me. It reminded me of a wrestling match gone awry. I knew I was cornered so my only chance of survival was to surrender.

“Okay, okay!” I laughed. “I give up. I give up!” I writhed still trying to escape his devious fingers.

He finally stopped. The moment he did the atmosphere took a serious turn despite the stupid grin on my face. He inched further on top of me, and my lips turned down. We lost all humor in that moment as our eyes met. We stared at each other for what seemed like eternity. Neither of us moved, locked by a connection that appeared out of nowhere. Suddenly he wasn't hovering over me anymore; rather his body was limb for limb on top of mine. His left arm supported his upper body while embracing me, and he brought his right hand up running his fingers across my cheek.

I felt a tingling within me. I knew what was coming and instead of being nervous, I was ready. Rapidly his lips crushed against mine. They were warm and soft yet urgent in their touch. His arms slid under my back pulling my chest against his.

We opened and closed our mouths in unison. I could feel his breath on my tongue. It felt natural. It felt like I had suppressed a lifetime of anguish and was finally releasing it. His right hand slid along my shirt hem, but my arms remained glued to my sides preventing his entry.

It was becoming too much for me. I felt the need for more slowly building, but I knew I wasn't willing to do more, especially given what I thought had been a revelation last night. I lightened the touch of my lips to his, pulling away between locks yet leaving my eyes closed. Our breathing was heavy as he kissed me one last time gently and then lifted me from under him onto my side. I now was lying on my left side and he was lying beside me, holding me so I wouldn't roll off the couch.

He was the first one to speak. "Umm...wow. That was, uh...breathtaking. I've kissed you before, but it was um... well, uh, never like that," he stuttered between pants.

I blushed as the reality of what happened set in. "You weren't too bad yourself."

Our breathing was still a bit inflated and my heart still raced despite being able to speak calmly. I was in awe of this new man before me. I didn't feel like I was kissing a boy I was prepared to dump, which had me looking at him in a new light. My only concern was, was what I felt lust or did I actually care for Mike in that capacity?

Holding me tight with his right arm he released his left and began pulling my hair away from my face. I remained still, gazing at him while I mentally deciphered my reaction to his touch. Though we weren't kissing, this silent moment held the same intimacy. His hand slid down to caress my face.

Amidst his admiration he whispered, "You really are beautiful."

I didn't respond, still absorbing what was happening and debating my intentions silently. I heard a buzzing noise off in the distance. It took me a minute to realize it was my phone still resting on the island.

"My phone!" I gasped, snapping out of my trance. I nearly fell jumping up off the couch and stumbling into the kitchen. I grabbed my phone to my ear without checking the ID hoping I caught the call in time.

"Hello?" I asked panting from the commotion.

"Hey Lexi. It's Kellan." He paused. "Are you okay?"

“Hey Kellan. I’m fine. Just was trying to get to the phone in time. What’s up?” I asked as my breath slowed back to normal. I turned to see Mike watching me intently from the couch; he had moved to an upright position.

“What does he want?” Mike whispered. I shrugged my shoulders awaiting Kellan’s response.

“Are you done with your monologue yet?”

“Yeah. I finished it the other night. Do you need help with yours?” I offered.

“No. I’m good.”

“Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.” Though I was talking to Kellan, my mind was entirely focused on Mike and his intense gaze locked on me. It felt odd to have the sudden mental switch between the two guys.

“I will. I’ll talk to you later,” he said.

“Umm... okay,” I responded, closing the phone in confusion. Was that really all he called for? Why was everyone acting so strange lately? It’s still one giant puzzle to me.

“What was that about?” Mike asked reflecting the same dismay I showcased.

“I’m not really sure,” I replied. I looked down realizing I was still in my PJs. “Um, you want to hang out in my room for a bit? I need to shower and change.”

“Sure,” he agreed with a grin.

“Don’t get your hopes up. You’re not seeing anything,” I warned as we walked up the stairs.

He chuckled. “I suspected that.”

“Oh, well good.”

Once in my room, Mike sprawled across my bed commenting on how comfortable and big it was while I dug in my closet for an outfit. I settled on a pair of navy blue yoga pants, though I'd never actually done yoga, with a plain white t-shirt. I grabbed panties and a bra, hiding them within my shirt, and hurried into the bathroom.

I rushed in the shower not wanting Mike to snoop and brushed my teeth thoroughly in the event of another make-out session. I folded my pajamas neatly leaving them on the bathroom counter. As I exited, I realized I was right to rush. Mike was walking around my room analyzing every picture and accessory. It was strange seeing a guy in my room. Until now, only Mel and my parents had been in it.

I sat down on my bed prepared to interrupt his browsing. “So what do you want to do?”

“Anything,” he shrugged happily, joining me on the bed.

“Um, well I am kind of curious about something,” I stated slowly.

“What do you want to know?” He was eager, giving off an exhilarated feeling.

“How long have you liked me?” I asked.

“Liked - since I met you, but as more than a friend, it's been a little over two years now,” he answered honestly.

“Why did you wait so long to tell me?” I really was curious to hear his answer.

“Well, you kind of ignored me a lot when I tried to talk to you and Mel. At one point I thought you hated me. Mel was the one who set me straight.”

“Oh.” I guess I had been standoffish with him, but that’s because I thought he was attracted to Mel. I didn’t want to be the third wheel in their conversations. Perhaps that was why I was so unsure of our relationship. I was so sure that he had liked Mel that when his attention was entirely on me, I panicked fearing it was another high school prank.

We both lied side by side on my bed, talking as our lives unfolded between us. It was an intimate conversation about everything that passed the hours quickly. I shared my infant travels, favorite food – Mexican, and color – green. He divulged his little league horror stories, Boy Scout escapades, and favorites as well – Italian, green, and he said his favorite song was Journey’s ‘Don’t Stop Believing.’

We laughed at classmates past, reveled in horror over certain teachers and discussed future college plans. Every subject we could brush upon it felt like we did. We rekindled what hours ago I thought was non-existent or lost. It wasn’t until my stomach growled and I peered over at the clock, 5:57pm, that I realized how much time had elapsed. I got up and looked out my blinds to see a darkening sky and the moon half raised.

“Wow, I can’t believe it’s almost night,” I stated turning back to Mike who was still lying down on my bed. I stared at him in admiration. His hair was a well-groomed mess against my pale teal pillows. I never noticed how symmetrical his face was; his nose sloped gracefully below his brown eyes. He’s wearing khaki cargo shorts with a long sleeved black DC brand t-shirt and matching black skater tennis shoes. The way his shirt hung in his flat position revealed a slightly sculpted physique below.

He looked over at me and smiled enticingly. “Are you hungry?” I asked.

“A little,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Let’s go downstairs and raid the fridge.” He got down from the bed with one leap and we wandered down to the kitchen. I opened the side-by-side fridge and freezer for the choices to be on display.

“What looks good to you?” he asked.

“I’m not picky. Want to just heat up the leftover pizza?”

“Sounds good, but I like it cold.”

I smiled. “So do I.”

He chuckled as I grabbed the box from the fridge. I handed him a coke and we sat at the island together to eat.

“I wonder where my parents are. They’ve been gone for a while now.”

“I won’t lie, I’ve enjoyed the time alone with you. I’m glad I was impulsive and came over,” he said between bites.

I looked over at him. He caressed my face momentarily with his left hand, his right still holding the slice of pizza. I smiled shyly replying, “Me too.”

My phone started buzzing on the island. I picked it up to read a new text from Mel. ‘Where r u? I’ve called a million times! What happened w/ Mike?’

I backed out of my texts to an alert showing an astronomical fifteen missed calls from Mel. “Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed.

“What is it?”

I showed him my phone. “I must have left my phone down here, and, being a bit preoccupied, I guess I didn’t

miss it.”

He chuckled lightly and leaned close to me. “I can preoccupy you again if you’d like.”

“Maybe later,” I dismissed though my heart was already increasing pace with his close proximity.

“I’m not going to forget,” he cited with a smirk.

I sighed and dialed Mel. I knew I couldn’t procrastinate much longer without a visit from her personally.

“Lexi?” she answered with clear fretfulness and relief in her voice.

“Yeah, it’s me.” Before I could say any more she went off on a tangent.

“Do you know how worried I’ve been? I called you a million times. I’ve considered everything, freaked out that maybe he was really obsessive to the point of kidnap or murder. Do you know how guilty I would feel for supporting that before? And where the hell have you been this whole time? I’m going crazy over here contemplating calling the police!”

“Calm down Mel. I’m fine. Mike is still here. We were up in my room talking and I’d left my phone in the kitchen.”

She huffed dramatically. “Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been? And it’s been over seven hours since I last talked to you. What have you two been doing all this time?” she demanded.

“I’m fine but he’s still here so I’ll call you later. I promise.”

“You better or I will show up with a posse,” she warned. Her tone at least had taken a slightly molded edge over the hard one before.

“Okay, Mel.” I laughed. “Bye.” I hung up before she could interject any more.

“I probably should call my mom to come get me. It’s getting late,” he said glancing at the clock on the stove.

“Okay.”

His mom was already in the neighborhood at a family friend’s house so she arrived within five minutes.

“I’ve had fun today Lex,” he said as we walked towards the door. He slid into his zip up hoodie for added warmth against the cold October night air.

“So did I.” I blushed like the schoolgirl I was as he turned back towards me. “I would appreciate a little notice first though...please.”

“I think I can handle that.”

“Have a good night.”

“Only if you kiss me good-bye.” He tilted his head towards me.

I met him halfway. He reached his arms around my waist and held me close. We kissed softly not lingering as we had earlier.

“Okay...I think you should go before, well...I will see you tomorrow.” I stuttered awkwardly.

He smiled wide. “See you tomorrow babe.” He started to open the door but swiftly turned back around and planted a quick smooch on my lips again.

Caught off guard I exclaimed, "Hey!"

"Leaving now," he replied and rushed out the door closing it behind him.

I stood there frozen in the entryway for at least five minutes. It was then that the shock set in. Today really did happen. I had to call Mel.

I grabbed my cell and dialed Mel on my way up the stairs. "Oh my gosh! Today was the best day of my life," I gushed when she answered. We talked for over an hour. She had me give every detail and describe our earlier kiss several times as she squealed enthusiastically.

Reliving the day with her made me realize just how amazing and fairytale-like it was. It truly was a perfect memory. I was on an amazing, indescribable high. I felt like I was floating on cloud nine and never wanted to come down. Maybe Mike and I did have a chance; maybe we were meant to be.

Before I fell asleep Mike text me, 'Good Nite Sexy' to which I replied 'Sweet Dreams.'

—

Chapter Seven

It's ironic how things work out. First and third period I was with Mike; second and fourth I shared with Kellan. The two men I was fawning over at the moment, though only one of them knowledgeable liked me back in that way, intermingled with me throughout every school day.

Mike was waiting for me when I walked through the doors at school with Mel. He greeted me with a smile, and pulled me in with his arm to kiss me lightly before he walked us to class.

"How was your morning?" he asked on the way.

"Good. How was yours?"

"It's better now that you're here."

"Oh, give me a break," Mel interjected sarcastically faking sickness.

"Hey. I put up with you and Ben for over a year," I reminded her.

"Yeah, yeah."

First period dragged by. It usually did since math was my worst subject. I'd never been a numbers person; Mel on the other hand excelled at it. She had to tutor me last year but this year I was slipping by with a B+ on my own. When the bell rang, Mike resumed his station next to me.

Mike walked Mel and me halfway to our next class. He gave a tug at my hand when he split from us but didn't say anything, which was surprising for him. Thinking back though, I don't think Mel gave him the opportunity to.

As soon as he was out of site, Mel drilled me. “So are you two staying together or what?”

“I think so.”

“It’s like overnight you two became a hot item again. Before he would touch you, but you were never giddy about it like today.”

“You think?”

“Uh, hello? Did you not have a major make-out session yesterday? And look at how you are today with him versus Friday. Black and white, day and night.”

“Hmm, I guess,” I shrugged. I realized she was right though. Friday we were normal then Sunday we kissed and spilled our guts with new fascination and attraction, and boom! Today we were more ambitious in our PDAs. Well, actually I supposed I was more receptive. Before I always held up this invisible barrier not wanting to draw any attention to myself. Today I didn’t care. Wow. Mel was right. It all happened so fast though. One minute I thought we were over; the next, I had renewed interest. It didn’t erase my attraction to Kellan, but removed my finger from the stop button.

My life seemed like such a blur these days. New emotions and feelings had been awakened within me, which was causing me to be confused. I wasn’t thinking clearly because I was usually sharp, on my game. If I wasn’t a mental mess, I would have figured out Kellan’s secret by now, and I probably wouldn’t have been such a weakling when it came to Mike. I felt like I melted into a puddle around him now. *Ugh! Pull yourself together Lexi!*

We entered the classroom, Mel was still babbling on about something as we took our seats. I was in a daze, off

in my own world trying to figure things out unsuccessfully.
Class began and the first note was passed from Kellan.

Hey

Hey

How was your weekend?

Good, yours?

The same. Did you have fun with Mike yesterday?

How did you know about that?

I heard him in the background when I called.

How?

Let's just say I have good hearing.

Okay??

So did you have fun?

Yes, what did you do yesterday?

I wrote.

I didn't know you write...what did you write?

I'll let you read it one day.

I'm going 2 hold you to that!

I didn't say when...

So unfair!

I think there is a saying about that.

Oh, aren't we smart today?

Today? Try always!

Cocky at all?

I just state the facts.

Facts or fiction?

Good one. It looks like I'm already increasing your IQ with my presence.

You really are cocky...

You still like me though. You can't hide that.

Is it that obvious? - I don't know why I didn't just deny it...

No, but I'm very observant. I notice the things other overlook.

What else have you observed about me?

When you are deep in thought, you walk with your head down and stare at nothing below you.

That was too easy... tell me something Mel doesn't know

You would pick me over Mike if given the chance.

I stared at the paper in astonishment. As much as I would have liked to deny this claim, I couldn't. He had me. I liked Mike and was enthusiastic about the attention he gave me, but I had this strong connection with Kellan that I couldn't make sense of and also couldn't ignore. I had this stranger beside me who knew my secrets yet held my interest beyond that too. I didn't like him having the upper hand; he seemed powerful in a subdued way, intimidating.

The only thing I could respond with was - *why?*

You feel obligated to like Mike, but you freely like me.

Once again, I was taken aback by his answer. I kept it simple - *interesting observation, doesn't mean you're right...*

But you're not saying I'm wrong either.

I was angry, frustrated and flustered. I didn't like vulnerability and I felt weak and exposed with Kellan in this moment. I didn't want to lie to my new gorgeous friend, but I didn't want him to know the truth. I suppose I was a little late since he already knew; there was no sense in denying it. He probably wouldn't believe me even if I did. So I was stuck; stuck feeling embarrassed since I liked him, he knew it and clearly didn't feel the same towards me, but also because I had a boyfriend that I'd just renewed my bond with, or so I thought I had anyways. And worse, he made a statement I couldn't deny, but why? Why would I pick him over Mike? Thus far, Mike was clearly the better man.

Luckily I didn't have to respond to his last jab since the bell rang for lunch. Mel quizzed me all the way to the cafeteria on our chat. I told her we were just flirting back and forth, but it's nothing trivial or worth blowing into speculation.

Perhaps I was a bit bi-polar given my attitude this morning, but I was annoyed throughout lunch. Mike was extra clingy and always felt the need to be touching me. Not one second went by that he wasn't caressing me, holding my hand, or dangling his arm around me. I liked the attention, but Mike was borderline overbearing at times. Or maybe I was just extra irritable because of Kellan. He hit the nail on the head, but how did he figure out what even my best friend didn't know? It's maddening how he was a big mystery to me, yet I was an open book so easy to read to him.

I couldn't even eat at lunch amidst my disheartening run through of facts. I sipped water while quietly declining Mike's continual insistence upon me eating, which, for some reason, brought to my attention that Kellan never ate lunch. He went missing for the forty-five minutes we got mid-day. I couldn't believe I'd missed that detail before considering how aware of his presence, or lack thereof, I seemed to be now.

History flew by as usual. Mike stared at me the entire time we were supposed to be watching a civil war documentary. It made me feel self-conscious and awkward yet adored and happy at the same time. Each time I looked beside me, he was goofily grinning at.

Mike walked Mel and me to English. We were hand in hand until the door when he released me with a kiss on the cheek.

"Talk to you later," I said as Mel and I began to stroll towards our seats.

"Call you!" Mike said rushing to his last class.

It's so hard to distance myself from Mike or decline his advancements. He's always so happy and carried this charm that was hard to resist when he laid it on thick. The lure he had was opposite of Kellan's. Mike was open, outgoing and charismatic; he didn't give me the option to say 'no'. Kellan was quiet, mysterious and charming in a dark way. They're both good-looking, carrying perfect physiques, though I found Kellan more attractive.

Mel was still carrying on about party planning - she was insistent upon this for my birthday - and had been all day long. Most of the day, sadly, I'd been a bad friend tuning her out to mull over other topics. Plus, after the tid-bit Kellan had revealed, I could not even be up for a party.

Mrs. Henderson gave us another free period today, this time to begin reading our next assignment - *Pride and Prejudice* - so from Romeo & Juliet to Mr. Darcy & Elizabeth. I couldn't concentrate on the book before me though.

My mind was still racing uncontrollably. Mid-Mike speculation, a folded piece of paper was set in front of me. I looked up at Mel, but her back was still to me. I turned back, but Chris was reading motionless. I then directed my attention to Kellan whose eyes, though his head was down towards the book in his hands, locked with mine. It was a powerful moment when our eyes connected. He again controlled me entirely in that moment; I couldn't breathe or think for myself. Alas, he returned to his book and I collected myself.

I opened the paper in front of me quietly. It revealed the unimaginable from Kellan. ***I like you too.*** Shock and surprise set in quickly. Did I really have a chance with mysterious perfection? It seemed impossible. The words were in front of me, but I still didn't believe them.

Suddenly frustrated, I crumpled the paper and threw it in my bag. It couldn't be true, and I didn't want to play games with my heart this way. I would be fine with Mike; he made me happy. Granted I would choose Kellan if he was an option, but he wasn't, so Mike would do. I could grow to adore Mike in the same manifestations I did with Kellan. I could suppress my attraction to Kellan, forget my mindless wonder over him with Mike consistently at my side to entice me the way he did Sunday. Couldn't I? Either way I had to try. Kellan would never happen, but Mike was. And I liked Mike enough to stick with him for now.

Giving up on my mental rationalization of my love life, I began reading once again. I must have slipped off because

moments later I was daydreaming. I was in a large open field in an ancient dress with a cinched waist held tightly by a corset and a flared puff of fabric from my hips down. I was holding hands with a gentleman I didn't recognize. He appeared to be Kellan, but his skin wore a darker hue and his eyes were brown, not the vibrant green I adored. A tap on my left shoulder disturbed my trance.

I shook my head, returning to reality. I turned around. Chris was still seated though he was doodling aimlessly rather than reading. I immediately looked beyond him, but Kellan wasn't in his seat. His desk was empty and his bag vanished with him. Where could he have disappeared?

I glanced up at the clock; we still had fifty minutes left. I shrugged, dismissing responsibility over his whereabouts, and turned back to the front. A torn piece of paper now lay on top of the page I was reading in my book. I recognized the handwriting as Kellan's. ***Meet me outside in 5 minutes.***

Outside? Outside where? The hall, the parking lot, the bus station? I sighed heavily debating the ploy. Did I leave and wander or stay and miss it? I was curious as to what he wanted, but frightened by it simultaneously.

A minute of consideration flew by. I walked to Mrs. Henderson's desk and told her I needed a potty break. She nodded once in approval and I gathered my belongings to slip out the door. I gave a note to Mel saying I would call her later and explain.

As soon as I entered the hall, I spotted him a few feet down leaning against the lockers. I couldn't read his expression so I approached with caution. He read my face.

"Follow me," he spoke calmly.

I obeyed, falling into step silently to his car in the parking lot. He held the passenger door open; I hesitated but eventually climbed in. I had my cell and could call someone if necessary, I rationalized.

Though mentally I was a bit frazzled, my heart didn't react with a sprint. He slid in the driver's seat and started the car.

He looked over at me. "You may want to call your mom and let her know you'll be late. I'll leave it up to you whether or not you tell her who you're with," he smirked sending off a devilish vibe. Kellan always appeared dark and mysterious despite his beauty, but he seemed different today. I was actually frightened by him. Nonetheless I complied with his terms. I did tell my mother I was with him, more as a safety precaution on my part. She didn't seem to mind though.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see," he replied as he drifted onto the interstate towards downtown Charleston.

I watched out the window as he drove. Given the feeling in the air and my mental anguish, I should have been a mess by now, but oddly I still trusted him. The time passed quickly on the drive, but then again, Kellan had a lead foot, which helped when I wasn't holding on for dear life.

He slowed down as we crossed the short, low bridge, which acted as the official entrance to Folly Beach's quaint village of shops, surf cafes, and gorgeous homes ranging from shacks on stilts to mansions that put Santa Monica to shame. He drove about a mile parallel to the beach before he found a parking spot along the road. He parallel parked perfectly in one shot.

Thank God I wore my hoodie since the ocean breeze was chilling against my skin. We crossed a small wooden pier connecting the road to the sand along the ocean's shore. It was high tide when we arrived, so we stayed close to the top end of the beach. We walked aimlessly along in silence for a solid ten minutes before I cracked. I couldn't wait anymore - the suspense was killing me.

"So you brought me out here why?" I prompted.

"I wanted to talk to you," he answered solemnly but didn't look in my direction. He focused straight ahead on the scenery, his brows giving away his intensity.

"And you couldn't do that a little closer to home?"

"I could have, but didn't want to. When I lived in Seattle, if I wanted to think about something or escape life, I would go to the beach or ride the ferry for a few hours," he explained. "I brought you here because I wanted to talk to you about me and you, but I need to get my thoughts together first."

"Okay?" My mind shuffled through thousands of possibilities but I shut it down quickly. I didn't need to set myself up and undoubtedly I would since I was usually wrong...

"I have a secret that I want to share with you because you share this secret too," he riddled.

"I'm completely lost." That matched exactly zero of the scenarios I had pondered previously.

"I want you to guess what I am because I can't tell you until after your birthday." His tone was mellow, but he was intrigued and it sounded like he was a bit amused by the prospect.

“Guess what you are?” I repeated wrinkling my forehead in confusion. “I don’t get it.”

“What have you noticed about me that is different compared to Mike?” he pressed.

“Umm,” I thought, still not understanding his request. Why did he want me to guess what he was? No one asked that unless...*no. It can't be. He can't be. That only happens in movies and fairytales!* I gasped. “Are you trying to say you’re not... human?” I whispered feeling foolish in asking. I would be so embarrassed if I was wrong.

“Guess what I am,” he reiterated, his lips lifting up at the corners confirming my amusement theory. Why was I not totally freaked out right now? I was confused but not afraid like before.

“Well, you’re not a werewolf,” I stated confidently. “You don’t have enough hair.”

He laughed. “Good observation.”

“And you’re not a leprechaun; you’re too tall for that occupation,” I explained figuring I would go along with the game.

“You are charming at times,” he said with a low chuckle.

“And you’re not a vampire because well, you wouldn’t live where the sun shines a lot and Charleston definitely has that in spring and summer,” I rationalized.

“And you’re sure about that?” he asked.

“Well, every book and movie I’ve read or seen has them avoiding the sun...”

“What if they’re all wrong?” he challenged.

We kept walking along the sand in silence as I pondered this. Why was he persistent on this subject? I froze mid-step. The only reason he would press my rational was if I was wrong. *Is he... could he... how?* I stumbled to wrap my head around it.

“Are... are you a...” I couldn’t say the word. “Are... you... an Edward?” I choked.

“Who’s Edward?” he asked, turning to face me.

“He’s from a book, but are you... a... you know?” I pushed exaggerating a biting movement with my ‘fangs.’ He was utterly entertained by this.

“Am I a vampire? Yes,” he confirmed with a snicker.

We started walking again a little closer to the water this time. A million questions swirled at once. I tried to zone in on the most important, but it was impossible. I started with the obvious. “How are you able to live here with the sun?”

“It’s a myth, but I’m twenty-five percent human which would protect me from the general associations attached. Vampires still tend to avoid the sun though.”

“So your parents are?” I prompted.

“My mother is half human, half vampire, and my dad is a full vampire.” He offered this as if it was the score for a sports game, no big deal.

“Are they your real parents?” I asked.

“Yes,” he chuckled. “My mother is half human and was still able to conceive.”

“How were you born?” I inquired.

“Like any regular baby,” he replied.

“Oh, of course.” It made sense I suppose. “What... do you eat?” I retracted to my earlier observation of his lunchroom absence.

“I can eat anything I choose, but I prefer to drink blood.”

“What kind?” I swallowed hard as I pressed for clarification.

He looked at me studying my expression for a minute before simplifying his preference. “Human.”

I recalled his earlier statement claiming he wanted to talk about him and me. “How does this involve me?”

“Because you are like me, well, you’re going to be anyways.”

“Are you going to bite me?” I abruptly stopped careful of my every move and his. His riddles confused me, but it was like he enjoyed having the upper hand despite how open he was to sharing. He burst into laughter.

“What?” I insisted, irritated by his response.

“I’m sorry; it’s just that you’re not appealing to me in that way.”

“You mean I don’t smell good to you?” I was a bit saddened by the thought. - What was wrong with me? I was sad that I didn’t smell appetizing to a vampire? I was losing it. Forget it... I was over the edge already.

“I’m not saying you stink, just that I don’t want to drink you,” he smiled wide calming my hysteria.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I must sound completely crazy.”

“No, you sound like a human who has just been told she’s standing next to a vampire whom, in theory, should

desire her blood," he outlined for me.

"So why were you not supposed to tell me until after my birthday? I don't see where my age would matter here."

"Well..." he hesitated. "Let's just say you will be one of us in some form by then."

"What do you mean 'one of us'?"

"I can't tell you that, but your parents will explain soon enough. At least they should be." He riddled off another answer that didn't answer anything. It was maddening.

"My parents know what you are?"

"Of course. They're one of us, well your mom is anyways," he corrected.

"The eyes," I gasped. "You have the same eyes."

"Yeah, but that's just a coincidence. You wouldn't know a vamp by sight; only smell. And ironically, a human's scent isn't strong enough to detect them."

We reached the central fishing pier and stepped up onto the wooden planks. Silently we traveled out over the Atlantic Ocean. The further we walked, the colder it became. I broke the silence again.

"Tell me the cool parts."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Are the stories true? Can you run fast? Are you as strong as superman? Do you sleep? I know you don't sleep during the day as history unveils because you're here with me, but do you sleep at night?" He laughed and lifted his head in my direction. Smiling wide, beaming with glory in his features, he answered my inquiries.

“I am much faster than humans or animals, but not like the speed of light. I am strong enough to incapacitate a lion, and I can sleep but don’t need sleep.”

“Do you... you know... hunt for your food?” I wanted to know, but was fighting an internal battle as to whether or not I truly could handle knowing.

“Yes.” I just nodded staring out at the waves. He interrupted my meditation. “You’ve taken this very well, all things considered. I’m really impressed.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. “I’ve always believed in, well, *you* existing; I just never expected to meet one.” I stared off into the great expanse of the ocean. The wind picked up and I involuntarily shivered. It reminded me though. “Are you cold?”

He shook his head answering ‘No.’

“I don’t mean with the wind or outside temperature,” I clarified. He had been leaning against the pier beside me but stood to face me now. He gently reached over and pulled my hand from my pocket. He guided my hand to his cheek and leaned into my palm. “Interesting,” I muttered.

“What?”

“You are definitely colder than a human but not freezing. And you don’t feel like marble, which is what I expected. Your skin is soft and feels kind of like a baby’s bottom, only cooler. You would be just right on a summer day and a winter night,” I described stroking his face. He locked eyes with me. It was dark out now, aside from the streetlights along the pier. His eyes glistened as the bulbs reflected off his gaze onto me. It was a sweet moment. I felt all previous barriers disappear. I knew in that moment that he trusted me the same way I mysteriously trusted him.

“I should get you home,” he spoke gently.

“Oh... yeah.” I dropped my hand suddenly nervous.

He secured my hand in his and walked me back towards the sand. The beach was empty in the darkness; the only noise was the waves. I deliberated asking him some more questions, but decided against it. I didn't want to ruin a good thing.

It took twice as long to get back to his car. I didn't realize just how far we had gone. He kept pace with me hand in hand the entire way.

“Are you hungry?” he asked looking at his watch.

“Kind of,” I answered sheepishly. “What time is it?”

“Almost eight,” he answered closing the door behind me. He got in and we drove off back towards I-26 West. He took the long, scenic route this time through downtown, which looked alive despite the time. He stopped at Arby's along the way.

“What do you want?” he asked pulling up to the order screen.

“I'll be okay until I get home,” I insisted.

“Either you pick something or I'll pick for you and I can't guarantee that you'll like it, but I will make you eat all of it,” he swore firmly.

“You can be very pushy sometimes,” I frowned. I settled for a jamocha shake. It's not a meal, but it's definitely filling. He raised a brow and stared at me for a bit before ordering the largest possible and insisting he pay.

I sipped my drink slowly and sporadically on the drive. Once on the interstate he got me home in ten minutes when it should have taken twenty-five. He parked in the driveway and was promptly at my door opening it for me no longer hiding his speed.

“Thank you,” I mumbled stepping out. He walked me to the door. “Are you going to come in for a bit?” I asked.

“Sure,” he shrugged.

“I’m home!” I yelled walking towards the family room where I heard the sounds of the TV.

“Hi sweetie. Hi Kellan,” my mother greeted us.

Given all I’d learned today, I stared at my mother for a minute before replying, “Hey.” My dad did a half wave of his arm but his eyes never left the TV screen.

My mother locked eyes with Kellan having observed my hesitation. “You didn’t.”

“Only me,” he countered.

My father finally peered over at the two of them taking everything in. I stood frozen between the family room and the kitchen suddenly panicked. The gleam in their eyes when they were locked was ferocious, as if they were debating attack.

“That’s still enough,” my mother angrily bit out.

“How long were you planning to wait?” Kellan demanded.

“I don’t see where that is any of your business.” Her brows pinched together.

“I didn’t tell her about you; I told her about me.”

“So you broke the rules then?” She narrowed her gaze at him.

I decided it was time to jump in. “Mom, I guessed. He didn’t tell me, I guessed.”

“Is this true?” my dad demanded.

Kellan nodded confirming.

I looked at my parents. “Mom, Dad, I want to know the truth. I’m ready to know the truth.”

—

Chapter Eight

My dad responded by turning off the television. My mother patted the sofa and requested that I sit next to her. I looked up at Kellan for reassurance. He smiled in an adoring way that would melt even the coldest of hearts. I grabbed his hand and pulled him to sit on the other side of me, which didn't feel odd or inappropriate in this moment. Any hesitation I held prior over approaching Kellan in this manner was squashed by our intimate conversation just an hour ago.

My mother looked at Kellan briefly before moving her attention to me. "Honey, I know Kellan has told you, or you guessed, what he is, and well, you are going to become like me very soon. I am a vampeen, which is a cross breed of a human and a vampire."

She studied my expression momentarily before continuing, probably determining my stress level. "The first of our kind dates back to the 1200s in Basque Country, Spain. The language Euskara is a vampeenic tongue we introduced to the area, though most who speak it today don't know its true origin. Our kind is different from a vampire. For instance both human food and blood can sustain us. While vampires don't need sleep, us still being half or mostly human, we need a couple hours to replenish our energy. The largest difference between a vampire and a vampeen is a vampire is created with a bite, but a vampeen is genetically manifested after approximately sixteen years as a human. You will live as a normal human until the vampiric DNA cells replicate enough times to out-number your human ones, which takes sixteen years from the day you are born."

“What happens when they take over?” I was thankful for Kellan, thankful that he softened the blow. I don’t think I could have handled this information had he not introduced me to the idea of him beforehand.

“You won’t feel anything, if that is what you’re referring to,” she explained. “You will sleep from midnight to midnight; a full twenty-four hours on your birthday while your body changes.”

“How will I change or what part of me will change?” I asked surprisingly calm. I didn’t feel the true impact of the concept quite yet.

“Many changes will take place. They are all physical. Your senses will heighten; you can hear and smell over long distances. Your temperature will drop to an average eighty-eight point six since you are seventy-five percent human. Your heart will beat slower; it will beat forty times less per minute. Your skin has already begun to clear up; you’ll end up with a perfect, silky complexion. The most dramatic change though will be your figure.”

“How so?” I was cautious, still absorbing everything. I don’t know what I was worried about; it wasn’t like my figure could get much worse. It already resembled the Pillsbury doughboy, or at least that’s how I felt.

“You will, well, you will look like me size-wise,” she stated. I was stunned. *Did she just say what I think she said?*

“Seriously?” I pressed. I couldn’t believe it. This was the best news ever! I would have a perfect figure without sacrificing to get it. No sweat sessions at the gym six days a week or eating lettuce and celery for breakfast, lunch, and dinner? I would have it all at the cost of nothing? This was

too good to be true. There had to be a catch. You don't get everything at the cost of nothing.

...and then it came.

"There is one catch to this lifestyle," my mother warned. "You must choose."

"Choose between what?" I inquired, my heart beating a little quicker. Apparently I had spoken too soon.

"Between a human or a vampire." Her words hung for a minute, suspended in mid-air before she continued. "Once you have been... intimate with one kind, you cannot cross back over. The connection initiates something similar to a defense system within you that prevents future experiences with the other species from being possible. It somehow alters your genes in a way to make you more like the one you choose. I obviously chose your father, whom is human, but not until I was one hundred percent sure. You must be confident in your choice Alexa; you cannot change what you regret later with our kind." Her tone was serious, ringing with finality. And the idea scared me a bit. I'd never heard of such a thing. No book or movie ever prepared me for this aspect.

But, taking into account the fact that I only knew one vampire, who was still twenty-five percent human and had no interest in me, this didn't seem like much of a choice. But I was still contemplating the information heavily. Was I wrong? Was I on the verge of having to make a choice?

I exhaled deeply realizing that I was already torn - between Mike, the lovable human, and Kellan, the gorgeous vampire. Though the chance of Kellan being possible was slim to none, I still felt like I had to consider him in my decision. At least now I knew the truth, though I was confused on how all of it was even possible.

“So I’m twenty-five percent vampire, which makes me a vampeen, and Kellan is seventy-five percent vampire so he’s a vampire?” I wanted to ensure I understood the basics.

“Anything over fifty-one percent vampire is categorized as that, a vampire, and less, like fifty-fifty, is considered a vampeen,” Kellan explained.

“You said I can eat human food or drink their blood” - I shuttered at the thought - “but which one will I prefer?”

“I can’t answer that because I’m not sure,” she replied, running her fingers through my hair. She was contemplative. I felt her stirring beneath her calm surface. “I personally prefer human food. I survive on things like raw steak saturated in animal blood. That’s why I never eat around you. But both Gran and Paps were vampeens; I am an even fifty-fifty. You are seventy-five-twenty-five; it will probably be the same for you, but I can’t guarantee that.”

“Will I want to... kill... my friends?” I asked hesitantly. For me, this was the all-important question.

She smiled at me warmly. “I don’t think that will be a problem since you are dominantly human, but, should their blood be spilled accidentally, the vampire within may surface.”

I sat frozen for a moment. Could I, would I, ever hurt them impulsively? Especially Mel or Mike, I would rather die. Wait. I was going to change. They would definitely notice if I lost a bunch of weight overnight. But I wasn’t allowed to tell them, to reveal this inner part of me.

“How do I explain the change to my friends?” I was praying for a good response.

“Your father and I have discussed this and feel it would be best to take you out of school for the remainder of the year. I can home-school you or we can send you to a boarding school if you wish.”

“You have to be joking! A year? And boarding school... I’d rather stay out a week and say I had extensive plastic surgery, liposuction or whatever it’s called!” I exclaimed. Something triggered within me. To have everything I’d known for all my life changed overnight and to then rip me away from the final bit of stability I had was too much.

“Calm down sweetie. We won’t enforce anything longer than two weeks, but that is the minimum,” she stated firmly looking at my father for reassurance. “After all, you are the one who has to face them and answer their questions. Just remember that you’re not able to share your secret with them, regardless of the circumstances.”

“I’ll help you Lexi,” Kellan promised with a light squeeze of my palm.

It was hitting me all at once, just collapsing down on me. After Thursday, or Friday technically, at midnight my life would never be the same. I would never look the same. I felt like... like I couldn’t breathe, like the walls of life were closing in on me. I felt like my heart was going to escape my chest. I felt...

—

“Lexi! Lexi!” I heard Kellan gasping anxiously.

“Lexi, sweetie, can you hear me?” my mother’s voice sung through the crowd calmly.

“Lexi, it’s Dad, can you hear us?” he attempted to state, but stuttered in fear.

I blinked quickly a few times trying to refocus my vision. I saw the three of them standing over me.

“Are you okay, Lex?” my dad pressed, still frightened and dismayed. Worry lines crowded his forehead as he stared down at me.

“I... I think so,” I whispered softly. “What happened?”

“You fainted sweetie, nearly gave your dad a heart attack.”

“Oh. Sorry,” I mumbled. I tried to sit up but fell back when my head whirled with dizziness. It suddenly weighed a thousand pounds as a massive headache set in.

“Just stay here sweetie. Don’t move for a bit,” my mother advised. She was always the levelheaded one in the middle of a crisis. She never lost her cool or became discombobulated as most people did in a panic.

“I really just want to go lay down in bed,” I insisted. I was more affected by the situation than I realized. It was overwhelming, but I assumed I could handle it. I handled Kellan’s news without a problem. I should have known that when it’s personal, it’s much more difficult to swallow.

“I can carry her up,” Kellan offered, looking at my parents for permission.

“Are you serious?” I croaked in the loudest whisper I could produce. “I’ll break you!”

He laughed looking at me still sprawled on the couch. “Strong enough to incapacitate a lion, remember? You’ll be like lifting air.”

My parents exchanged glances before agreeing. Kellan bent down slightly and lifted me without hesitation. I wrapped my arms around his neck just to be sure I didn’t

fall abruptly. He laughed again staring at my frightened expression. Somehow I always amused him.

“Do you want to be more frightened?” A satanic grin spread across his face.

“I don’t think that’s possible right now.”

“Yes it is.” He suddenly tripled his speed. I felt a gust of wind slap the side of my face; but it was gone as quickly as it came. I was in my bed already. My eyes bugged out in shock and Kellan was smirking in cockiness clearly pleased with his rash decision.

“Headache, remember?” I grumbled pointing at my head.

He let out a quick chuckle. “Sorry, didn’t know if I would ever get the chance to do that again. It won’t be the same after Friday,” he frowned.

“Yeah,” I whispered. “I’m going to be really different aren’t I?”

Kellan smiled one of his melting expressions but didn’t answer my worry. “I should probably get going.”

“I know this is going to sound strange, but do you think you can stay? You know, just for a little bit.” I stumbled, hoping he would oblige. I was already embarrassed by my blackout downstairs and knowing he could deny me here was a major risk. It paid off though.

“Umm, sure,” he said as he hopped into the bed next to me.

Truth is, I really didn’t want to be alone and Kellan, though he was dominantly a dark loner, was oddly comforting to have around given everything I was trying to process. Plus he had opened up to me in a way obscure to

my classmates and friends, which exposed his shared comfort around me. And for me, seeing him let me know that everything would be fine; he was proof of that.

“Will you do me a favor?” I asked sheepishly.

“Aren’t I doing you one already?”

“Umm...well, will you tell me about your transformation?”

He sighed quietly. At first I didn’t think he was going to tell me and I was prepared to let it go, but then he began to speak.

“Well, since I’m twenty-five percent human, I had the same sixteen years to marinate like you. My parents told me two weeks before my birthday. I didn’t believe them at first since they put on such a convincing human charade. My dad actually took me on a hunting trip to prove my heritage. I was shocked. The way he pounced the guy...” he shivered in reflection of the human memory. “Well, needless to say I believed them at that point. It made it easier that my best friend, Craig, had gone through the change a week earlier. He’s like you though and is more human.” He paused and looked down at his feet appearing caught up in the design details of his shoes. It took me a minute before I realized he was trying to control an emotional reaction.

“Do you miss him?” I asked softly. I’d never seen Kellan so sensitive.

“It’s just different without him. We were the guy version of you and Mel.”

“I’m sorry,” was all I knew to say; yet it wasn’t nearly enough.

“Back to the story,” he prompted himself. “So my family flew back to Spain for our ‘Family Reunion’.” He lifted his fingers to create quotation marks as he spoke. “I left Seattle human and returned a vampire.”

“What did you look like as a human?”

He reached in his back pocket and retrieved his wallet. Tucked deep inside the back slot, he pulled out a worn photo and handed it to me. He looked almost exactly the same, only a bit more rough, despite his baby face. He had only minor enhancements to him now, nothing a round of plastic surgery, skin treatments and general aging couldn't have done for a human.

“Wow. You look so different,” I smirked.

“You're such a horrible liar,” he laughed.

“Yeah,” I smiled. “How old were you here?”

“Thirteen.”

“Adorable.”

“And now?” he prompted.

“Now you look... handsome,” I replied before handing him back the picture.

“You're going to be just as beautiful you know,” he stated.

Copying him, I asked, “But now?”

“You're beautiful in your human form now, and will be stunning after. Don't sweat it.”

“Did it hurt? Did you feel different or strange?” I was unsure if I was really ready for an adverse response.

“You sleep through everything. It’s like when you have surgery, the anesthesia makes you sleep deep enough to ignore the pain,” he explained. “After, when you wake up, it is shocking at first. Everything is intensified. You hear every pin drop and smell every daisy three yards down, but you adjust after a few days. You’ll feel weird. It’s almost like an out-of-body experience in the beginning. You’ll have to get to know your new figure and lifestyle. You’ll have to buy a new wardrobe. Once you become acquainted with everything though, it’s great. You’ll be fine Lexi. I promise.” I enjoyed seeing this softer side of Kellan. He was vulnerable, contemplative and passionate. For once, we were on the same level of exposure. We shared an intimacy in the experience without touching physically.

“I know. I’m over thinking it all. It’s just overwhelming,” I admitted shyly.

“You should get some sleep. It’s been a long day for you.”

“Thanks... for everything. I would probably be a total nut case right now if it weren’t for you,” I said, pulling the covers up higher as I rolled on my left side towards him.

“You already are,” he laughed. “At least you’re a likable crazy person though.”

“I’m choosing to ignore that jab since you’ve been so great for the majority of this evening.”

“Go to sleep Lexi. I’ll see you in the morning,” he said.

He turned sideways to face me as I had him. He reached out, but pulled back hesitantly. I could tell he wasn’t used to this sort of closeness. He stretched out his hand again; this time he didn’t waver as he caressed my face from head to chin. His skin was just as smooth as earlier with the same cool temperature. Despite the rest of

my body being cold under the thick comforter, I enjoyed his touch and didn't want him to stop.

So much was racing through my mind. I still couldn't believe it. Kellan was a vampire, I was going to be a vampeen, my mom was a vampeen, and I had three full days remaining as a human. How do you live your last days to the fullest when no one can know what is coming? It was a little tricky. On the up side, Kellan wasn't so dark and reserved. I felt special, like he'd torn down a few defenses to let me in.

And Mel... What was I going to tell her? What could I tell her? I didn't want to lie to her, but I also didn't want to lose my best friend.

Then there was Mike. He was the first and only guy to like me the way I was - fat. He had embraced my every curve and made me feel special unlike anyone else. How could I turn on him? How could I abandon him without feeling a gut-wrenching guilt for the rest of my life? Honestly, I couldn't. I still liked him and cared about him. I couldn't hurt him like that.

And finally there was Kellan. He's so easy to talk to, especially now that he's the sole student at my school who knew and understood what I was about to endure. I didn't have to hide anything from him, but he was definitely not like Mike. Mike loved me the way I was now, but I worried that Kellan only liked me for who I would be, how I would look after Friday. I couldn't let go of Kellan now though. The bond had been formed, my desires were plain and vivid despite the lonely question mark I carried with him.

No. I couldn't let go of my best friend, of either guy I admired, or my life as I'd known it. Despite the rumors that would swirl, for their sake, I had to return quickly to what I had established. I would stay out of school for two weeks

before returning with a boom. Perhaps I would even let Mel plan a party for me and concoct a big reveal there. At least then she could have her fun and no one would assume I was a new student in the halls. After all, if I turned out as gorgeous as everyone claimed, I wouldn't mind flaunting a bit.

How different would I be though? Listen to me. I hadn't even transformed and I already sounded like a selfish, snobbish cheerleader. If I maintained this reprisal attitude, I would be a bratty monster. I couldn't let model looks change me internally. I didn't want to be Jenny Struthers's evil sidekick. I didn't want other girls to feel intimidated or self-conscious around me. I didn't want anyone to endure what I did because of me.

—

I woke up in the morning to my alarm sounding. I slapped the snooze button and stretched. I opened my eyes and scanned the room. Kellan was gone. I didn't know what I expected, but my mood sunk a bit knowing he left me. I guess I was hoping for another Edward moment.

I heard a tap at my door. "Come in," I said stifling a yawn.

"Morning sweetie, how are you feeling?" my mother asked sliding gracefully onto the edge of my bed.

"Umm, okay so far."

"That's good. You do have some worried visitors downstairs though."

"Visitors? As in more than one?" The last thing anyone wants is a visitor when your alarm sounds first thing in the morning.

“Yes. Mike and Mel are worried about you. Mel said you didn’t call last night nor did you answer her calls. I didn’t tell them anything; I will leave that to you.” She kissed my forehead and returned downstairs to give me time.

“Ugh.” I decided not to prolong my crucifixion. I took a two-minute shower, tossed my hair up, brushed my teeth and threw on the first outfit I found. I strolled downstairs remembering I’d left my cell in my bag by the door.

As soon as I entered the family room, I knew I was right to rush. Mike appeared ready to have a heart attack at any moment and Mel looked pissed off giving me her ‘you’re in deep shit - start talking’ glare.

“Umm, morning guys,” I smiled with a half wave motion.

“I’ll give you some space,” my mother offered exiting the room.

“You better start talking fast Lex,” Mel warned.

“Sorry. Kellan and I left school and went to the beach. We were walking and talking. We lost track of time. It was night before we left. He brought me home; I talked to my parents for a bit. I was so exhausted from walking all night that I just crashed and forgot to call you guys. Sorry,” I gushed trying to stick with the truth.

“If you went to bed, then why was Kellan just leaving when we got here?” Mike asked. I could hear the pain in his voice despite his accusing tone. I knew what he was thinking and I had to make it right.

“Listen. Nothing happened with Kellan and me. We didn’t even hug. He’s an old family friend. He and my mom like to reminisce about Spain since they were there

together this summer, his family and my parents.” Okay, so I was going to have to exaggerate a bit to defuse the situation. “I did go to sleep last night though and nothing happened between me and Kellan,” I calmly explained.

My efforts worked. Mike cheered up and Mel loosened her expression.

“So what were you two talking about all that time on the beach?” Mel probed with new enthusiasm.

“About life. He told me about living in Seattle; I asked him a lot of questions.” I was still attempting to remain truthful, as much as deemed possible anyways. What Mike said before was at the front of my mind though. Had Kellan really stayed the night with me? Did he lie in bed with me the whole night? I quickly pushed the thought away. *He’s not into me like that. Why am I allowing myself to go there?*

“I’m going to trust you this time,” Mike stated. I didn’t know whether to be relieved or irritated. This only went to show that we both carried trust issues.

“I’m really sorry,” I said.

Mike crossed the distance between us and pulled me to him for a kiss. After the intimacy I’d shared with Kellan last night though, I didn’t feel right being in Mike’s arms.

Mel interrupted the moment. “Ugh! Can we skip the Dawson’s Creek and be on our way before we’re late?” Mike gave Mel an intense angry look. Mel just scoffed sarcastically and stated, “Oh get over it Mike! There will be other times for you to smother your girlfriend. Hopefully you will choose times when I’m not around though.”

“I’ll see if my mom will drive us,” I interjected hoping to distract them. I walked away from Mike’s embrace to gather my stuff.

“Lexi. You. Me. Dinner, tonight. No boys allowed,” she ordered sticking her tongue out at Mike with the end jab.

“Sounds good,” I confirmed. I pulled my cell out of my bag and flipped it open. “Thirty-eight missed calls! What the heck were you two doing... speed dialing me all night?”

Mel shrugged while Mike tensed up again, glaring up the stairs at my room.

“Well?”

“Oh give it a rest Lex. You *really* don’t want to get me started on this again.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

—

Chapter Nine

My mother drove us to school. Mike walked me to every class, obviously still upset over last night while Mel had me retell the entire conversation on the beach with Kellan; this was extremely difficult considering I couldn't mention anything related to our secret heritage. At least she got it out of her system early, which meant dinner would be drill free.

I was disappointed when I got to Spanish and Kellan wasn't there, however he was in his desk in English. The moment I sat down a note was on my desk.

Hey

Hi

How are you today?

I'm okay. Haven't gone into shock yet if that's what you mean. You?

Not really, but good to know. I'm good. I had fun yesterday.

You mean yesterday and this morning? Mel and Mike said they saw you leaving. What did you do all night? My dad didn't say anything to you?

After you fell asleep I talked with your parents for a while. Your dad went to bed and your mom and I talked about stuff. Around three you sounded like you were having a nightmare so I stayed in your room until your dad left for work.

Oh.... why did you stay?

We gave you a lot to think about last night. I wanted to make sure you were okay.

Wow... thanks

So dinner with Mel tonight?

Yeah. How do you know about these things?

I overheard her talking earlier.

Oh. Yeah. I don't know where we're going yet. It's no boys allowed...

Have fun.

I will thanks.

The remainder of English flew by. My mom had agreed to pick Mel and me up after school so we could go to dinner.

"So where do you want to eat?" I asked as we climbed into my mother's heated leather back seats.

"I was thinking Mexican. I could do some chips and salsa with a virgin margarita."

"Chicken enchiladas here we come."

My mother decided to meet my dad for dinner at Outback Steakhouse after dropping us off down the road at Tejano Restaurante. Living in Spain helped me communicate at the restaurant perfectly.

"Buenos dias señoritas," the hostess greeted.

"Buenos dias. Necesita un mesa por dos, por favor," I responded, asking for a table for two. She smiled and led us to a booth by a window. This was a quaint restaurant, nothing large or overwhelming in size, but definitely not a hole-in-the-wall joint. It was charming with its adobo-flared

design. The focal point on the wall opposite the windows was a large framed Mexican flag surrounded by memorabilia and old sepia toned photos.

Our waiter, Jorge, introduced himself and promptly returned with the two sweet teas we ordered, a southern delicacy I loved. We requested a bowl of *queso blanco*, the best dip ever, and two virgin margaritas before starting to eat the chips and salsa set at our table. Mel, of course, was the first to speak between bites.

“So what’s up with you and Mike? I can’t keep up anymore.”

“I honestly don’t know. One minute we’re okay and the next we’re balancing on a tight rope. If I’m honest, I just can’t make a solid decision as to whether or not we should really be together right now.” This was all the more true after talking with Kellan and my parents last night. I would have a secret that I couldn’t reveal to him, something that impacted my life greatly, and that automatically put us at a disadvantage without the trust issues.

“If you’re not one-hundred percent sure about it Lex, then you really shouldn’t be with him. Every relationship hits a rough spot, but you haven’t totally committed yourself to the relationship at any point over the last month. It’s pretty obvious to me that your hearts not in it, so why are you sticking around?”

“I guess I feel obligated in a way. He was the first guy to acknowledge that I was beautiful in any way, or even acknowledge me period. I think I feel, to a certain degree, that I need to return the favor. He’s done everything he can to embrace me, and I’m trying to do the same for him.”

“Yeah, Lex, but it’s just like you said. It’s *for him*, not for you, and you will never be happy until you’re doing this

for yourself. You have to want this, not just settle for it.”

“Yeah. I know you’re right. It’s just... How can I hurt him after all he’s done for me?”

“You need to take him off this invisible pedestal. All he’s done is give you a few compliments and minor affection to boost your self-esteem. That doesn’t automatically qualify him to be the king of your heart,” she stated as Jorge set down our *queso* and margaritas.

“¿Qué le señoritas les gusta comer?” he asked.

“Mi amiga que como dos tacos de pollo con crema agria, y me gustaría una enchilada de pollo con salsa roja, por favor.”

“Buenas opciones. Volveré con sus pedidos en un poco,” he stated collecting our menus before walking away.

“I don’t know what I’d do without your Spanish,” Mel commented.

“You could manage. This is your second year of Spanish, remember?”

“High school Spanish doesn’t really count. It’s nothing like living in Spain for a couple years.”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s going on with you and Bancroft now? No guy stays the night without ulterior motives, regardless of whether or not he knows your parents personally.”

“Nothing happened. I wasn’t lying there. Honestly, I still feel this intense pull towards him, and, after he opened up to me last night, that feeling has only intensified. We have this invisible bond that surpasses what me and Mike could ever fathom having; I just don’t know quite what to do with it yet. I know Kellan’s presence has played a role in

my teeter tottering with Mike, but I don't know where Kellan stands with me. Now that I say that though, it's obvious that I'm just using Mike as a safety net because I don't want to be alone. Oh my gosh, Mel. I'm horrible! This whole time I didn't want to hurt Mike, yet now I see I'm doing something far worse. I'm using him and abusing our friendship." I couldn't believe I'd been so selfish. Beyond that, I couldn't believe I'd been so blind to my own selfish behavior. Regardless of where Kellan stood, I knew I had to let Mike go. With my transformation coming up, it was for the best that I figured it out now anyways.

"Don't beat yourself up, Lex. Nobody's perfect. I'm glad you figured it out, and now you just have to make it right by telling Mike the truth. You'll probably feel a huge burden lift off of you when you do it too."

"Yeah." I was trying to suppress the impending depression I felt blooming, but struggled.

"So... your birthday. What did you decide?" Mel prompted clearly trying to yank me from the edge of misery.

"Ugh," I groaned. "You can plan a party. But it can't be this weekend; it needs to be two weekends after."

"Yay!" she shouted victoriously. "Not that I want to jinx this, but what made you change your mind?"

"Apart from your continuous nagging?" She rolled her eyes and I continued. "Sixteen is a big year for a girl and I have a feeling I'm going to be a whole new woman. What better way to introduce the new me than with a party, right?"

"Definitely!" She began her rant at that moment, random chatter over party locations, themes and guest lists. I knew she would distract herself for a while not

needing even a word from me; she tended to answer her own questions in this mode. It gave me time to think though, to reflect on the truth within my words that my best friend didn't even recognize.

Just then it dawned on me, the perfect excuse. Sixteen was a huge year for a girl and a surprise birthday vacation wouldn't be unusual for a family with financial assets like my parents. I could say we're going to Tahiti or Hawaii - some kind of Tropical Island get-away with the sun and sand to escape the cold here. I would still have to discuss it with my parents before I used it, but it's the best idea I had.

"Lexi. Lex!" Mel interrupted.

I snapped my head up towards her as the waiter set down our meals. He asked if we needed anything more before excusing himself.

"What is up with you Lex? You are constantly lost in your world of thought lately. That's like you sometimes, but it's been happening a lot lately. I know you've had a lot going on with the guys, but talk to me. Is there more that I don't know about?"

What do I tell her? What can I tell her? 'Well, Mel, you see, on my sixteenth birthday I'm going to become a vampeen. That's a cross between a human and vampire...' As much as I wanted to dish my fate, I couldn't. I wasn't allowed. There is a secure vow of silence with this thing. Even if I could divulge she probably wouldn't believe it fully. Even I didn't believe it and I had proof with Kellan and my mom.

Acknowledging my silence, Mel stated, "If you don't want to talk about it, I'm cool with that. No pressure."

"It's not that," I sighed. "I just..."

“Is it about Mike, Kellan, your parents, school...? Is it me? Did I do something?” she asked in a panic.

“Calm down Mel, you didn’t do anything wrong. I *definitely* would have told you that. It’s just well, I can’t really talk about it right now.” I decided to stick to the truth. I didn’t want to lie to her unless I had to. I probably would after because there was no other way to explain a dramatic weight loss complete with a new gorgeous body and smooth skin in such a short time. Until that time though, I wanted to stay true to her and the value of our friendship with pure honesty as often as warranted in our discussions, which was surprisingly more difficult with Kellan around.

“If it’s boy trouble, I can totally help. I do have experience in that field you know,” she reminded as she took a bite out of her food.

“I know. You’ve already helped me with that since we arrived.” I began picking at my enchilada a bit.

She sighed dramatically. “So back to the party plans.”

“Do we really have to do this here?” I complained. “Plus, that is so your venue. I’m creative but I don’t dabble in the whole social exploitation thing like you. Can’t I just give you a wad of cash and free reign to do what you want?”

“You can’t buy me Lex! I can see that your attitude over this event hasn’t changed though so don’t worry about it. I’ll just plan it all with your mom,” she grumbled clearly upset over my view of it all.

“Sorry Mel. It’s just not my thing, but you should be happy. This means I totally trust you.”

She lightened up a bit. “Yeah, you’re right. I know you trust me with everything, that’s why our friendship works. I just want you to have fun and enjoy yourself. If I do it all without your input, you may not like it.”

“Mel, you know me better than anyone, probably better than I even know myself. I know I’ll love it!”

“You better if you know what’s good for you!” she said sternly with a pointed finger. We broke into laughter. I love Mel for her overly animated character. She knows how to make me laugh; she makes me forget about my worries with one line. Of course she also over dramatizes most situations simultaneously. She’s the best friend I could ask for though. She’s never betrayed me. We have our spats, but have never stopped speaking for one day, which again had me sinking into a deep depression.

We’d never gone a full day without talking yet somehow I had to avoid my best friend for two weeks. I was required to flat out lie to her for the first time. This gut wrenching guilt was already settling in. I was being forced to deceive and abandon my friends, even if just for a short time. Knowing I could never share the truth with them was depressing. Well, no use crying over milk that wasn’t spilled yet, even if it was inevitable.

“So my mom is dating again,” Mel announced nonchalantly.

“Are you serious? Who? What do you think about it?”

“Some random guy she claims to have known for five years. I don’t buy it, but who cares. As long as she is happy and the bastard doesn’t drain her bank account, I’m okay with it.”

Mel’s mom had done well since her divorce. She received a huge monthly child support check from Mel’s

estranged attorney father, but made over six figures a year on her own selling insurance. She's a brilliant businesswoman, but an overbearing mother since the divorce.

"Wow. I can't believe she's dating again. Have you met the guy yet?"

"No. We're supposed to do a family lunch on Saturday," she shrugged seeming uncomfortable despite her earlier claim.

"You are definitely obligated to dish."

"Yeah," she whispered, lowering her head in a sulking manner.

Attempting to distract her, I whittled out more details of my night with Kellan. "So Kellan held my hand on the walk back to the car at the beach."

"What? You held out on me? Hello, dish! What else are you keeping from me?"

"Nothing. I just couldn't say this before because Mike was around. It's nothing serious though. It was dark and the sand isn't easy to walk through; plus you know how clumsy I can be sometimes. So Kellan held my hand to make sure I didn't fall."

"O.M.G.!" Mel squealed. "Look at you Lex, going from zero to two guys in less than two months. I told you it would happen eventually. Meanwhile I can't seem to lock down even one date."

"You could if you made yourself available."

"I'm available!" she defended.

“Brandon?” I prompted. “He asked you out religiously for two months and you always told him you were busy.”

“Well, I had to watch Kyle... and I didn’t want to cancel on you a few times...”

“Okay, Dillon? He was all over you for six months after Ben. You completely blew him off and literally killed his ego.”

“That was right after Ben. I was still mourning...”

“For six months? Okay, fine. How about Caleb? You two have been passing notes since the start of school and nothing. He’s obviously into you. When a guy says ‘I dig you’, it’s pretty much a done deal. And you said he’s definitely your type, so what gives?” I pressed.

“I don’t know Lex,” she whined. “I don’t know what’s up with me. I guess I’m just afraid of another Ben or ending up like my parents.”

“If you ever want to find the right guy, find true love, you’re going to have to take a chance. Yes, you’ll run the risk of getting hurt, but you also stand a chance at romantic bliss,” I consoled.

“I know. It’s just hard,” she admitted sadly. She lowered her head and began picking at her second taco.

“Tell me about it.” I took a bite of my now cold enchilada. “Hey. You think your mom would let you stay over tonight?” I asked, wanting to cheer up my suddenly depressed friend.

“It doesn’t hurt to ask,” she perked up.

Surprisingly Mel’s mom agreed. Maybe this new guy was good for her. We finished our dinner and ordered two slices of *tres leches* to go; a midnight snack never killed

anyone. My dad picked us up announcing that my mom had a last minute offer to put together for some VIP client. We dropped by Mel's on the way home for her to grab some clothes.

"So what do you want to do tonight?" Mel couldn't contain her excitement upon returning to my dad's SUV.

"I don't know. I'm still shocked that your mom is actually letting you stay over."

"I know; so unlike her. But don't question the hand that feeds you. I'm just going with it."

"We could always attempt an all-nighter like in the old days."

"Sounds good, but I know when I'm going to lose a battle. I'm an expert and I'm so not winning the zombie thing tonight," she chuckled.

"We're not ancient you know. We still have it in us."

She smiled. "We can do movies, veg-out, talk boys. Oh! I'm so excited Lex! This is just what I've been needing!"

"What we both have."

"And what boys will you be discussing?" my dad chimed in.

"Dad! That's private," I droned.

"Just make sure none of these boys pay a house visit tonight. I will be ready to run them off," he warned.

"Dad, be nice! And you should know better. Mel and I aren't like that."

"Yeah Mr. Jackson, we're definitely not those girls," Mel reiterated.

“I certainly hope not.”

“I’ll put the desserts in the fridge and grab a coke for us if you want to go up,” I offered as we pulled in the driveway.

“Sure. I want to change into my PJs a.s.a.p. anyways.”

“Try to get to bed at a reasonable time, Alexa,” my dad stated as I was exiting the kitchen.

“We will dad,” I replied robotically. “Night,” I called on my way up the stairs.

“Night,” he said entering his room.

“My dad is being so weird,” I announced as I handed Mel her soda. She was already changed and sitting comfortably on my bed waiting.

“How so?”

“You know, it was weird because he loved Mike, but glared at Kellan who’s supposed to be a family friend. Like tonight, he knows I’ve never snuck around with boys, yet still gave us the warning. Then just now he was telling me to get to bed at a decent time and he even called me Alexa; he never calls me Alexa. It’s just not like him to interfere so much; he usually leaves that to my mom...”

“Huh. You think he’s weirding out over his daughter dating? Or just you getting older?”

“I have no clue.”

“Well until he goes psycho-delic like my mom, let’s just forget about it.”

I chuckled. “I think I can try to do that.”

“So what movie do we want to watch?”

“Hmm. Let’s see what’s on demand,” I stated flipping through the menu on the TV. At seeing the movie ‘Eclipse,’ we immediately selected it.

I changed into my pajamas and settled next to Mel on my bed. The next couple hours we were engrossed in the world of love, werewolves and vampires only as it happens in books and movies, at least from Mel’s point of view anyways. The similarities to my own world were uncanny in some places. To think, just as quickly I was being submerged into this mythical world. In forty-eight hours I would be preparing for my own transformation into one of them; and my best friend beside me wasn’t a werewolf nor a witch or any other creature of sorts to warrant my disclosure of truth to her. I hoped I didn’t have to abandon her as Jacob did with Bella until she figured out the reality. Bella was allowed to discover the truth; Mel never could for her own safety. I hadn’t been clued in on the repercussions of exposure yet, but I could only imagine that a royal vampeen army existed somewhere to rule our kind.

Sadly, this would probably be my last great human memory with my best friend. I was glad we had this opportunity; this was the best way to conclude my human life. I couldn’t hold on to it forever...

“Are you seriously crying Lex?” Mel interrupted my compelling evaluation at the end of the movie.

I ran my fingers under my eyes and was surprised to feel the water running down my face. “Umm... I guess so,” I stuttered bewildered by my sudden, intense down pour.

Why was I crying? Was I that upset over the changes coming to my sisterhood with Mel? *What am I saying? Of course I am!* Mel was my favorite person to be around and no matter how things panned out over the next couple weeks, even if I did reveal the truth to her, things would

never be the same between us. Our solid friendship realistically ended here, for I would always have to maintain some sort of distance between us to protect my true identity and involvement in a new world. I wasn't a good enough actress to do otherwise; Mel knew me too well.

"What do you want to do next?" Mel asked attempting to distract me from further collapse.

"Umm," I sniffed trying to pull myself together, "I don't know. What sounds good?"

"I'm thinking *tres leches*," she beamed.

"Sounds perfect. Let's go!" I hopped down off my bed in unison with Mel. We retrieved our desserts from the fridge just as my mom returned home.

"So did the sellers accept the offer?" I asked my mother as she entered the kitchen.

"I'll know in the morning," she replied.

"Was it a solid offer?"

"I think so but you never know."

"Good luck," Mel offered.

"Thank you," she smiled. "Make sure you get to bed soon, it's almost midnight."

I looked at the clock in disbelief. "Oh my gosh. It is. Time has flown by."

"Definitely," agreed Mel.

"I'll drop you two off in the morning to give you a few extra minutes of sleep. Good night girls," she said as she walked towards her bedroom.

“Night Mom,” I called.

“Night Mrs. Jackson,” Mel added.

“I guess we should try to get some sleep.” I savored the final bite of my treat.

“Yeah. Thanks for tonight, Lex. I really did need a mini-vacay from the insanity at home.”

“Are you trying to make me cry again?”

“No. Let’s not,” she laughed.

“Let’s go to bed.”

The moment I crawled into bed under the warm covers, exhaustion sunk in. It was easy to fall asleep with such heavy lids, a physical sign of my heavy thoughts.

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Chapter Ten

Something disturbed me in the dead of night. Mel slept soundly through it. The wind was blowing harshly outside forcing branches to slap the house. It didn't sound like it was raining though I heard something close to sand being thrown at my window.

"Ugh, I definitely can't sleep through this," I spoke aloud as I often did to myself. I might as well go downstairs. Surely my mother was awake if her hearing was as sensitive as she claimed. I slid out of bed and put on my hoodie and slippers before creeping down the stairs. Before hitting the final step, I paused due to a humming noise. I stood frozen attempting to distinguish the sound.

"Lexi," I heard my mother call.

"Are you down here, Mom?" I whispered creeping down the final step.

"Yes, in the family room."

I walked towards the sofa to realize the humming wasn't an object, it was whispering. Four people sat on the sectional with my mother.

"Umm...hi," I stuttered unsure. It was dark and I knew others were sitting with my mother but could only make out figures, not details since the darkness overcast the inaptitude of my eyes.

"Hey Lexi," the familiar voice greeted.

"Sweetie, why don't you turn on the kitchen light and I'll introduce you to everyone," my mother instructed.

This should have been odd; I mean what parent entertains guests in the dead of night in the dark? Sadly though, it didn't feel strange. I searched for the light and flipped it on cautiously. Sitting on the couch was my mother, my Aunt Claire, Kellan, a man and a woman I presumed to be his parents since he vaguely resembled them. I suddenly felt awkward, like the odd man out.

"Come have a seat here," my mother directed patting the empty space between her and my aunt.

Seeing my aunt and mother side by side was like seeing a mirrored reflection. The only differences were my aunt had short shoulder length hair, less cleavage, and though she was older, she never had children so her hips were still narrow. When they were younger, my gran dressed them alike pushing a resemblance of twins since they were only a year apart.

"Umm, what's going on?" I was bewildered as I sat between them.

"Well, honey, these are Kellan's parents," she stated gesturing toward them with her right hand. "This is his mother, Elizabeth."

Kellan's mother looked nothing like I imagined though I did recognize her from the photo. She's a gorgeous young woman, slender with auburn hair and soft lips, though her top is a bit fuller than her bottom. She had a heart shaped face that somehow fit her warm, motherly aura. But what caught my attention were her eyes. Kellan got his eyes from his mother though hers were more hazel than green.

"You can call me Beth," she said with a friendly smile.

"And this is his father, Alejandro," she pointed towards him on the far end of the sectional.

He was a visually dominant person. His muscles were clearly defined through his blue V-neck t-shirt. There was a sense of mystery and darkness set amongst pain surrounding him; I immediately knew where Kellan got it. He looked dangerous, yet still approachable and protective over his family. He looked like he belonged in the vampire version of 'The Sopranos' but set in the early 1900s for some reason.

"Are you planning to inform her?" Alejandro asked in a gruff voice with a slight Italian-New York accent.

"Tell me what?" I looked to my mother for answers.

She exchanged looks with my aunt before sighing, "I suppose we should warn her just in case."

"Warn me?" I was abruptly uneasy.

"I didn't go to the office tonight sweetie. We had an emergency VVA meeting."

"VVA? What is that?" I was confused and felt slightly overwhelmed by everyone.

"The Vampire and Vampeen Alliance," my aunt responded.

"Is that like some secret society?"

"No. It's the only allegiance of our kind," Beth answered.

This was growing ever more difficult to understand. The moment I believed to have a handle on the idea of what I was to become, something was shaken and stirred; another angle was abruptly thrown in. I felt like midnight would come Thursday night and I would have more questions than answers, more anxiety than peace.

I remained overwhelmed by everything. I never knew my life could be turned upside down in less than a week to the point where I was questioning my identity.

Noticing my silence, my mother took the reins to explain. “Let me explain our history Lexi; this may provide you some answers. You see, the first documented vampeen was Johanne Euskadi. He was born in Romania, but left at the age of sixteen deemed an outcast. His mother did not survive his birth; his father, a vampire, rebuked him ashamed of his human affair. Johanne was a cross between both worlds, yet belonged in neither after his transformation.

“So he traveled all of Europe, parts of Africa and Asia for a place to call home. He lingered in Germany, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, the Soviet Union, and Greece, but settled in Basque Country, Spain. He married Araceli Maria Criscencia, a human native, who later gave birth to their daughter Cristianna Rose Euskadi. Like his mother, his wife did not survive labor. Johanne was left to raise his daughter alone. Shortly after her transformation, Cristianna met and fell in love with Juliano Del Torro, a vampire.

“Johanne despised vampires because of his father’s denial of him and the ridicule he endured from them after his transformation; therefore he forbid his daughter from seeing Juliano. It was over his self-hatred of the vampires that he drove his daughter to flee with Juliano, leaving Johanne alone again. In anger, he dedicated the remainder of his life to the vanquish of vampires near and far, thus setting the precedence of each kind to hate the other.

“He created a vampeenic tongue comprised of the many areas of the world he knew and loved, but ensured the verbiage was too complicated to be logical in

comparison, and converted the language of Basque Country to Euskara. It spread amongst the natives, beginning as slang until it progressed. Johanne married again and had three sons who continued his mission throughout the world.

“Vampeens, still today, are strict in their association and most seek to kill all vampires they come across. Thus, to protect themselves, the vampires began destroying vampeens in large numbers. Even in Euskadi, as Basque Country is sometimes prevailed, it is divided. The French part of Basque Country inhabits a plethora of vampires, where as vampeens are headquartered within the Spanish regions. And now, a vampire radical is running rampant murdering vampeens during their twenty-four hour transformation.”

I was stunned. I didn't know what to say. I didn't even know if I could speak. I knew I had an empty scared look on my face, but I couldn't shake it. This couldn't be happening. *I must be dreaming. This isn't possible.*

One week ago, I was a normal teen. Then Kellan showed up - okay so he was already there just in the silent backdrop - and since then everything had changed. How could this be real? You're only supposed to read about this stuff, see it in movies, not live through it and amongst it.

“H... How...is...,” I tried to speak but failed.

Kellan clued in on where I was going and answered the unspoken. “When you go through your transformation, you sleep for twenty-four hours. But it's not like you do every night. It's like you're under anesthesia, you can't hear or feel anything. So if this vampire took a stake to your heart, you wouldn't feel it. You also couldn't prevent it; you can't move.”

His mother continued for him in a soothing voice, "You are to be locked away in the dark during this process. Traditionally, you would be placed in a sealed coffin to ensure no light touches you. This is the one time when vampire myths and restrictions apply to you entirely."

Though I should have been scared silly at the idea of being locked in a coffin unable to fight off a crazy vampire murderer, I wasn't. Actually, I suddenly understood the weight placed upon my choice, the choice my mother said was between a human and a vampire. I realized now that my decision forever associates me with one side or another. They didn't intermingle the way I assumed previously. I could feel the stress across my face as I reveled in this new revelation.

"Don't worry sweetie," my mother said giving me a one-armed embrace at the same time as my aunt.

"Listen Lexi," Alejandro stated firmly, "We've devised a plan. I've been training Kellan for several months to fight off attackers. Since the gender of this assailant is unknown, I feel better with both of us men being there to ward off any attempts. Kellan and I will stand guard. Your aunt, mother and Beth will be on stand-by just in case though I don't believe it will come to that. I do promise you that you will be safe."

"Thank you Al," my mother offered her gratitude, clutching me even tighter.

He spoke with such confidence that I felt a bit of peace surround me. I wasn't okay with this, but I didn't have a choice. I couldn't stop fate; I couldn't prevent what was to come Thursday night at midnight. I merely shook my head in acknowledgement.

Ugh. I can't believe vampires want to kill vampeens. And how do they find us anyways? Do we smell different? Hmm... I should ask...

"Umm...just out of curiosity, how is this vampire tracking me?" I asked cautiously.

"There are a few ways. First, the master record of all vampeens in the world and their children yet to be transformed is catalogued in Basque Country within a secured data network underground. Recently, this information was hacked, and they've yet to find the culprit. Also, we have our distinct scents, but the scent of ,well, you, two weeks prior to your transformation is capable of luring travelers hundreds of miles away. You have a very strong scent right now," Aunt Claire explained while watching my face intently for any changes in my demeanor due to stress. I swore everyone thought I was going to keel over at any moment due to overload...which could definitely be the case.

"Great," I muttered sarcastically. "So in three days I'll sleep for twenty-hour hours in a coffin dead to the world. I'll wake up no longer human or I could just not wake up at all if this crazed vampire gets to me. Oh and after I can't tell a living soul, note the difference, and could possibly lose all my friends and be deemed an outcast!" I huffed in frustration.

I was enthralled. Four days was definitely not enough time for anyone to accept the terms of this death sentence. What was my mother thinking in keeping this from me until the very end? And now they're springing this on me last minute. What more could go wrong in my life?

Just as a boy finally noticed me, and my life as a teen was evolving into something great, Boom! Smack! Snatch! It's all gone! Ripped from under me!

I was angry at my parents for this, at my heritage with its stupid sixteen-year stipulation. Unable to hide my distaste, I blurted, “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? Why did you wait until the last freaking minute to divulge it all?” I belligerently balled my hands into fists, centered myself towards my mother and waited for her excuse.

“I’m sorry Alexa,” she offered in a soft, sincere tone. “Maybe I was in denial. I do not want this life for you, but I cannot change it and neither can you. I promise to be there and help you every way I can, but first you must accept your fate as I have.”

My body was tense, though I loosened my hands. I peered around the room, looked into the eyes of my new family. I felt silly, selfish for my actions. None of the people before me chose this lifestyle; with the exception of Al, they were born into this. Each one of them received this curse at conception; this was their hereditary disease.

Shame – I was ashamed of myself. My parents did not raise me to be weak. I’d learned from the strongest woman I knew – my mother. I realized this must have been just as strenuous for all of them as it was for me; why should I feel more entitled than they? *Ugh. I’m such a mess, yet not one of them sits here judging me or casting stones at me for my ignorance.*

I sat there in silence, observing each person before me as guilt spread throughout me for at least five minutes. No one spoke recognizing my need for a bit of space mentally. Surprisingly, it was Al who spoke first.

“Lexi, I know this must be difficult for you, but allow me to share my own story. You are not alone in your uncertainty and struggles.”

I shook my head once accepting his offer.

He began, shifting his husky voice into a soothing baritone. “You may be wondering how old I am. To answer that, I was born in 1891 in Savannah, Georgia. My parents were human. A year later my father moved us to upstate New York for his work. My parents were the first of their families to venture to America. My mother was born and raised in Tuscany, Italy and my father was born in Germany as his father was a borrowed soldier in their army, but was raised in Madrid, Spain where his family originates.

“Upon graduation, my father traveled to Tuscany to study in the wineries. It was there that he met my mother. My father was a brilliant businessman. He built a trusted relationship with the owners of the vineyards and agreed to introduce their wines to the finest restaurants in America. He and my mother wed in Tuscany before setting sail for the new world.

“It was in the middle of the Atlantic that I was conceived. Their ship docked in Savannah and that is where my parents decided to settle for nearly two years. One day, my father read of the upscale mountain resorts and the fine log cabin eateries of upstate New York. The next day he packed us up and we travelled by train to our new home.

“Growing up in fine restaurants with the gourmet cuisine shared by the social celebrities of that era, I became fascinated with the art of food. So after graduating, I travelled south into the city, New York City that is, in 1923 to the Culinary Academy. It was a tiny school, but captured brilliant chefs of varying cultural backgrounds as instructors.

“I focused on my studies. I was the first student to arrive and the last to leave. I practiced dicing and pairing, sculpting and searing to the point of insanity. Eventually

the head master trusted me with a set of keys to the school. The next night I closed up for the first time alone. It was nearly midnight and the streets were mostly deserted. I lived only three blocks from the school and thus began my tread home.

“A block from my studio apartment, out of nowhere I was attacked and dragged into a back alley. I felt the bite, the sharp teeth cut into my skin and I went limp. Mentally I was there, and though I felt the pain, I was paralyzed and could not defend myself. Seconds later a dark figure knocked the vampire away from me. The blood poured out of me and I lost consciousness; unaware of what had taken place.

“When I woke, I was alone in my apartment. My two windows had been nailed shut and black fabric was tacked temporarily to their surface. On the table next to my couch was a letter instructing me to read a book, which ultimately divulged my fate. Within seventy-two hours of my bite, I was a full vampire without a master to guide me. I had to abandon all I knew without understanding what was happening to me.

“Five years later I met Phoenix, a south-western vampire visiting the city by mere impulse. He was created in 1782 at the age of nineteen. He is Native American and was scouring the woods, hunting, when he was attacked. His own father killed the vampire, but they were unable to save him from the poison that lurked in his body. It was Phoenix who saved me from insanity. He took me under his wing and showed me how to survive, how to cope with my new world.

“It took me forty years to come to terms with my new identity, and another forty to feel normal in any manner. It was then that I met my dear Beth,” he looked into her eyes

passionately. For this one brief moment, I felt like I was intruding on a private moment. “She loved me despite what I was or who I killed. She unveiled the human trapped within me and ignited my passion for life.

“I was never able to see or speak to my parents again. I had to relinquish everything for nothing Lexi. You are far more blessed than I was. For five years, I wandered aimlessly trying to comprehend myths and legends as reality alone. You have the support I needed in numbers. It took me an entire lifetime to come to terms with my transformation, but your laws are different and your lifespan not as infinite,” he warned with sincere concern and prompted awareness on my part.

“What do you mean?” I asked warily.

“Both our hearts still beat, but it is far easier to kill a vampeen than a vampire because you are guided by your humanity while we are guided by our instincts. Look what happened to your Gran,” he offered thoughtfully.

“Wait. What are you talking about? Mom, what happened to Gran?”

It was only then that I thought back. My gran always appeared far more youthful than she should have. I never saw her past age five, though we talked in length every weekend. We were very close despite our physical distance. The same with Pap, though I never saw him past two.

“Lexi, that is how our kind die; we are killed,” she answered softly.

“How? I mean why?” I questioned frantically.

“The vampire war surges deeper than we let on. We have been destroyed by our own kind in most cases, and

occasionally murdered by exposure to the human world," my aunt responded.

"So what will happen to me? I realize now that you and mom are not simply aging gracefully..." I pressed, still frazzled mentally.

"Twenty-five. The vampire cells go from fifty-one percent at sixteen to seventy-six percent at twenty-five, which stops the aging process of your integumentary system for your skin but doesn't affect your hair and nails," she answered directly.

"So if I choose a human, as you have Dad, I will outlive him. I will inevitably choose to love and lose knowing fate?"

I saw the sadness in her eyes before she even replied. "Yes."

"Unless," Kellan spoke for the first time in a while, "You have him changed. There are vampires willing to change a human for a fee."

My mother's eyes filled with fury in conjunction with Kellan's remark. For once, their green hue seemed hazy; the outer ring of her irises began to flicker a red-orange. She darkly scowled, "That is *never* an option if you truly love. You would never curse the one who brightens your world."

"I was just informing Lexi of her options."

"Again, that isn't an option," she reinforced.

So this was my fate. This was my world as of Thursday at midnight. I knew in watching *True Blood* and reading books such as *Dracula*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Interview with a Vampire* and *Twilight* that the lives and world of vampires was complex and took self-control to survive in; even fiction

captures this essence accurately, though this seemed three times more difficult to maintain. I literally would be entwined in three worlds with enemies lurking around every corner - the human, vampire and vampire world. They each had separate rules, restrictions and dangers. Suddenly I would rather be a fat, lonely teenager...

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Chapter Eleven

Once my mom cooled down, I opted to return to bed. I had heard all I could take for a lifetime, let alone one night. Even worse... my best friend was lying beside me sleeping and as much as I wanted to wake her up for advice and some much needed comfort, I couldn't. This part of me must forever remain a secret to her.

Here I lied in the middle of the night tossing and turning in my bed; I felt like my life was just one big charade. Everything I'd known until now about my parents, my family, my lifestyle... it's all one huge façade in numerous ways. Not one piece of my life was solid, not one person a permanent fixture anymore.

Finding out that Gran was killed was heart wrenching. I remembered the sweet angelic voice on the other end of the phone every weekend reminding me to avoid burnt popcorn if I wanted my hair to stay straight. She believed the funniest wives tales. I missed her terribly. I was at peace before thinking she passed in her sleep, but with this new revelation being revealed to me, I felt her soul ablaze. She must have been disturbed. How could any soul peacefully retire when it was abruptly forced to leave its physical refuge in violence?

"Ugh," I sighed aloud, "I will never get back to sleep after all this."

"Then you won't mind a visitor?" I heard a familiar voice inquire.

I sat up and turned my attention to my bedroom door. It was slightly ajar and standing just beyond its frame was

a tall male figure I recognized as Kellan. "Umm, no... Come in," I mumbled.

"So... Interesting night, huh?"

"To say the least. I don't know if I will ever be able to wrap my mind around all of this," I stated still soaking in the events of an hour ago. I fiddled with my nails atop my thick comforter. Thank God Mel was a sound sleeper. I don't know how we could have explained tonight to her.

"You will in time. I know how you feel. It's overwhelming, but you have good people supporting you like I did. Just try not to overanalyze every detail. I know you are and that's only making it worse for you," he said while walking closer towards me.

"Huh," I chuckled softly. "Yeah, you're probably right. I can't help it though. It's just how I am."

"Hey. I know this is going to sound crazy, but you want to go for a walk outside for a bit? It sometimes helps me organize my thoughts," he offered seeming a bit anxious.

"Right now?" I crinkled my forehead in disbelief.

"Yeah."

"But it's night out... And it's cold," I stumbled to chuck up some sort of excuse.

"You can bundle up. And you can't tell me you've never walked around at night before. You might as well get up before I make you," he warned.

"Ugh, fine," I groaned. I looked up at his gorgeous face. Unable to make out all of his features, I stared at the one prominent part of him that captured me, his breathtaking smile and single, appealing dimple. He was beaming in radiance before me, his teeth pearly white were

slightly iridescent. Though he didn't confess, I knew he enjoyed spending time with me just as much as I did him. Whatever this bond was between us, it stretched beyond our basic comprehension. And I would have liked to rely on Mel to stay asleep since she'd slept through hurricanes and tornados, but it's better to be safe than sorry.

I slid down off my bed and into my flip-flops. Luckily I was wearing toe-socks already so I didn't have to dig for them. I threw on my red Aeropostale hoodie and retrieved my cell phone as I walked towards the door. Kellan stood guard the entire time watching me as if I was planning a secret escape. "You can relax. I'm not going to cop out on you," I said slightly teasing his demeanor.

"Sorry," he shrugged.

By the time we reached the bottom of the stairs, my mother and aunt were standing there expectantly. "Just where do you think you're going at this time of night Lexi?" my mother demanded.

As much as I would have liked to oblige her earlier unspoken request to stay safe, Kellan wanted to go for a walk, and frankly, I could use a little fresh air. "For a walk with Kellan. We won't go far and we won't be long. I promise."

"I'll keep her safe Mrs. Jackson," Kellan firmly stated.

My mother and aunt exchanged worried glances amongst all four of us before agreeing. The terms: we had to be back in twenty minutes or they were coming after us.

Kellan opened the door for me. A gust of wind beat against me as I stepped outside. "Why did I agree to this again?" I whined sarcastically.

"Because you like me," he smugly replied.

“Ugh. Don’t remind me.” I hated the fact that Kellan knew where I stood with him. He knew he’s attractive and charming in his dark mysterious way. He’s cocky and shy at once. It drove me insane, but I still loved it on him.

“I’m really not that bad. It could be worse. You could like Jason.”

“Gross! That’s a never! Point made.”

He chuckled nervously. “I did want to walk with you for a reason though, but not here.”

“Where then? We only have twenty minutes,” I reminded him. Without notice I was scooped into to his arms and traveling at what felt like the speed of light. “Where the heck are you taking me Kellan?” I demanded as the wind slapped the left side of my face. He just laughed and continued to run down my street un-phased by my sudden panic.

“Close your eyes.” I hesitantly obliged by curling into him. I placed my face into his chiseled chest right as the wind tripled in force. I felt like I was dropped into a wind tunnel.

Moments later he slowed to a jog and I turned to observe my surroundings. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust. It didn’t matter though; I didn’t recognize the area. “Where are we?” I looked around at the meadow of grass before me.

“The thirteenth hole,” he replied setting me down.

“Nice, but why here? It’s not like you have any more big secrets left to reveal to me.”

“Or do I?” he said with a Dr. Evil tone.

“Shut up!” I laughed smacking his arm, as if he would actually feel it. He led me towards a small hill set amongst the surprisingly flat Tourane. I followed his lead in sitting on the cold ground; I always defaulted to an Indian style position. “So what do you want to talk about?” I folded into my jacket a bit more trying to survive the breeze.

“Why do you like me?” he returned seeming a bit distracted by his thoughts.

“What?” Was he really asking me this? Was he seriously putting me on the spot like this? I was embarrassed enough that he knew undeniably about my crush, but he was extending it to a detailed level with bribing specifics to be exposed.

“Why do you like me?” he repeated.

“I can’t believe you’re asking me this...”

“Please just tell me the truth Lexi. I need to know why.”

Despite the temperature of the earth below me, I laid back and heaved a loud sigh. I really didn’t want to answer the question, but then again, he already knew I liked him. Why did it matter if he knew specifically why? I knew I was going to cave eventually; Kellan was not the type of person to admit defeat. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before spilling my guts to him.

“I like you because your smile lights up the room I’m in, because you’re funny and approachable yet dark and mysterious. You’re friendly and share your stories with me, but keep me wanting more with your games sometimes so I know I would never be bored with you. You are the first guy to walk in and figure me out in a minute and while I never prided myself on enjoying men as a challenge, you are the first to make me rethink that effort. Aside from the fact that

you are the only student in my school that shares my heritage, you are also the only guy I have met that invigorates my senses. Something about you ignites my mind, drives me mentally, emotionally and physically in a way I've never experienced. At first I thought this was just a little crush, but over time I've come to realize that I like you for far more than what meets the eye. You've awakened the dead within me simply by your presence and a blooming friendship. And while it's true, I want more, I would never jeopardize what you've given me at this level for a delusional dream I have for something beyond that."

I lay perfectly still inhaling a few more breaths before opening my eyes. I didn't know what to expect. I just poured my heart out, admitted all my secret desires in a matter of sixty seconds to a guy I knew didn't feel the same in return. I stared up at the stars waiting for some sort of response. Laughter, a jab at me, something... anything, but alas I heard nothing. I dreaded eye contact after all I'd splurged, but Kellan wasn't giving me a choice. I didn't want to speak again, plus my foot was too far lodged in my mouth for anything to come out clearly at this point.

I slowly turned my head towards him. His eyes were intently staring at me, his brows furrowed almost in anger. "I'm... I'm sorry. Did I cross the line? I was just telling you the truth. I thought you would appreciate that," I attempted to explain.

Nothing. Neither one word nor one move in response. He remained dormant with the same intense expression in my direction. Feeling more and more awkward by the minute, I finally gave up. I stood to my feet and began walking. I was clueless with navigating my route, but eventually my mom or aunt would find me. Why was he acting like this anyways? He was the one who asked. He

pushed for my answer. I should have lied. I should have said or done anything but what I did.

I walked no more than ten feet before I felt a pull on my left arm. Great! What did he want now? Did he think of another way to humiliate me in a matter of thirty seconds? Frustrated and embarrassed, I lashed out as I turned back towards him. "What do you want from me Kellan?"

"No one's ever said any of that to me before," he whispered.

Still angry, I blurted, "Well now they have. Good for you!" I turned and began stomping across the field.

"Lexi," he called. I ignored him and kept pressing forward.

One minute I was walking in an open grassy golf course, the next I bumped into something hard. A bit dazed I shook my head and looked up. Kellan placed one hand on each of my arms as to hold me hostage in this position. I did the worst thing possible... I looked into his eyes. His beautiful brilliant green eyes sparkling like emeralds in the night responded to my attention with a flicker of passion within them. Lost in my trance, I was caught off guard when he whisked me into his arms without warning and took off.

When I broke away, I realized we weren't going the way he came. We were flying in and out of trees along the back yard lines of a neighboring community. I sunk into Kellan, retracting against the cold of the night once again. Within minutes we were on my doorstep. The moment he set me down I marched up to my room to sulk in the comforts of my big warm bed where I was free to like and dream of anyone secretly without repercussions.

Chapter Twelve

The morning was a standard routine despite Mel's presence. Mike came over and after last night with Kellan, I was happier than ever to entwine myself within his arms. I knew I was supposed to be breaking up with him; I knew I was just procrastinating, but it felt good to be in his arms in that moment. I needed the comfort, even if he didn't know what it was truly for.

"Now this is what I call a proper welcome," he smiled as I nearly toppled into his embrace the minute he set foot in the door.

"Yeah."

"How was dinner last night with Mel?" he asked pulling us into the family room to sit.

"It went good. She stayed the night."

"I'm surprised."

"I know, right? Anyways, she's freshening up. My mom already said she'd take us."

"Awesome. I hate the bus. My dad promised to buy me a car, but not until I bring English up to at least a 'B'."

"I can help with that," I offered. "That is definitely my forte."

"That'd be great. You think you could help me with my monologue? I have Mrs. Henderson second period so we have the same assignment."

"Sure. You want to just come over after school?"

"You're a lifesaver."

“Okay. I’m officially ready to go,” Mel announced as she entered the family room, backpack in hand.

Right behind her stood my mother. “Lexi, I need to speak with you for a moment. Mel. Mike. Why don’t you go get in the car; the heat is on already,” she prompted politely.

I waited for my friends to exit before turning to my mother a bit uneasy. “What’s up, Mom?”

“Alexa,” she stated firmly placing her hands on my shoulders lightly, “I need you to please be careful. Avoid all new students at school, anyone you are unfamiliar with. The attacker in is our area.”

Instantly my stomach began to gurgle nervously. “H... How can you be so sure?” I stuttered.

She sighed looking into my fearful eyes and answered not out of desire, but necessity. “A vampeen transforming was murdered. She lived in Goose Creek.”

“What...When did this happen?” I pressed in a panic. My mind was racing. Ideas, concerns, nightmare possibilities flashed before me, consuming my rational.

“Last night,” she stated looking away, trying to remain unruffled for my sake seeing how easily frightened I was.

I felt the life force within me drain. I felt empty. In forty-eight hours, I would be transforming with a crazed vampire on the loose and ready to destroy me. I hadn’t crossed over yet and I was already the center of their war efforts; a war I didn’t wish to be a part of. I’d met Kellan and his father; I had no problem with their kind thus far. And the vampeens I’d met seemed equally amicable.

“Let’s go before you’re late for school,” she prompted, maintaining a professional manner about her. She gently pushed me towards the garage. I wasn’t mentally there at the moment and she recognized that.

Upon arriving at the car, Mel and Mike had strategically sat apart. Mel was sitting in the front seat with Mike in the back anticipating the ride to school beside me. I quietly slid in the backseat next to him, feeling pale as a ghost, bug eyed and fearing death with each lingering second.

Mel stared at me as I entered the car absorbing my energy, or lack thereof, and Mike acknowledged my expression with matched apprehension. I couldn’t shake it; this was one time when my emotions couldn’t be tamed. The concept was engrained into my mind; the sheer comprehension of intent to murder was slathered over my confidence. I suppose for the first time I fully understood the danger I was in; the danger I was luring to my family.

Neither Mike nor Mel questioned me in the car knowing it was my mother’s words that had disarmed me. Mel attempted to communicate with her eyes and a few mouthed words, but I just stared off into space, dead to the world and incapable of recognition. Mike put his arm around me, and, though I couldn’t tell him the truth, his presence alone provided me a bit of comfort.

I leaned into his arms prompting a full embrace from him. I didn’t believe for one minute that Mike could fight off a vampire, but I did know he cared enough about me to try. Of course this would probably never happen, but I thought the same about encountering a vampire in my lifetime a week ago.

The moment my mother drove off, what I knew was coming did – Mel and Mike drilled me.

“Lexi, what the heck happened with your mom?” Mel exclaimed.

“Yeah, babe, you look whiter than a ghost. What’s going on?”

Wow. Am I really that pale?

Snap back Lexi! What are you going to tell them? What could I tell them? Surely I couldn’t exploit the truth; they probably wouldn’t believe it anyways. But I had nothing but the truth at the forefront of my audible thoughts; my thinking was fogged by the mounting stress.

“Lex! I’m drowning here!” Mel cried wearily trying to squeeze juice from a barren fruit, which would be me at this point.

There’s nothing else I could do but tell the truth. I had to say something. I could escape with a white lie with Mike, but Mel knew me too well.

“Umm...” I stumbled to coordinate my thoughts into words without revealing too much. I sighed. At that moment I felt it, I couldn’t hold back any longer. Then it came. The water began welling up in the ducts of my eyes; my throat tightened and breathing became uneven.

“Lex. Are you okay? What’s wrong babe?” Mike pressed with worry lines across his forehead.

“Lex. Talk to me. You’re freaking me out. I’ve never seen you like this,” Mel stated anxiously.

I couldn’t. I was frozen in the middle of the hall with my best friend and supposed to be ex-boyfriend by this point feeling like a building just collapsed on me. I guess I didn’t heed their warnings last night. I’d felt invincible, like a serial killer wouldn’t touch me. Knowing he or she had

struck close to home was what shook me. I didn't want to die, but if I did I would accept it. If someone else died trying to protect me though, especially Kellan or my parents, I would crumble. I couldn't handle that amount of guilt.

I looked at my friends before me and realized I had to pull myself together. They couldn't be involved in this. I wiped the last of my tears trying to gain the courage to tell them something.

"I...um..." Mike pulled me into his arms embracing me and immediately the water works began again. Who knew turning sixteen could be life threatening? I was saved for the moment though. Mid-hug the warning bell rang forcing us to hurry to class in time.

Mike remained glued to my side all day, warmly wrapping his arms around me randomly. He walked Mel and me to every class. I knew I should have been distancing myself from him, but I was distracted throughout the day. Mel realized whatever was said upset me beyond words, meaning I wouldn't be able to talk about it anytime soon. She tried to coerce me a few times during first period, but I didn't budge. After much thought, I decided it was better to say nothing at all, at least for now.

Conveniently, Kellan was absent all day. Today, as angry as I was with him over last night, or should I say this morning, he still was the only one I could talk to about this. My dad was obviously withdrawn, my mother was torn emotionally and yet trying to stay neutral over the whole thing, and though I loved her to bits, I didn't really talk to my Aunt Claire. Sadly, Kellan was my only outlet; he was my stability in all of this. I hated to admit it because he was a jerk just hours before to me, but I needed him right now. I wanted to open up, spill my guts entirely and ball my eyes

out. I knew if I did this with Kellan, he would put it all into perspective and reassure me to the point where tears would be unnecessary. Alas the jerk was inconveniently m.i.a. the one day I needed him, so I was forced to cope alone.

Lost in my own world mentally, the day passed quickly. Mike met me outside English the moment the final bell rang. Mel was frustrated with my silence by the day's end and walked to her bus immediately without a word to Mike or me. Mike remained patient the entire day and pressed for nothing more. This was very unusual for him. He and Mel couldn't stand silence.

My mother insisted on picking us up after school. She and Mike made small talk on the ride home. Almost to the house, Mike spoke to me breaking the silence. "Are you sure you're still up for helping me Lex? I'm sure I could figure it out if you want."

I inhaled a deep breath. "I'm sure." I smiled as convincingly as possible.

Once inside, Mike insisted I eat since I'd skipped breakfast and lunch. I grabbed a bag of pretzels and a coke on our way upstairs to pacify him. I dropped my book bag on my bed and slid off my tennis shoes. I turned back around to close the door and almost ran into Mike.

I glanced past him to see the door was already shut. He took my face into his hands and pulled me towards him. I couldn't help but look into his eyes, innocent and honest, somewhat mesmerizing but flat compared to Kellan's. He stared down into my eyes intensely as if he was trying to read me.

"Listen Lex, you don't have to tell me what's going on. But if you do want to talk, I'm here. I know you have Mel,

but I want you to know you also have me," he spoke strongly emphasizing all the right areas to reaffirm his commitment to me emotionally; this just made the guilt resurface. He was completely dedicated to me and I wasn't to him.

"I know," I answered softly still awestruck over the intensity behind his wording. He spoke in a manner that you were forced to pay attention to.

"Would it be too girly of me to ask for a kiss?" he smiled shyly.

I giggled, cracking a smile for the first time today. "I promise not to think any less of you." I closed the gap between us, pressing my lips to his. I hadn't planned to linger, merely placate him for the moment and return the favor of his support. Instead I released all my inhibitions and angst from today within this kiss.

I finally pulled away from my stress-reliever feeling surprisingly much better. Though my mother's words hadn't been erased mentally, my present company rather than the complications that could arise over the next few days distracted me. Mike slid off his shoes and pulled me on the bed with him.

"Don't forget we have an assignment to complete," I reminded him verbally though physically I inched into his arms. I'd already messed up. I was supposed to be distancing myself from him, not drawing closer.

"Consider this part of the research," he said.

"How do you figure?"

"I'm exploring love to accurately portray it from Romeo's perspective."

“I’ll allow that lie to pass but only because I’m comfortable.”

Pulling me in tighter, Mike asked intently. “Lex. Please be honest with me. Are you in any danger?”

I froze. He hit the nail on the head. I was possibly in danger, but could I tell him? Putting off any over-analyzation of the situation, I decided to tell him as much of the truth as possible. Perhaps I needed to tell someone in order to really sort through it.

“A sort-of related person to me was killed last night. Murdered. Whoever killed her is unhappy with my family. My mom believes whoever this crazed person is may come after me next.”

I braced myself, unsure of what his response will be. Anger? Outrage? No. I was almost angry with him. He broke into laughter. I was stunned.

“Are you seriously laughing?” I demanded pulling away from him to see his face.

“Calm down Lex. It’s just. Well...why would anyone want to kill you? You have a better chance of being hit by a bus.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “You don’t understand.” I sat up completely on the bed and began fidgeting with my hands again. I was wrong to believe this could ever work between Mike and me; without being able to tell him my secret double life, he would always brush off the danger surrounding me.

He copied my movement and observing my distaste to his reaction added, “Babe. If you really feel like your life is in danger, then I’m going to be here every minute I can to protect you.”

This time it was my turn to laugh. I initially flashed to Mike pursuing Kellan in physical combat. “No offense, but how do *you* plan to fend off a killer?”

“Easily. I’m a master in Krav Maga. Been practicing it since I was five,” he answered.

“What is that?”

“It’s basically like karate for the Israeli army. It’s street fighting but war-style,” he explained.

“Why didn’t you tell me this last weekend?”

“I didn’t feel the need to. Also it kind of scared off a girl or two before. They were afraid I’d use it on them but I’m not that kind of guy,” he insisted.

“Oh, well, I consider that a good thing,” I smiled. “It’s always good to know how to defend yourself and your loved ones.” I felt the gut-wrenching truth clenching my insides. Mike didn’t stand a chance, and neither did our relationship.

“Good,” he stated pulling me back into his arms. “I really won’t let anything happen to you babe.”

“I know,” was all I could muster up. I knew now that Mike could protect me against the worst of human attackers, but he still stood no chance of winning against a vamp. I didn’t know if he would even do that though once I broke his heart.

“So Romeo’s point of view in the theatric form,” he prompted trying to distract me. It worked.

“What do you have so far?”

“Oh yeah, about that. It’s not very good.”

“I kind of guessed that when you begged for my help.” He grabbed his book bag and I retrieved my English binder to coordinate with him.

“Do you want me to read what I have?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“It’s kind of about you,” he added shyly.

“Really? I’m intrigued.” Mike was frighteningly dedicated to me at times. This lied wearily on my surface. My world was upside down; it rolled in the course of a week. My entire life was consumed with new concerns right now and as good as his intentions were, his words added to this stress line preparing to fracture me.

He pulled the lined paper filled with words from his binder and began to read.

“What a twisted world love lies within, for I am forced to love in anguish. Wars, family feuds distract all rational and bar my desires from existence. I must silently watch my heart walk by or speak softly with her through a window in the dead of night. It’s as if my heart is caged, it’s demanded to remain tame despite the tease or lingering passion outside.

“Her voice, her words spoken aloud detest all she is confined to. She lures me in with rivaling rebellion, and captures me with a secret smile.

“Oh! What a torturous realm love lies within! It dangles my desires in front of me but presses murder upon me shall I show weakness. My life is torn amongst deadly romance or a dull approved existence.

“Shall I be forced to reveal my choice aloud, I will forever accept to love my true. I’d rather die happily

knowing her embrace. I'd rather love and lose than to pine through a life of mediocrity forever regretting my choice to let go. To know love is to live in prosperity, to not, is to ward off death at every corner.

"Juliet, my fair Juliet, is the air I breathe, the pitter of my heart. She's the only one to touch my soul, to attach strings to my heart. I shall not abandon all I know for one kiss, but I shall die a silent poison to defend the love I hold for my dearest enemy, Juliet."

I sat speechless. These words poured from the mouth of a skateboarding goofball with an overbearing personality? I'd never heard such beautiful lyrics strung with strife yet intertwined with reality.

"I told you it was bad," he blushed taking in my silence, mistaking my awe for disapproval.

"Actually, it's the most beautiful monologue anyone has ever written."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. It's perfect the way it is. You need *no* help from me," I stated in a daze, lost in his features in the dimming sky outside my window. Mike was going to make some girl very happy one day; unfortunately, that girl wouldn't be me.

"Umm. Are you sure?" he pressed.

"Positive. But one question. How was that about me?"

"Well. You're probably going to be weirded out but I care about you a lot Lex. I can't explain it or control it. I've tried not to like you, but it's like we have this connection, like destiny, that I can't shake," he answered seemingly embarrassed with every cautioned word of explanation.

“And I’m to the point where I would rather embrace it and die than deny it and try to carry on.”

Here I was hearing him say the words every girl dreamed of being told, and yet irrationally I was saddened by it all. Perhaps because I knew his words were wasted on me. Perhaps because I knew I couldn’t indulge in them even for a minute. Mike complicated things for me. Every time I planned to pull away, he did something sweet like this and lured me back in.

“Lex. Can you please say something, anything? I’m dying here. You’re too quiet.” He stood shifting back and forth before me.

I didn’t know what to say, but wanted to alleviate his anxiety. I stood up and gently leaned in and kissed his cheek. I allowed my hands to cradle his face as I studied him for a brief second. “You really are wonderful,” I smiled sadly.

I saw the confusion on his face but pulled away before I was forced to deal with it.

I caught a glimpse outside via the corner of my eyes but was alarmed when I saw pure darkness beyond the glass. “What time is it?”

Mike looked at his Nautica watch that his dad gave him for Christmas last year. “Umm. It’s 5:15,” he replied.

“Wow. It’s dark extra early tonight.” I sighed inwards knowing I’d successfully changed the subject. I just hoped it would last.

“Yeah, I actually prefer the dark though. I’m definitely a night owl.”

“Nice. So what do you want to do?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he shrugged returning to sit on the bed.

“How about a movie?” I got comfortable on the other side needing a little space.

“Sounds good.”

I sat up and grabbed the remote to turn on my TV. I flicked it on and passed it off to Mike. “Find something good.”

“No pressure,” he laughed.

I stood up walking towards the first window and closed the blinds and curtains. I shifted to the next with a shock. Staring at me were two bright green eyes in the darkness. Caught off guard I screamed and jumped back. I turned around to Mike alarmed on my bed and my mother inside the door, unable to hide her speed in a moment of panic.

“What is it Lex?” Mike asked anxiously.

I looked at my mother and replied, “It seems I have a creature friend outside my window.”

My mother understood that it was Kellan. She simply stated, “I’ll have your father get rid of it,” and left my room.

I closed my blinds and curtains quickly and returned to Mike on my bed to enjoy the last of my full human night. Despite the impending break-up, I relished in Mike’s company. After all, he was still my friend.

—

Chapter Thirteen

We settled on *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* with Leslie Neilson. Mike knew I liked Dracula and admitting my love of the comedic side of his story portrayals in the past, I didn't try to insist otherwise.

He handed me my bag of pretzels still sitting next to my now warm coke on my nightstand and demanded, "Eat. Don't think I forgot about your anorexic tendencies."

"Do I look anorexic?"

"You do seem five pounds smaller since this morning," he smirked.

I couldn't tell if he was trying to flatter me or if he was implying something so I just glared at him. But when he continued smiling brilliantly at me, I softened saying, "I think I can afford the five pound loss," with no harshly implied undertones.

"Lex, you're perfect just the way you are. Please don't become one of those carb obsessed, calorie-counting cheerleaders. I like a girl with curves. I like to think of it as excess sexiness."

My heart melted. Never in my life had anyone, my parents included, said something so close to eluding unconditional love. I allowed myself to scoot closer to him and retrieved a pretzel from the bag happily biting into it. Mike copied my move and we watched the movie on demand for the next hour and a half munching pretzels.

Stuffed of my carbed-up dinner, I handed the bag completely over to Mike and lay back on my side. He copied my move. After a few minutes I looked up to see him

staring at the ceiling, but could tell his mind was further away.

“What are you thinking about?” I prompted politely, not wanting to disturb his thought process entirely.

“Umm... Well, just life I guess.”

“You guess? You mean to tell me you don’t know what’s on your mind?”

“You’re on my mind,” he threw out casually.

“Hopefully in good forms.”

“Duh!” he said mocking Mel perfectly in his rendition, “I mean get with it Lex!”

I couldn’t help but break into laughter. He even escalated his voice into a higher octave. “That is so Mel! You did her perfectly!” I exclaimed between chuckles.

Mike turned on his side; we were face to face, as he noted, “I love your laugh.”

“Umm... Thanks.”

“I love you Lex,” he said, running his hand over the apple of my cheek.

I just gazed at him for what seemed like hours but was only about two minutes.

“Uh, I don’t know what to say,” I finally replied. He really was innocent and more than I deserved in devotion thus far.

I couldn’t help but retract to my lingering transformation set for tomorrow night though. So much would be different a few days from now; I would be very different. I didn’t want to hurt him, but, other issues aside,

I knew I couldn't be a successful girlfriend to him after tomorrow. Why did this have to happen now? Why couldn't he approach me last year when I didn't know about my impending doom?

*Okay...you need to get a hold of yourself Lexi! What if-
s and why didn't-s don't change what is.*

I pulled away the second I heard honking outside. I was saved from having to console him in any way for my less than desired response.

"That must be my mom," he said getting off the bed. "Thanks for the help."

"You really didn't need me, but I enjoyed my time with you," I smiled as I followed him down the stairs.

"I always enjoy spending time with *my* girl," he said as we reached the front door.

"Night Mike," I said giving him a quick hug.

"Night Lex," he said kissing my forehead before walking out the door.

"Lexi," my mother called startling me with her presence the moment I closed the front door.

"What's up Mom?"

"You need to be careful. You will not be the same person after Friday," she warned. "It's wrong of you to knowingly break a heart."

"I know. I'm trying not to," I replied.

"You can't possibly plan on anything after Friday," she reminded me.

“Don’t worry Mom. I know what I need to do.” She nodded, accepting my plans. “Which reminds me, what do you think of my excuse being a surprise birthday vacation?”

She stood silent for a solid sixty seconds before agreeing. “I think that is your best option. Your father and I have taken the entire week off starting tomorrow afternoon. I also spoke with your guidance counselor and advised of your absence effective tomorrow.”

“Wait, I’m going to school tomorrow, right?” I questioned her wording.

“No. I know you mentally need to prepare, regardless of what you are ready to argue.”

Knowing I couldn’t fight it, “I guess I should call Mel and squeal with joy over my surprise trip to... Where should I say we’re going?”

“A ten day cruise to Mexico should suffice. That will explain our cars being here should she swing by.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I gave her a quick hug turning to go back upstairs.

“Lexi,” she called.

“Yeah, Mom?”

“I’m very proud of you. You’re handling this better than I did at your age,” she lifted her lips releasing a short smile.

“Thanks Mom. I’m trying.”

“I know,” she said walking back to the family room.

The truth was, I really was trying. I was struggling to wrap my brain around everything that’d been revealed to me; at times it still seemed like I was in a fairytale story, an

on-screen movie. Was I getting Punk'd? Where was Ashton Kutcher? – At least that would explain Mike.

I lied down on my bed; I was still attempting to comprehend it all. In two days I would be a vampire. I'd hear across yards, run fast, smell the tiniest crumb in the corner, and best of all, I'd be beautiful for the first time in my life. There were no repentance cycles here; no second chances would be permitted. Knowing all this inevitably, I might as well skip the procrastination and put on the best show ever with Mel. I flipped my phone open and inhaled deeply before pressing 'send'. Too much was on the line for me to screw this up.

Zoning in on my acting abilities, what little there were, I sold the story to Mel without a hitch. My enthusiasm was perfect, my surprise impeccable and my story untouchable. She even forgot about my melodrama earlier today. I successfully faked the entire thing without guilt... until I hung up.

The minute I closed my phone the twinge of guilt pegged me. I'd just lied to my best friend. Why, oh why, did I have such a good conscience? I said they surprised me with a cruise, that we were leaving tomorrow morning and kept the secret of my return as a different person, a changed thing. I didn't know what to classify myself as; I just knew I wouldn't test human. I would remain intact every way except physically, and I assumed there were several emotional ramifications to such.

Following my plot consistently, I called Mike and faked it another time. He was a little upset at first, but towards the end he was already anticipating my return telling me to have fun. Knowing where I stood, harboring my lingering doubts with Mike, I felt the separation was timed impeccably.

Again, the moment I closed my phone the guilt hit me like a ton of bricks. It was painful to lie to the important people in my life. Ordinarily I would be rolling in shame, and though guilt was present, I knew it had to be done, because as much as I loved them both as my best friends, they could never know the truth. That's perhaps the most challenging aspect. Knowing I would have to retain this huge part of me, secure it away indefinitely from them.

Looking around my room, I observed every detail as if it would disappear shortly. My white dresser with crystal knobs sitting atop the light beige carpet held my favorite, framed picture of Mel and me. My dresser matched my nightstand and colossal king-size canopy bed, solitaire without the canopy - I felt claustrophobic within its white cloth-paneled walls, so I removed them leaving the posters in place barren. Then there was my comfy chair next to my front window. It was nestled beside my bookshelf, which was happily worn and filled with the books I'd come to love and appreciate. There was nothing like a relaxing evening by the window with a good book.

Looking around, I took in the light teal walls remembering, the day before my furniture arrived. Mel, my parents and I spent the day painting my huge 22'x26' room. My eyes drifted to the large 60"x84" canvas oil painting my parents gifted me from Paris, easily recalling the struggle my dad had to center it on the wall behind my bed. It's gorgeous with cool colors washed throughout the background with its depiction of the Eiffel Tower and street cafes popping out in black and gold.

Then there was my wall-mounted 48-inch LCD TV my parents insisted on getting me this past Christmas. I recalled the dozens of movies Mel and me enjoyed the first week of installation. We held a movie marathon week of our

favorite romantic comedies, or as we deemed them, 'our dreams on the big screen.'

Set in the far corner was my antique white desk, which housed my MacBook and lone spelling bee trophy from second grade. Glancing around, the only other photo in my room was my favorite picture of Gran and me. I was about a year old in the photograph. Memorizing it now, she did look like my mother rather than grandmother confirming the genetic constellation that we stopped aging at twenty-five. Although recalling the picture on Kellan's MySpace page, the adults present, with the exception, of about two or three, all seemed the same age.

Memories swirled me, overwhelming me. I recalled the many sleepovers with Mel, pillow talks with my mom, and more recent, my times with Kellan and Mike. I couldn't remember how many times I'd fallen asleep with books in my hand dreaming of the science fiction world, but not once did I dream of existing within one.

Sighing, I picked up the remote and turned the TV on. I settled on MTV's *True Life*. Somehow watching someone else's struggles with life eased the stress of my own. I looked at the clock, shocked to find it was already 11:36pm. Let the twenty-four hour count down begin!

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Chapter Fourteen

Opening my eyes, I took in the light in my room. Squinting, still trying to adjust, I lifted my head to view my bedside clock, which claimed it was only 8:38am. “Ugh,” I groaned stretching as I rolled over to see why my room was so bright – my curtains and blinds were open. *Hmm... that’s strange. Mom never opens my windows...*

“Good morning,” Kellan greeted entering my room as if he lived there.

Caught off guard I fumbled with the covers trying to get them as high up over me as possible. “Umm... What are you doing here?”

“Your parents asked me to guard you for the day,” he explained sitting on the chair next to my bookshelf and front facing window.

“Guard me? Sounds more like babysit,” I grumbled.

I was still angry with Kellan for the other night. So I was frustrated that I had to spend my last human day with him. At the same time though, he’s the only one who knew fully what I was going through. My encounters with him over the past week had only strengthened my dependency upon his knowledge and experience.

“So how would you like to spend your last human day?”

“Umm... I’m not really sure yet. Any suggestions?” I fiddled with my hands atop my comforter. I assumed I would be subjected to school until the last waking moment I had as a human and therefore neglected an alternate balooza of want-to-do’s.

“Well, you should definitely eat your favorite meals. They don’t taste the same after. Other than that, so far, it’s all better than when I was human.”

“How so?”

“Well... a rose’s alluring scent is intensified now so I enjoy it longer. Sports aren’t a challenge anymore; I could beat any opponent one-handedly. My days are twenty-four hours now versus sixteen or less before. I have more time to do what I want now. I can read a five hundred-page book in two hours with my photographic memory; that’s how I get straight A’s. Life is enhanced when you transform. It’s simpler in most ways, but complex when crossed with other worlds. Best way I can put it is your day time life is fantastic, it’s the one you create for yourself at night that tends to induce a migraine,” he explained.

“I guess I’ll find out soon enough, right?” I lowered my head attempting to allow his words to settle. The creeping stopwatch was the symbol I wished to avoid currently, yet the only thing I could think of.

“Hey, what’s your favorite breakfast?” he shot with a gleam of excitement, flashing his dimple.

“Chic-fil-a chicken biscuit,” I answered without hesitation. Ninth grade year, Mel and I made a pit stop once a week for the hearty entrée.

“Get dressed and let’s go. My treat.”

Quickly forgetting my anger, I hopped out of bed and into the closet for clothes. At the very least I’d like to venture outside my walls on my final day of freedom, or first depending on how you looked at it.

“Nice PJs,” Kellan commented as I walked towards my closet.

Looking down at my green Victoria Secret size XL Capri sweats and favorite comfy white tee, I smiled modestly before saying, "Umm, thanks."

I grabbed my blue men's American Eagle hoodie Mel bought me for Christmas. Our inside joke over the name brand automatically qualifying me for the preppy clique kept me from wearing it to school. I was quite happy in my artsy group of dramatics like Mel and didn't want to blur any lines though I was sure Jenny would protest any consideration. This intrigued me, for the repercussions of my physical changes were on the positive spectrum alone. If I was as beautiful as everyone claimed I'd soon be, a rivalry truly would spark spontaneously.

"You mind if I bum-it?" I asked Kellan grabbing a bra and clean panties on my way to the bathroom. I wasn't out to impress anyone. Kellan had already seen me at my worst anyways.

"No."

Something about him seemed different this morning. He was acting kind of arrogant but in a nice way though. He also was out of his shell more, lighter in atmosphere. If I had to guess, I would say he's mimicking Mike in some ways. He appeared relaxed, no longer stiffened by a cold world.

Giving up on my comparison, I put on my clean undergarments along with deodorant and re-clothed with the same sweats and tee I covered with my jacket. I quickly brushed my teeth and threw my hair back in a messy semi-bun style.

"My shoes are... umm..." I was searching my room when I saw they were conveniently absent from my closet.

I'd been unusually disorganized lately; my discipline was slacking in many realms.

"Here," Kellan answered dangling my tennis shoes in his left hand.

"Thanks," I offered grabbing them.

"Now where is my cell phone?" I wondered aloud scanning my bed.

"Here, with a text from both Mel and Mike," he announced tossing it in my direction.

"Nosy at all?" I pressed sarcastically scrolling to read. They both said for me to have a good trip. Mike of course added, 'I miss you already babe!!'

I sighed reminding myself once again that I'd lied because I had to, not because I wanted to. Allowing it to sink in, a semi-yoga moment on my part, I replied with a safe, 'Thanks. I'll try not to have too much fun without you. ☺' to both.

"It gets easier," Kellan said after observing my dip in mood.

"I assumed so, but that doesn't make me feel less guilty."

"Lexi, you're doing what you have to do to protect everyone. If word spread to an unauthorized human, they would be killed within twenty-four hours."

"What do you mean unauthorized? And who would kill them?"

"Unauthorized as in not married to a vampire or vampeen but knowing our secrets. And we have vampers

throughout our worlds to enforce our vow of secrecy and discretion.”

“English please. What the heck is a vamper?”

“It’s what they call military vampires and vampeens. They literally camp out amidst our circles in secret ensuring we keep quiet - which explains the title ‘vamber’.”

“Wait. We have our own military? And these vampers, do they work together? You know, vampire and vampeen? Cause I thought they hated each other after the other night.” I scrambled to obtain as much information as I could.

“The vamp army is the only branch where both kinds work in unison. Vampires and vampeens have secret militaries as well ready to attack on any kind caught rebelling. That is partially how the rivalry began and how it continues to be fueled,” he explained.

“So... how do you tell the difference?”

“You can’t. The vampers dwell among us in secrecy, remember? You will never know one distinctly unless you’ve broken a rule. That wouldn’t matter anyways though since you would learn of their service title only seconds before they destroyed you.”

“Wow! I have so much to learn.” I pushed my wallet and cell in my pocket.

“I’ll share what I know, but I’m still learning like you.”

“You already are,” I smiled chancing a look for the first time today into his beautiful green eyes. “I love your eyes,” I commented absently. He stared at me for almost a solid minute before I caught myself and broke away. He led the way to his car.

“So, if the vamp army is hidden from us, how does someone enlist?” I asked buckling my seat belt as he sped off down my street. It’s not like they’d have an office if they were a private entity.

“You can’t enlist, they only recruit.”

“How do they know you’re right for the job?”

“The vampers dwell among us. They see our every move without us knowing. So I’m sure they choose well.”

“Don’t laugh,” I pleaded before asking, “But if the vamp army is secretly among us, then how do you know about it?”

“Very over analytical aren’t you?” he stated with a smug smile showcasing his amusement and his adorable dimple. I shrugged, waiting for his answer, but all I got was, “I can’t say.”

“What do you mean you can’t say? You just told me about it,” I whined.

“And I shouldn’t have,” he said dismissing my question.

It dawned on me then, the light bulb switched on. “You know one, don’t you?” That’s the only way. Kellan wasn’t one to gossip sheer myth or perception; he’s a factual person.

He sighed staring at me with regret visible in every pore on his face. Knowing it was my last chance to sway him into confession I put my best ‘you can trust me’ face on. “I promise I won’t tell a soul. Notice I said a soul, which includes every species and race.”

“I’m not getting out of this, am I?”

“Nope,” I confirmed, smiling inwardly knowing he was about to cave.

He looked around his parked car, as if someone was eaves dropping, and said, “My dad.”

“Seriously?” I questioned but his image came to mind from the other night and clicked as making sense. He definitely seemed like he would fit into that secret army category. Buff army body under a classic attire yet entwined with a rugged charm. Without his story, I knew Al had seen things beyond an average vamp. I definitely got the 1900s Sopranos vibe from him; family in the front of the house and business around the back of the house.

“Yes.”

“Wow. That’s really cool,” I added as if I was talking to Mel. What else was there to comment? The guy was James Bond army style.

“Let’s get your breakfast before it’s too late,” he pushed, no longer wanting to discuss the subject. I didn’t press; I’d mastered Kellan’s restrictions.

Inside I ordered my sandwich with a sweet tea. We sat at a booth and I began to eat. Midway through my meal the silence got to me, not because of the lack of noise but because of Kellan’s lack of a distraction. He was gawking at me while I ate, which was uncomfortable to say the least.

“Want a bite?” I asked holding out my biscuit towards him.

“No. Thank you,” he answered quickly backing away. He returned to observing me while I anxiously observed the pictures on the walls.

“So tell me more,” I requested, taking another bite, anything to lure his attention from my consumption momentarily.

“I don’t think this is the best place for that discussion.”

“Oh. Humans. Right,” I stated looking around at the random customers and employees.

“What do you want to do next?” It’s clear that he wanted to avoid all vampire talk at this point. He had sat relatively motionless except when I offered him food a moment ago.

“Well, Barnes & Noble is next door,” I replied looking towards the left side of the plaza where my beloved establishment rested.

“Sounds good.” He reasoned, “You will never read a book at this pace again so you might as well do it once more.”

Knowing I would be stuffing my face all day and realizing I wanted one more, great tasting Frappuccino, I wastefully discarded the remainder of my breakfast.

“Does it bother you to walk slowly in public?” I asked Kellan as we walked towards Barnes & Noble.

“I’m used to it.”

“But do you want to run past them?” I pressed.

“Sometimes. But then I stop and remember that I have forever.”

“Makes sense,” I shrugged as he held the door for me.

I walked up to the café counter and just as I was about to order Kellan stepped in between and said, “Your best

grande, double-blended, coffee Frappuccino and hold the whip.”

“You got it,” Joe said from behind the counter. Joe was the epitome of a chess club and science fiction loving college kid. He bragged about seeing Star Trek in the theatre twenty-five times. He was a nice guy though if you could venture beyond the nerd-front with him.

Kellan paid before I could even pull out my wallet. “You didn’t have to do that. You already paid for my breakfast,” I said. “But thank you.”

“No problem. Today is on me. All of it,” he emphasized the last words, but remained monotone when speaking it somehow.

“Drinks up!” Joe called.

“Thanks. I hope it’s good,” I smiled at him knowing my words and thoughts were in unison on this prayer.

“Have I ever made you a bad one?” he scoured with a chuckle.

“Guess not,” I shrugged taking a sip. “You’re record is still clean. It’s good.”

“Have a good one Lex,” he smiled turning to help a new customer.

“What do you want to read?” Kellan prompted walking back out into the rows of books with me.

“Research,” I answered heading straight towards my goal section.

“Enlighten me.”

“Vampires,” was all I said. Looking around the shelf of religious and cultural books for a minute, I finally located

the one I'd caught Kellan with the past weekend. He watched me with intent as I retrieved the book from the shelf. "What were you reading about in here?" I asked flipping to the first page.

I waited patiently for a response as I skimmed the first few pages, but received nothing. I looked up and gasped when I saw how angry he appeared. His eyes encompassed a red ring around the bright green that I loved and a fierce piercing intent to kill dined within them; his lips were pulled over his teeth a bit and in that moment I heard a low growl escape.

"I'm... I'm sorry. I didn't know this stuff was off limits. I was just curious," I explained anxiously trying to defuse the situation; though I was confused as to what I'd done that warranted this reaction. The last week Kellan had been almost eager in sharing as much as possible with me. I didn't see how me asking a simple question could enrage him to this degree.

He continued to glare and grumble. It took me a moment of intense focus on his eyes to realize he wasn't fixed on me. I slowly turned around unsure of what to expect. Standing no more than twelve feet away was a female with long, thin black hair hitting her mid back. She had narrow lips and tapered black eyes that glared the same. Just as Kellan's eyes were trained on her, she was locked on him, and her body was slightly crouched prepared to spring at any moment.

It didn't take a genius to realize I was in danger. I slowly started inching my way behind Kellan. And though I didn't want to, I caught myself glimpsing at the vampire hedging so close to me. She stood about 5'5" and though she's not drop dead gorgeous like I suspected them all to be, she was still somewhat pretty. She seemed an exotic

blend of an oriental descent. She was very thin, my guess is a size 00, but I still comprehended the danger she could present to me.

Once I'd secured a solid two feet behind Kellan, I heard someone coming. Peering towards the aisle I saw a man walking with an employee towards our section. I froze with panic. No longer than two seconds after this registered mentally, I was whisked into arms and flying at the speed of light it felt. A wind tunnel had nothing on this swiftness. The moment I inhaled, I was relieved to smell Kellan's cologne. At least it confirmed I wasn't in the wrong arms about to be killed.

Less than ten seconds and only one breath after being pulled into his arms I was inside his car in the center of the plaza, a good one-sixth of a mile from Barnes & Noble. Kellan was driving before I could even grasp that we were in his car.

“Buckle up!” he commanded.

The traffic on Rivers Avenue was horrible any time of day, but somehow we were on the interstate in less than two minutes.

“Who... Who was that?” I asked unable to gage whether this was the right time to press for answers. His demeanor was protective though his voice revealed unwavering rage.

“Keira,” he stated.

“You know her?” I was confused.

“No,” he quickly denied.

“Then how do you know her name?” I felt uneasy.

“She told me. She spoke soft and swift. Human ears would never hear her,” he explained in a hurry, a notion I knew was to shut me up.

Kellan retrieved his phone and attached it to an advanced speaker system on his dashboard. No sooner had he connected it that it was ringing.

“Kellan,” the husky voice pushed in a question-statement form, silent unease cracking midway.

“Gear up Dad. She’s located us. I’ll be there in two minutes.”

Kellan repeated the same call to a voice I knew all too well - my mother. Though she held tight to sensibility, I felt the fear she was fighting.

“That’s my attacker, isn’t it?” I whispered knowing Kellan could hear me still. I couldn’t look at him, my gut already knew the answer, and I was just waiting for

confirmation. I felt his gaze locked on me from the side; he was probably battling with telling me or not.

He quietly sighed, "Yes."

I lifted my head, fidgeting with my hands in my lap, to notice that we were in a driveway. One second later Al was in the backseat instructing Kellan to go.

I looked between both men baffled. "I... I thought you avoided the sun?" I stumbled.

"We common the day, it just weakens us a bit. The sun absorbs your energy like a sponge. Think about a day at the beach. Are you not exhausted by days end when you've merely lied around most of the day?" Al clarified calmly.

"Oh." So my attacker was weakened during the day. At least I theoretically should be protected until sundown. I was still alarmed; it was all so sudden. The last thing I wanted was a meet and greet before I went to sleep. I couldn't even think straight to comprehend the drama.

We rounded the corner to find my parents waiting in the garage with the door open. Kellan flew in just as the door started to close. My door swung open prompting me to almost fall out, but my mother had me in her death squeeze before I could inhale once.

"Everything is going to be fine Lexi," she stated though it felt like she required more convincing than me.

"Let's get her inside," Al prompted.

My mother whipped me into her arms and on the couch in a matter of seconds. I didn't think I would ever get used to the sporadic speed races. I was surprised I didn't have whiplash at this point. Once there, my dad sat on one side of me caressing my arm and patting my hair in a

reassuring manner. My mother settled on the other side with my right hand in hers as she carried on with her babble of conviction over my safety.

After five minutes of straight blubber from my mom and non-stop physical contact on every side of me, I began to feel claustrophobic. “Mom! Dad! Just stop!” I exploded pushing them away. “I know you’re just trying to help, but you’re only making it worse. Please.”

“I’m sorry sweetie,” they stumbled in unison.

I sighed taking in their reaction. Guilt panged me internally; I knew they meant well. “Listen, I’m trying to cope but seeing you so distraught is making it impossible. I’ll be in my room. I think we all need a breather,” I said hoping to bring rational to the situation.

My dad looked at my mother with obvious edge. I could only imagine how helpless he must have felt, torn between comforting his wife and daughter, but mortal and unable to defend either. He didn’t say a word to me when I stood up and moved towards the stairs.

I heard Al move in to level off the emotional stress my parents exuded. He spoke calmly in a rather soothing voice as I retreated to my room.

I felt his presence halfway up the stairs and knew without turning that Kellan was behind me. I entered my room, didn’t bother to close the door in his face and plopped facedown on my bed.

Though he didn’t rustle the bed, I felt a slight tug of the sheets beneath me when Kellan nestled beside me awkwardly. I refused to acknowledge his presence and turned my face up on the opposite side.

“Lexi,” he called me in a soft voice. Anger rushed through me; rage, disbelief. I felt like the child that got picked on constantly. I was offered no break, no intermission before another issue pushed in. And Kellan, granted he protected me a bit ago, confused me.

“Kellan, what do you want?” And without warning, I exploded on him. “One minute you’re telling me your secrets and my own, schmoozing me, the next you’re cocky and throwing my attraction for you in my face. You claim my friendship but then play games. Make up your mind. Either you’re going to be my friend or you’re going to be a permanent jerk like the other night!”

“I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m honestly not too good with the whole friend thing though, at least not with you,” he replied, putting one hand on my back but removing it quickly.

I flipped sides to look at him. “Explain,” I ordered. He seemed genuine and I knew my verbal vomit was partially stress-induced by outside concerns piled on top of his, but he was the brunt for now nonetheless.

“I connected with you immediately. I assumed that was because of our common bond and placed you in the friend zone. When I started talking to you more, I realized we have more in common. I’m not trying to play games with you Lexi; the back and forth is my own mental battle over where I stand with you.”

“Get to the point, please,” I sighed.

“I feel the same,” he blurted.

I continued to assess him. Emotions swarmed me from all areas of the spectrum. I was happy to hear what I wanted to from him, but angry and – I was just a bad potion of all the wrong feelings and the right battling each other.

“I think the adrenaline is catching up with you,” I settled on. I wouldn’t be made a fool of anymore.

“Lexi, I know without you saying it that you feel the same. Now why are you rejecting what you’ve wanted all along?” he demanded searching my eyes in frustration.

“I’m still with Mike,” I replied softly swallowing hard with regret.

Now I was super confused. Kellan was the untouchable perfection that would never be attainable for me; Mike was the touchable human love that had extended himself to me without hesitation. Kellan had remained distant, cold on some levels despite my odd connection with him that I still couldn’t explain; Mike hadn’t played any games with me nor kept me at arm’s length as Kellan had, but I had this unexplainable desire deep within me to connect on a novel level with Kellan though, not Mike. I guess the saying is true. You really can’t choose the ones you love.

My mind tried to wrap itself around the possibility of Kellan and me, but I still had a hard time believing him... “Kiss me,” I abruptly ordered.

“What?” he looked at me in shock.

“See. If you felt the same as me, you wouldn’t hesitate.” At least, that is what I was trying to convince myself of.

“Hesitation doesn’t constitute a lack of certainty; it means I have a conscience. You just said you’re with Mike,” he defended inserting his ego between lines.

“Whatever Kellan,” I scoffed in frustration. Thank God my logic still operated around him. I knew he could never feel equally as strong about me as I did him.

“Screw it!”

“Wha-?” But I couldn’t finish the word. He ambushed me, unleashing whatever was pent up. This kiss, the touch of his lips to mine, shot fireworks overhead. It felt like I was kissing my long lost lover who’d been away at sea for years. It’s like the magician connected the rings that were separate just moments ago, but belonged together.

The cooler temperature of his skin as he caressed my face with his hands, pulling me in closer, only further ignited the flame. I was getting hotter, not colder. How could this feel so right?

Kellan was an amazing kisser. His lips matched mine perfectly; his hands encompassed my face as if each groove was a flawless fit. Suddenly, amidst Kellan’s intensity increase, the pieces slid together for me; I recognized a distinct difference.

With Mike, I was ready to move to the next base when the sparks flew on our lips, to be further involved with him physically alone. With Kellan, the craving surged internally. The feistier the pressing of our mouths, the harder I was searching to feel his soul. The way he searched for mine in his gaze was identical to how hard I was trying to touch the surface of his with this embrace.

Kellan began to pull away and I gave up on discovering all of him. Mentally, emotionally, spiritually, I was trying to feel him. If we were soul mates, shouldn’t I have found the edge of his soul with our embrace? Felt a surge of overwhelming confirmation? Alas, I didn’t.

He carefully lifted off of me, looked directly into my eyes and bluntly declared, “I don’t lie.” A second later my door closed softly and he was gone.

I sat up in my bed and stared around my room. I never assumed this could be so complex. I believe that sparks truly do fly when you kiss your soul mate; you become as one spiritually, mentally, physically and emotionally, sharing mirror image connections so intense you couldn't deny it in any way. And once you'd felt this rush as one intimately, the bond is unable to be severed despite distance, evil setbacks or generations of time.

Maybe I was wrong. Had I been searching for a lie? Was I looking for the Fountain of Youth - a figment of my imagination that just didn't exist? I'd never questioned my conviction on this subject until now. Of course, a month ago I'd never kissed a boy and a week ago I'd never known a vampire or been forced to question my theories.

This was overwhelming... all of it. I looked at my bedside clock. 12:34pm. I had less than twelve hours to go.

How does one prepare to become a vampeen? Duh Lexi! Watch the movies. Hollywood has a lot of myths wrong, but some are dead on. Like controlling the mind of a human; they can't actually tap into our minds, but they can hypnotize us in a way. And though not all vampires are drop dead gorgeous, as I'd learned with Keira today, they do hold some type of physical allure.

Hmm... Which to begin with? My stomach growled a low rumble as I slid off my bed. I did eat this morning. Thinking back though, I threw out half my breakfast and only took a few sips of my drink abandoning the majority of it on the shelf when Kellan raced me to safety.

I browsed the DVDs preprogrammed into the fancy system my dad installed and connected to my TV. I threw the remote back on my bed when I found *Twilight*.

I walked into my closet to pull out a lighter fitted tee to wear in place of the baggy white t-shirt I'd worn since last night. I was about to pull the new tee over my head when there was a tap at my door. Assuming it was my mom since Kellan left and neither Al nor my dad would come up, I instinctively called, "Come in."

I turned to the door, arms in the sleeves but tee still dangling in my arms held over my head. My bra was my only upper body cover in this moment and yet I froze when I saw Kellan. He closed the door and set a to-go box on my bed and cold coke on my nightstand.

He nonchalantly walked directly up to me, pulled my shirt down over my head for me, and said, "Come eat."

I remained still, in shock, not over my flab being exposed, but because of his demeanor. He acted as if he saw nothing. Mike would have taken full advantage of the situation, yet Kellan just discarded it. The sad part - I didn't know which I preferred.

Oh my gosh. What was wrong with me? Did I want to be groped and treated like a piece of meat by a guy? Of course not... Kellan did the respectful thing. So why did that upset me?

I reevaluated their different responses: Mike jumping me and uncovering more versus Kellan covering me up and walking away. Of course. It's clear as day. Mike would acknowledge his attraction to me; pay me a compliment with his strategic moves. But Kellan simply covered me up, as if my body was something to hide, to be ashamed of. This had always been my hesitation with Kellan. I knew all too well that he was only interested in my after-transformation body. If I was completely honest with myself, this single entity was what built the wall of defense around the idea of Kellan liking me.

“It’s not true,” Kellan stated factually.

“What?” I asked snapping back to reality, unfreezing my position to sit next to him on my bed.

“I can see it on your face. I am attracted to you now. You have a curvy womanly figure more men than you realize like. My dad being raised in a different time, he has instilled old fashion values and morals in me. I would never take advantage of you like that,” he explained as if he could read my mind.

“Hey. You can’t... you know... read people’s minds can you?” I checked nervously.

He laughed shaking his head. “No. I’m not an Edward.”

“So you do know who he is,” I grinned slyly as if I’d caught a bandit red-handed.

“I didn’t before. I grew curious and researched it Tuesday. It’s a good book. He’s quite a perfect vampire theoretically. No mortal or immortal compares,” he replied. “And now I get to see the movie. Glad I’ve done my homework,” he smiled with a dark, sarcastic gleam in his eyes.

Breathtaking. That’s the only word I could use to describe Kellan in this moment. He’s unpredictable, mysterious in that sense. It’s part of his sinister charm. His dimple, glorious smile and beautiful green eyes swindled my logic with one showcase.

“Eat Lexi,” he insisted. “I hear your stomach growling.”

“Oops,” I smiled shyly somewhat embarrassed.

I opened the box to find my favorite chicken enchiladas with a side of chips and *queso blanco*. I dipped and bit a chip simultaneous to him pressing play.

The next six and a half hours I spent watching movies with Kellan in my bed. I felt completely safe with him. After this morning, I knew he would protect me at all costs. In that sense, I preferred Kellan over Mike. I knew Mike would die trying to protect me, but in essence, he would do just that - die. Kellan I knew would come back to me unscratched or with few injuries.

We didn't touch during those hours. He kept his distance in typical Kellan fashion. It was all very innocent, very gentlemanly of him.

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Chapter Fifteen

The credits began to roll when Kellan announced, “Time for dinner!”

“Huh?” I questioned, surprised by his spontaneity.

“It’s 7:15; time for dinner. Come on,” he repeated pulling me down off my bed and towards the stairs. As we reached the bottom I heard the coordinated crowd yell, “Surprise! Happy Birthday!”

We rounded the corner to a dining room lit with soft white candles of varying heights, white flowers of multiple angiosperms on the table and matching petals strewn on the floor. It was elegantly decorated with white and silver balloon bouquets filling the corners. The table held fancy plates and silverware sets. A big bowl of fettuccini alfredo dressed with freshly chopped parsley and parmesan shavings sat on one side, several almost raw steaks covered in red blood on the other and a beautiful white and silver cake was the centerpiece. I felt like I was walking into a wedding hall, not my dining room.

“What is all this?” I gasped taking it in.

“Happy Birthday Lexi,” my Aunt Claire squealed excitedly.

“This is your last human birthday. We have to celebrate it somehow,” my dad explained. He attempted to sound solemn in his words, but I sensed the underlying dread in his voice and tension in his smile.

My mother had her arm around him in a gentle open hug and added, “Let’s eat, celebrate and enjoy your last hours as a happy family.”

I smiled tenderly. "I wasn't expecting this... And you!" I turned to Kellan. "You knew this whole time and didn't say a word. You kept distracting me with movie after movie."

"I had no choice. Every one of them threatened me if I told you," he said pointing at the faces staring back at me.

I laughed, "I guess I can understand."

The next four and half hours I laughed, cried, and celebrated my life up until now. Al cooked the meal, which tasted exquisite, as if it was imported from the finest Italian restaurant in Tuscany. My dad and I reminisced over my childhood. Up until middle school I was the epitome of a daddy's girl and still am at heart. In a special moment I reminded him of that which was what brought on the bought of tears by all the women at the table.

Beth shared stories from Spain while Al gave me a few more vampire facts to absorb. Aunt Claire shared stories from her and my mother's transformation. They laugh now at their hysterics and mishaps, such as running into walls, unable to stop abruptly when they didn't have complete control over their new abilities; but I knew back then they felt overwhelmed just as I did now.

The grand finale to the night was a gift from my mother, aunt, and Gran. "What is it?" I asked as I tore open the pristine white wrapping paper. All paper and ribbon removed, I saw it was a scrapbook.

I flipped it open to find page-by-page pictures chronicling my years as a human. Comments and stories clearly written by my mom and aunt filled the space between the photos. My heart stopped on the final page. I choked up, gasping for air. I looked at my mother who held the same fountain of tears in her eyes. Never before tonight

had I seen my mother cry; never had I bore witness to such a tender moment as now.

I ran my fingers across the picture of Gran and me and moved down to the letter below it. I could feel the imprints of the pen where she had pressed down to write.

My Dearest Ally, (only she called me this)

You are about to take the same right of passage as all the women in our family before you. Without seeing you, I know whole-heartedly that you will surpass us all in performance and acceptance of your new identity. You possess the inner strength I long to replicate and the unweathering heart I know we already share.

You have the wisdom of an owl, the morals of a Saint, the diligence of a scientist, the passion of Picasso, and the perfect beauty of a rose, which is pretty despite its shape or size. I've heard your potential in every conversation we've had. There are forces you need to survive in our world. While others must develop them, you already hold them deep within.

As you cross over, you will be tested. Your heart will fight your mind and your body will test your spirit. You should practice living daily; while procrastination is easy when you have forever, so is forgetting.

Stay strong in yourself Ally. Stay true to the powerful female vampire I know is inside. Regardless of the distance between us, I have always and will always know your soul and proclaim with pride that you heir from me. I know you will never fail yourself or your family.

I love you my dearest Ally.

Gran

I sat frozen, the tears quickly falling like rain.

“It’s almost time Lexi,” my mother advised softly.

Swallowing hard, trying to rid the lump in my throat, I looked around at everyone. “Thank you. For everything.”

I couldn’t believe the time had arrived already. It took so long yet happened so quickly. Listen to me; I was so nervous I was contradicting myself!

“It’s nothing honey,” Al said.

“We love you Lexi. I know you’ll be fine,” my dad said with a tearful smile. I leaned over and hugged him. I then turned to my mother and did the same.

“I love you sweetie,” she whispered in my ear.

“Love you too,” I choked. “What time is it?”

“It’s 11:47,” Beth smiled at me. “You should probably go get settled in bed.”

“Umm. I know it’s a little late, but how does this work?” Okay, late was an understatement. I’d literally procrastinated to the last minute.

“At midnight, your body will feel heavy. Slowly you will drift out. Within thirty seconds you will be unconscious and asleep until midnight tomorrow,” Beth explained.

“And the whole coffin thing?” I asked feeling my stomach flutter as my nerves took over.

“It’s used traditionally, but isn’t necessary. Kellan installed electronic blackout window seals this morning. You’ll be in your bed the entire time,” Aunt Claire advised. That explained why he was peering through my window last night; he was probably checking measurements or something.

“Kellan and I will be in there the full duration to protect you. You have nothing to worry about,” Al stated confidently.

I gave my parents and everyone else one last hug before turning to go upstairs. My parents and Aunt had tears flowing down their cheeks as they watched me go. “Thanks again. I love you all,” I choked out between short breathes as the tears still slid down my face. It felt like I was saying good-bye forever.

“Kellan, go get her tucked in,” Beth directed.

Kellan grabbed my hand and gave me a light squeeze. Hand in hand, side-by-side, we took the walk to my room.

“I feel like a death row inmate taking her final walk,” I chuckled nervously trying to control my emotions.

“You’ll be fine Lexi. I won’t let anything happen to you,” he reassured me.

I simply nodded my head. My throat had closed temporarily at the notion of what was coming.

Once in my room, I walked towards my bed slowly. With each step my stomach knotted tighter. Kellan checked around the room; I guess to make sure we were alone before grabbing a remote. Seconds later black coverings dropped down over my windows sealing them. He then closed the blinds and curtains over that.

“Thorough,” I noted aloud. I lay down in my bed and pulled the covers up over me. The only light was my clock on my nightstand reading 11:56pm. Seeing the time for myself made the nerves kick into overdrive. Frantic waves rushed through me as a pulsating stir of anticipation surfaced.

“Kellan?” I called in a little panic.

He grabbed my hand and shifted next to me on the bed. “I’m here,” he said, though I couldn’t see him given the pitch-black darkness. I’d never seen my room so cave-like.

“You promise it doesn’t hurt?”

“I promise. You feel like someone injected you with anesthesia medicine. You’ll be okay Lexi. You can stop shaking.”

My palms were sweating as my nerves intensified with every passing second. “Actually I can’t. I’m really nervous. How much longer?”

“It’s 11:58.”

“Kellan. Thanks for being here. I know I’ve been crazy sometimes and I haven’t known you that long but I appreciate you. I love you for all of that you’ve done for me,” I spoke swiftly, jitters strewn within my voice.

“One minute,” he announced. I squeezed his hand. “Lexi?” he called.

“Yeah?” I gulped.

“Better late than never right?”

“Umm... I guess?”

“You’re the one; you’re my girl for eternity.”

And with that he was on top of me. It was the kiss of death in passion. We held nothing back. He grabbed my face and pulled me tighter to him. I put my hands behind his head and did the same.

Closer and closer, we couldn't be any tighter physically as our lips caressed each other with force yet sensual romance concurrently. I pushed towards him emotionally, mentally and spiritually, all my walls silenced. I reached into him like a telepath zoning in on the mind of a person. Pressing forward, I felt no barriers as I had earlier. I struggled to focus as... *wait!*

I was feeling a bit groggy; it must have been after midnight. I continued moving in stride with him, our mouths opening and closing in unison, our lips singing perfectly. We were still connected, but I felt my arms fall. A weight was beginning to press down on me. Five pounds... ten pounds...

Focus Lexi! Search for his soul, feel for his inner core, ...and remain diligent in your quest. I was losing control, going under. Pushing mentally and emotionally through an invisible layer, scraping to be entwined with him in every format, I was trying to do the undoable.

Giving all of me over to him, sacrificing my conscience to salvage our final seconds together, I finally hit it. I knew I'd hit it because sparks flew within me. I felt a moment so concentrated, so deep in an overwhelming power that I couldn't control myself. It's as if our destinies collided head on, the stars and moon reversed orbit. This was the feeling every person on this earth hopes and searches aimlessly for. It's beyond words as an immensely awe-inspiring thrust projects through every part of you into that of the person you are with, proving sex is not necessary in the world of spirituality.

"Kellan." I tried to call, but nothing came out. "I felt it, I touched it. Our souls became one," I wanted to yell at the top of my lungs. All guards down in the heat of a dying moment it happened.

I could feel the internal sedation kick into overdrive. My body was winding down as if I was in a coma. They say you can hear but can't respond, which was my current state.

"Tell me you felt it." I wanted to scream, but the pounds pressing down on me had since multiplied making it impossible to project any noise let alone pure air. My body was numb, completely paralyzed physically; I realized I was only there mentally, but I couldn't help but scream inside, "Tell me you felt it Kellan!"

My last seconds were drawing close. I saw the black hole clouding my mind slowly. I couldn't fight sleep much longer. As I drew my last breath of mental awareness, I finally heard it. "I felt it, my love."

—

Chapter Sixteen

Voices – whispers, noises, music and a fish tank.

Subtle sounds were awakening me mentally. My hearing was not the megaphone I assumed it would be, but it's at least five times more than I had. It's as if I was wearing a hearing aid turned to max. The whispers were muffled at first, like a crowd buzzing, but it started to clear up, to distinguish and separate in voice distinction as they inhaled to breathe in rhythm.

“Shh! She's waking up!” my aunt declared.

I inhaled deeply to the lingering scent of roses, carnations and another flower I was unfamiliar with. Those must be my birthday flowers. Breathing again, I caught Kellan's cologne, strong and poignant yet appealing as if he was standing beside me.

I ran my fingers along my comforter. I felt every fiber, each string of thread woven to create the intricate cotton blend. Remembering the promise of a figure I could appreciate, I began to pull my hands to my stomach carefully hesitating momentarily, acknowledging I would be devastated if I was the only fat vampeen. Before I could feel for my waist, a warm smooth hand entwined with mine.

“Lexi, sweetie, can you hear me?” my mother asked softly.

“Y...Yes,” I replied. I was shocked to hear I sounded the same. No melodic, angelic voice, as I dreamed of hearing, escaped my chords, merely a slightly hoarse version of my own.

“Open your eyes sweetie. It’s 12:02. It’s all done and you’re... you’re... beautiful!” she gushed. I heard the hushed single tear slide down her cheek and splatter lightly on my comforter.

It was relatively quiet yet far from silent. I heard the sound of a few stray birds outside, the fish tank in my dad’s office humming, and the steady breathing of the six people I sensed the energy of around me matching the six pitter-patter beats I assumed were their hearts.

My eyelids flittered as I opened them to the dark room. I was still able to see every detail within but in a muted color pattern. *I have night vision!*

I looked to my right to see my mother still holding my hand, smiling with pure elation and relief extending from her. Next to her was my dad. I knew he couldn’t see me, I remembered how I was just twenty-four hours ago. Seeing the fear still stretched across the wrinkles in his forehead, hearing his heart accelerate with each passing second of silence, I knew he felt left out in this moment. He’s the blind man at a silent motion picture movie.

“Dad,” I called.

He took a deep breath; I saw him choke back a few tears filling the basins of his eyes. “How do you feel?” he asked, nerves shaking him.

“Okay, I think,” my voice was beginning to clear. I reached out, much faster than I meant to, and embraced him. He squeezed me with all his might, which would have crushed me before, but felt like a gentle brush from a willow’s branches. “I’m okay, Dad,” I reiterated.

As I was leaning over my bed on my knees pulling him into me, I noticed the most awkward thing: the waist of my capris is almost at my knees. I released my dad and tugged

up my pants immediately. "Sorry about that," I chuckled feeling embarrassed by my free show. I felt the rosy red of heat lift into my cheeks.

"Here," my aunt handed me a white box. "This is my gift to you," she smiled.

"Can we turn on the light? I want dad to see too."

"Thanks sweetie. Glad to know you still think about your old man." Even in the darkness his joy was visible.

The light flickered on from the chandelier over my bed. My eyes adjusted quickly and the colors that warmed my room turned vivid, brilliantly reflecting every ray of light.

I heard my dad begin to gasp. Before he exhaled entirely my body was maneuvered, situated in front of him observing his vital signs.

"What's wrong?" I yelled in fear still scrutinizing his color, the pumping of blood pulsed within the vital vein in his neck. But he didn't say anything, his mouth hung ajar as his eyes stared in astonishment at me. "Mom, what's wrong?"

"Nothing sweetie. You're dad, as all of us are, is surprised by your appearance. You're still Lexi, beautiful before, but well, gorgeous doesn't even begin to describe you now. You're far better than we imagined, breathtaking," she answered with the same glossy-eyed look as my father.

I turned to Kellan who was standing at the foot of my bed with his parents. His eyes appeared the same. The emerald green of his eyes was mesmerizing with my enhanced vision. They hold varying striations of a grassy green, emerald green, light brown, and lines of gold with a

few specks of blue surprisingly mixed in. The outer rim of color is a muted hazel instead of the black or brown I assumed. They gave the impression of having a shiny clear coating over them that is reflecting a mirror image of my crystal chandelier overhead.

I became lost in his eyes. Their beauty exceeded any human visions I'd happened in my life. No rainbow, no ocean sunset, no field of colorful daisies compared to what I saw in him now.

Nothing compared to the way I felt. Energy - I had a supply beyond necessary performance levels. I was ready to run across the entire nation without shedding a single bead of sweat. The scent that encompassed my room was of flowers, cologne and a lingering morsel of my shampoo. Occasionally I would catch a dusty draft from the A/C vent.

The sounds of nature, life and the living surrounded me. From the neighbor's occasional snore to the other neighbor's backyard water fountain, I heard the near and distanced items distinctly. And my eyes, everything was so bright. I felt like I peered through a frosted glass for sixteen years.

I looked at everyone around me observing the tiny details I missed with my human eyes. Even 20/20 is flawed greatly in comparison. As I was watching each of them, they were equally concentrated on me. *I must be drastically different physically; why else would they silently gawk over me...*

As if I said it aloud my aunt interjected, "Let's stop gawking at Lexi and give her some space. Open your gift and then we'll give you some time alone."

I smiled and lifted the cardboard box with a smooth white overlay. I pushed the tissue paper aside to reveal a

navy blue velour Juicy Couture crystal embellished jacket. "It's gorgeous Aunt Claire," I gasped holding up the hooded masterpiece. "And small," I noted aloud.

"There are matching pants and a white tank to wear beneath," she advised with a smile emulating mine.

"I love it! Thank you so much! I know you must have spent a fortune!" I exclaimed. Without thinking first I was on my feet hugging her.

"Umm, Lexi... sweetie," my mother called.

"Yeah, Mom?"

"Your pants," she stated pointing at the sunken material sliding effortlessly past my hips.

"Sorry! Umm... I guess I need that minute now," I bit my bottom lip as I spoke the line. How awkward! I'd only been up for seven minutes and I'd mooned everyone twice.

"Make sure you look in the mirror!" my aunt smirked exiting the room with a smug look plastered on her.

"Love you sweetie," my mom kissed my forehead at the same time as my dad before leaving hand in hand with him.

"You're perfect Lexi," Beth complimented giving me a gentle hug on her way out. Al passed by and winked prior to following his wife.

"Thanks," I replied.

I turned back to Kellan. He was still in the same spot, his face locked in the exact expression he'd held minutes ago. His lips, full and pout, were shaping a small exasperated 'o.' His features were perfect even with my detailed magnification. His pores were sized evenly; his

skin had not one blemish, until I noticed one small faint freckle on his left cheek approximately two millimeters from the bridge of his nose. His dimple indented ever so slightly setting in a light honey complexion amidst the light tan of him.

“Kellan,” I spoke, unsure of what to say or how to react in this moment.

I heard my family downstairs. My dad was speechless over my looks, my aunt gushing about me inheriting her figure, and Al saying to look out for Kellan to make a move. I needed to look in a mirror with all this fuss.

I closed the door, holding my pants up in case and came to stand beside him. “Kellan?” He just stared at me with a dumbfounded gaze. “Do I look that bad?” I asked wrinkling my forehead as doubt seeped in.

“No,” he whispered. He quietly swallowed, almost in a gulping, nervous way.

I heard whispered steps up the stairs and a bag rustling along the way getting closer. I opened my door just as my mother handed me a Victoria Secret bag. I peered in to see cute panties and a bra.

“You’re a lifesaver; I didn’t even remember those.” She just smiled coyly and zipped downstairs in less than three seconds.

I turned back to Kellan, *still* statuesque in the position I left him. “Girl stuff,” I announced holding up the bag to show him. He did nothing to acknowledge my gesture though.

Feeling frustrated, I grab the box from my bed and walked towards the bathroom just as Kellan snapped out of his trance. “Lexi.”

For the first time I felt the carpet fibers twisted beneath by socks as I rotated back to him. “Yeah?”

“I felt it,” he stated. “I felt it, I felt you; ... your soul, the energy. Intense concentrated force,” he stumbled to blend his thoughts into cohesive words and sentences.

“I know,” I whispered. “I heard you.”

“I’ve never felt something, *anything* so powerful in my life. It’s as if creation manifested the earth between our souls,” he explained.

“I know,” I said softly as our eyes locked on each other. Looking in, I saw beyond his exterior to, as cliché as it sounds, to my destiny; to a love so intense I couldn’t look away. It radiated, permeated our energy fields.

Kellan closed the gap between us in one swift movement, never breaking concentration. He extended his hand in slow motion towards my cheek, all visible in my peripheral vision. The second our skin touched, the graze of his inner hand along my cheek down to my jaw released a tingling, magnetic sensation drawing me to lean into him. Chills ran down my spine as my heart skipped a few beats; a smile lifted my heart to a novel experience I’d never known or imagined. His teeth glistened a pure white as his skin took on the subtle honey glow I noticed in his dimple moments ago.

His fingertips reaching my temples were a cool relief amidst the chatter I heard downstairs. I zoned into him, closed off the distractions. Lost in his eyes of wonder, I finally stated, “I felt it too.”

“I know,” he replied.

“Wait,” I shook my head breaking the intensity of the moment. “How?”

“When we connected, we shared thoughts. I heard you calling for me to tell you I felt it,” he explained.

“O.M.G!” I noted in my best Mel impression.

“Oh my gravy?” he grinned.

I broke into laughter. “Way to ruin the moment.”

“I think you already did when you brought Mel into it,” he chuckled in a smooth tone.

“True.”

“Change clothes here, I want to be with you when you look in the mirror.”

“Promise not to peek?”

“I’m a gentleman, but not a fool.”

“Just say you promise,” I laughed smacking his arm playfully. He didn’t even flinch. Even with a hulk gene I couldn’t hurt him.

“Just change!” he smiled, dimple showcased as he turned his back on me.

My old clothes slid off me with little effort. I ran my hands along my thighs. “They’re so thin,” I commented sliding my new size small cheeky panties on.

I held out the pants my aunt bought me observing their measurements. They were so tiny compared to what I was wearing yesterday. How was this possible? It’s mind-blowing. Yesterday I was barely fitting in XL clothes and today I was wearing small undies and medium pants.

I removed my blanket of a shirt and bra replacing them quickly with my new items. “Okay. You can look,” I told Kellan.

“Much better,” he beamed looking me up and down. “You ready to see how utterly gorgeous you are?” he asked.

“I’m a little nervous actually,” I confessed, fidgeting with my hands.

“Lexi, trust me when I say no other woman is as beautiful as you.”

“That’s a lot to live up to,” I noted, my voice quivering lightly.

“Come on, close your eyes,” Kellan said taking my hand and leading me into the bathroom. His hand was still cool to the touch, yet not as cold as I remembered before. I heard the flicker of the bathroom light switch and felt the heat that radiated the room the instant the bulb filled with electricity.

“You ready?” he asked.

I inhaled a deep breathe, released slowly and said, “I am.”

“Open your eyes.” I could hear the suspense in his voice; he’s anticipating my reaction.

I lifted my lids slowly, unsure of what I would see reflecting back, praying it’s nothing short of my dreams.

I gasped; my hands flew over my mouth cupping the “Oh!” that escaped. Was this really me? Was I that pretty person staring back? It couldn’t be. This girl belonged in a magazine, in a fairytale story, not in my bathroom. “Is this really me?”

“Told you,” Kellan whispered from behind my ear though his eyes were observing my every move reflected in the mirror.

Standing in the mirror was a curvy, yet thin woman with brown shining eyes, full lips with a rosy hue, and long dark brown hair with new golden highlights when the light reflected certain strands. Her skin was light but clear, not one spot, not one mole or freckle was visible.

My beauty... I couldn't believe it was mine... It's unfathomable. I lifted my shirt to reveal a smooth, flat stomach. Though my hips were clearly there, wide in form protruding to create a perfectly balanced hourglass, not one stretch mark wrinkled my skin.

I twirled around, peering over my shoulder in the mirror to see no love handles, and, though it's bigger than my mom or aunt's, I was happy to see an instantly recognizable round booty - the kind that fills out jeans but doesn't leave a huge pucker at the waist. It's not J.Lo but certainly not Jessica Simpson.

I spun back around and held out my arms. *No wave!* There were no fat slabs on my triceps. And my boobs! They're fully shaped - voluptuous and perky yet not overwhelming. They were proportionate to my figure, maybe slightly smaller by my keen-eyed calculations.

I glanced back up to my face, to my enhanced features. My eyebrows were arched and primed according to the exact map of my brow bone. My lashes were thick, long and naturally curled to frame my big, bright eyes that seemed awake yet dark and exotic returning my reflection. I turned sideways to see the little bump I once had from breaking my nose at five was gone. A flawless profile mirrored back at me. Gone are the days of a double chin. My skin was pulled, taught along my soft, yet strong jawline.

Leaning into the mirror, I saw the exact outline of my lips was straight, not one jagged edge or feathered color -

think built-in lip liner without the hassle. I ran my index finger along my softly, filled lips. The color lightened as I touched them, but returned the moment I pulled away.

I finally pulled back and looked at Kellan through the mirror. I saw him watching my every move as I examined my new self. *Wait!* I leaned back into the mirror and smiled. Pearly white teeth all perfectly aligned were revealed. I clamped up and down a few times smacking my enamel. I pushed my tongue against my cuspids, but nothing happened.

I turned to Kellan and asked the ultimate question, "Where are my fangs?"

He burst into laughter. "You really are charming."

I projected my bottom lip in a pout. "Well I don't know."

Still laughing he replied, "I guess so."

Feeling a bit annoyed now, I decided to force the information out of him. "Kellan, if you don't stop laughing and tell me where my fangs are I'm going to tackle you. I'm just as strong now, remember?"

That only made him laugh harder. "You're being silly Lexi."

"Ugh!" I groaned racing out of the bathroom and down the stairs in six seconds flat. Apparently I was still slow. As I reached the bottom, Kellan was grinning smugly up at me.

"Kellan, why didn't you tell her?" Beth scolded from the couch.

"Mom," he stated seriously, "Did you hear her?"

Beth just glared at Kellan. She gave him what I call the 'mother's look of death.' The moment you get this glare, do as she commands or be prepared to suffer the consequences.

He sighed and chuckled to himself once more before explaining. "You don't really have fangs that appear or disappear. Your teeth are sharp against foreign objects even as a human with enough force. Your perfect health has cemented your enamel and your increased strength is what allows you to pierce your victim effortlessly."

"Oh," I said, feeling foolish in my mythical beliefs.

"It's okay, sweetie, you didn't know," my mother advised.

"I didn't know either," my dad added.

"Thanks dad. Umm, I know you want me to stay close, but can I go for a walk in the neighborhood? I need some fresh air." I was ready to explore my environment with my enhancements; scrutinize what I'd always overlooked, smell what I'd never encountered, hear what once was muted and, most of all, feel the exhilaration of driving a convertible by simply sprinting.

"I would prefer you not sweetie. It's still very dangerous for you."

"What if I go with her?" Kellan offered.

My mother looked around at every adult in the room obtaining approval with a quick nod before agreeing.

"Let's go!" I squealed grabbing Kellan's hand and running towards the door.

"Lexi," he called pulling back on my arm.

“Yeah?” I asked puzzled over his hesitation.

“Umm... shoes...” he smirked looking down at my socks.

“Oh. Right.”

“You’re a very amusing vampeen,” he laughed. His entire face glowed, eyes sparkled, and for a brief second, I felt his energy project the love and laughter of a child. I guess he really was entertained by me.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mocked and sped up to my room for my shoes. Those were the only things that still fit me.

—

Chapter Seventeen

“I feel so exhilarated, so free,” I exclaimed as I walked down the sidewalk with Kellan. “I feel energetic, like I’m wide awake for the first time in my life.”

“That’s good,” he said, placing his hands in his pocket and lowering his head towards the ground below.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he replied forcing a smile my way.

“I know I was kind of born yesterday, but I’m not stupid or blind. What’s wrong?” I repeated stopping mid-step to face him.

“It’s silly.”

“I’m sure it’s not; now dish,” I commanded with the same authority Mel held over me at times.

Mel... my best friend, the one who believed I was on an exotic vacation. She’s the one I needed most in this situation yet she’s the last person I could talk to. I was right in believing that things would change drastically, yet I still underestimated the challenge. Looking at myself now, I realized the complexity I faced in returning to school after merely a couple weeks.

“It’s, uh...well...”

“Spit it out. I know I have forever, but I don’t want to waste forever,” I teased.

“Wow, you’re feisty now!”

“Sorry. I guess I am a little edgy.”

“Follow me. Or do you want me to carry you?” he offered with a smirk and a wink.

“I can walk,” I quickly claimed.

“Oh, we’re not walking. We’re running,” the devilish part of him was glowing.

“Where to?”

“You’ll see.” And with that he took off towards the woods lining the backyard of my neighbors.

I sped off to catch up, but never could get close enough. I was literally following the wind and his shadow. Racing faster than any track star I’d seen, zigzagging between trees, we finally came upon a short dirt path. I slowed to a brisk walk. I’d been trying to stay with Kellan to the point where I ignored the thrill of the wind beating my face in a pleasant way; I didn’t remember to enjoy my first sprint of freedom.

The path led straight onto a golf course that seemed oddly familiar. Observing my surroundings, I realized it was the same course Kellan brought me to before. I stood at the edge of the forest for several minutes listening, but alas, nothing caught my ear – no crickets chirped, no birds sang, no whispers carried from houses away and no wind rustled the leaves like most days in fall. More alarming, I’d been trying to hear nature so intently that I forgot to listen for Kellan who wasn’t within view.

“Kellan,” I called walking onto the mildewed grass.

I heard an awakening within the forest. Something or someone was traveling like a bullet, like a cheetah running on scent of his prey. Listening, the leaves on the forest floor were flying up quickly. It’d been three seconds since the

noise erupted and already the sinking feeling within me sensed it was coming for me.

Judging the distance based off a muffled scattering, I realized I had three... two... one.

I closed my eyes, frozen, unable to face whatever it was. Locking all joints in my body, I braced myself for an attack from behind.

Cocking my head sideways I listened but heard nothing once again. The disturbance that swept the woods was gone. Reviewing my memory and calculations, I should have been hit and hit hard by that thing.

I slowly turned to face the path I'd arrived on, opening my eyes as I rotated and saw... nothing. My stomach began to churn as I heard footsteps, faint but audible from behind me. I inhaled jaggedly and returned to my previous position. But again, nothing.

"What the heck is going on?" I whispered to myself, creasing my brows attempting to rationally plot my next move.

"Boo!"

"AHH!" I took off sprinting across the field. The pace I did earlier was jogging compared to this. Halfway across the open field of green turf I heard him.

"Lexi!" Kellan called from behind me.

I paused abruptly, chucking up a bit of dirt and grass with my swift skid, and turned to see a clearly amused Kellan smirking yet shaking his head in a disapproving way.

"Kellan! That wasn't funny!" I yelled stomping across the green. Couldn't he at least wait until boot camp was over, until I was managing my new abilities cohesively?

“You’re right,” he said seriously, promptly standing to greet me. “We need to talk.”

“About what?” I demanded feeling hotheaded.

“Lexi, why didn’t you run?” he pressed.

“I froze, that’s all,” I replied brushing off his concern.

“Lexi,” he stated sternly.

“Kellan.” I mimicked his tone.

“Believe it or not, we’re more often hunted than hunting. You failed survival instincts 101.”

“Can I repeat the course?” I smiled wryly.

He took my face between his hands gently. “Lexi, I’m being serious. Keira came for you. We scared her off but she’s still here. I don’t want to lose you. I know you’re enjoying the feeling of being indestructible, but trust me, you aren’t,” he warned looking fiercely into my eyes.

I froze, like a deer caught in headlights. She came for me. I’d never done anything to this crazy vampire yet it’s her mission to destroy me because of my heritage, something I couldn’t change. Now I empathized with the victims of racism or hate crimes; I just struggled to comprehend that they existed in the vamp world.

I didn’t know what came over me. Fear? Anxiety? Relief? I burst into tears.

The overwhelming process of becoming a vampeen didn’t end after your transformation. It’s like the army, you don’t stop developing as a soldier after boot camp; you have to continue learning and practice drills daily. I focused so much on my transformation as the final step that I

neglected the adjustments I would need to make ongoing outside of Mel and Mike.

Kellan carefully lifted my chin with his hand, "Lexi. It's okay."

"I'm being silly, huh?" I blubbered trying to choke back the unrelenting waterfall.

"No, you're finally acting normal."

"What do you mean?"

"Lexi, the entire time your mom and me explained this to you, you were Joe Cool. I freaked out for two weeks straight. I became a mad man. You just took it in stride as if this was always your destiny. It wasn't natural."

I didn't say anything. Despite what he said, more tears filled my eyes and trickled down my cheeks. I couldn't even look at him. I looked down fidgeting with my hands, trying to discern my emotions.

"Enough of this," he commanded. "Look at me Lexi."

I lifted my eyes to stare into his though my head didn't budge. Despite my water works, my vision wasn't blurry.

"Every waking minute this week I will be with you. I am going to teach you," he advised.

"But what about school? Don't you still have to go?"

"Not really. My parents will excuse me for this."

"How do you know all this anyways? You've only been a vampeen for two months. Do you really learn that quickly or am I just that stupid?" I pressed, on edge from how out of control I felt.

"Promise not to be mad?" he asked warily.

I just stared at him. I didn't acknowledge a 'yes' or 'no.'

"Kiss me."

"What?" I shook my head, caught off guard. "Kellan, just tell me!"

"Kiss me first."

"Why do I have to kiss you? Why can't you kiss me?" I challenged.

"Fine." He grabbed my shoulders, pulled me into him, wrapping his arms around me so I couldn't move back. He didn't lean down and kiss me though; we just gazed into each other's eyes, a fiery, feisty appetite flaring between us. I lifted my head but made no move to close the gap.

"Thought you were going to kiss me..." I whispered, lost in our intense no-blinking match.

"Can't I admire the apple I'm about to eat?"

I chuckled. Playing along, I asked, "And this apple. Is it red or green?"

"Red."

"Why red?"

"Because it's my favorite color."

"Oh."

"Lexi?" he called softly.

"Yeah?" I copied his volume.

"Please kiss me."

I lifted myself into him and pressed my lips to his gently. I put no force behind it; it was meant to be nice. I

didn't linger and he didn't pull me back in.

"Now," I stated softly yet firmly, "Tell me."

"I'm not sixteen," he said cautiously.

"How old are you?" I asked stepping back, breaking out of his embrace.

"Eighteen."

"I thought you don't lie?"

"I don't...usually," he corrected.

"Why are you a sophomore with me then?" I questioned, beginning to caution myself for his response.

"Remember how I said I became a mad man when my parents told me?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, I literally became a mad man. I went crazy. I was angry. I didn't want this life. I'm not proud, but I started going out a lot, dating several girls at once just because I could. I was on a power trip. I eventually dropped out of school. I was a mess. That's why my parents moved me here. And since I got here a month ago, I've been distracted by you. You keep me going to school every day."

"But I've only known you a little over a week... I mean it feels like it's been forever, but technically it's just a week," I interjected.

"Your mom told me about you when I got here. She showed me your picture and I recognized you in class."

"Why didn't you say anything sooner?" Thinking rationally, recalling how silent and withdrawn he appeared

a week ago, I accepted this concept of his shy tendencies but needed a verbal confirmation.

“You’re the only girl to ever make me shy.”

“*I made you shy?*” I wrinkled my forehead trying to process what he’d just claimed.

“You’ve always been pretty, Lexi. Maybe you weren’t for every guy, but in my eyes, you intimidated me and I was a cocky guy upon arrival.”

“And you still are, but I *really* need you to stop lying.”

“A very feisty vampeen. You’re getting sexier by the minute,” he grinned.

“Out of curiosity, just how many girls did you date?” Knowing I had just kissed my first guy less than a month ago, had never been on a date, and was fat until now, my insecurities were bubbling beneath my surface.

“That’s not important,” he said, his voice harsh and dismissive. “Let’s go.”

Here we go again with the dark and mysterious thing. He wanted to know me and my past but secured his own in an untouchable vault. “Why?” I demanded.

“Because in exactly fifty-three seconds the sprinklers will turn on.”

“Not that. Water never hurt anyone. Why won’t you tell me how many?”

“Twelve. I’ve dated twelve girls. Now let’s go,” he answered pulling me just in time for the sprinklers to lift out the ground. Seconds after we began running through the woods, I heard the water begin to spray the fairway we stood on moments before.

Back at my house everyone had dispersed. My dad went to sleep, my mom and aunt were catching up on CSI and Kellan's parents went home.

"How was your walk?" my mother prompted the moment my hand touched the doorknob.

Once inside I replied, "Good. Kellan is going to help me learn the physical stuff."

"He most certainly is not!" my mother yelled; I swore fire would exit her nostrils at any moment.

"Relax Mom. I mean running and defending attackers and stuff," I explained.

"Calm down Sharon. Lexi isn't going further than a kiss right now," my aunt advised.

"How do you know that?" The afterthought of covering my tracks occurred to me. Nothing like playing the part of the guilty when you're really innocent.

"We're both Libras," she winked.

"I'll be in my room with Kellan. Listen if you'd like," I announced. And like any newly released teen from captivity, feeling a bit rebellious, I added, "But I'm not responsible if you hear something you don't like."

"Alexa Lorrayne!" my mother scolded.

"Sorry Mom. I'll be in my room," I jetted up the stairs and plowed onto my bed. By the time I was lying flat on my back, Kellan was already next to me.

"I can't believe how vivid everything is at night," I commented aloud observing the cuts inside each of the crystals dangling from my miniature chandelier. "Can I ask you a question?"

“Do I really have a choice?”

“No,” I smiled rolling over to enjoy the eye candy beside me. “When you said twelve girls... were those all at once or total?”

“I have an idea,” he popped up and was hovering over me in one second flat.

“You’re not going to answer my question, are you?” I whined hoping to sway him or at least make him feel guilty.

He ignored my question completely. “So say I’m your attacker. You’re flat on your back and I’m coming at you. I just lunged towards you; you need to open your hand, spread your fingers, and give a powerful thrust with your lower palm to the center of my chest where my diaphragm is.” He grabbed my hand and emulated the move.

“Kellan.”

“Yeah?” he asked repeating the motions again with my hand but refusing eye contact.

“Can this wait until tomorrow? I want to enjoy my first day and it’s overwhelming enough without the classes immediately,” I sighed.

“I suppose. That means that I can’t leave your side until you’ve learned a few moves though.”

“I think I can handle that.”

Though Kellan and I had this intense connection, we were still reserved in expression. I think we’re both scared... at least I was. They didn’t explain it accurately in books. It’s so powerful, so breathtaking; your universe stops rotating in that second when your souls collide into one. The love you feel is dominant, it consumes all of you leaving no breathing room. You feel crazy because one

minute you are looking at a stranger, the next you are in love with a partner you can never let go of. It's sporadic, spontaneous and impulsive by design.

Regardless of how tantalizing the person is physically prior, the level of concentrated allure within their soul the instant you feel it is like hearing a river in the desert; you don't have to see it to be drawn to it without hesitation.

Even lying beside Kellan, I felt the magnetic pull between us. I wanted to pounce on him, but I resisted. Despite feeling what I had and seeing myself in the mirror, I still felt like the fat, awkward girl who would be rejected. I didn't know when this insecurity would fade.

Insecurities that were present but brushed aside around Mike - the guy I - *gulp* - cheated on. Guilt filled me obscuring my thoughts from elation to self-image to pain. My mom was right. It wasn't fair to hurt him like this. Things were very different today from yesterday, especially with Kellan. What we have cannot be manifested through human desire, nor can it be broken or denied with resistance. To put it bluntly, what I have with Kellan will always be there and nothing I have with anyone else will ever compare.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked, breaking into my thoughts.

"A lot."

"Like what?" he prompted, running his fingers through my hair with one hand, and caressing me gently with his other to encourage me to open up.

"Umm... are you sure you're ready for my basket dump?" I checked.

He smiled reassuring me and nodded his head once. I took a deep breath and released. I began to fiddle with my hands explaining, "I feel weird. I know I'm thin, I know I'm pretty now, but I don't comprehend it fully still. And then there's Mike. I kissed you a couple times which means I've cheated on him. I feel so guilty about it only because I never set out to hurt him not because I regret anything with you. We have this connection, this strong bond between us, that I'm trying to reject and it only makes me want you more. I can't even put it into words. You've blown my mind and set me out of control in every way that scares me silly. And on top of all this I'm missing Mel. If I could tell her, give her the tiniest of details, I know she would help me every way possible. But I can't. Not only can I not divulge, but I've also had to lie to her, which is piling on more guilt than I have with Mike. Oh, and don't forget that I have a radical vampire out to avenge her kind over the silent threat I somehow impose on her. And now, despite my healing abilities, my head hurts from the constant noise of birds, fish tanks, a neighbor who snores horribly, the random cars outside and everything else I can't seem to drown out."

Kellan just stared at me, continuing to comfort me. He didn't say a word; he remained silent.

Seconds after my emotional explosion of words, a new one settled in. I started to cry. As the tears began to fall, a few chuckles escaped. "I'm such a mess," I cried. "I feel bad that you're tied to *this* for eternity," I commented gesturing up and down myself as if I was a bad purchase.

Again he didn't say anything. Instead he pulled me into his arms tight. I rested my head in his chest and he ran his hands in short strokes up and down my back. Without thinking, I closed my eyes and leaned into him. Millimeters

from his lips, I opened my eyes and whispered, "Thank you."

He ran his index finger under my eyes, wiping away the tears. "I'll always be here for you."

I began to close the gap between our lips when I heard a crash so startling that I was on my feet in half a second listening carefully. Ears perked, eyes wide with fear, my heart racing, I heard a row of small crashes following. It sounded like someone dropping ceramic plates one by one.

"Lexi," Kellan called. "It's just someone breaking into a house."

"We have to stop it," I blurted irrationally. Kellan was on his feet and in front of me before I could blink once.

"We are not the police and you are not superwoman. Remember the rules; you cannot interfere with a world you no longer inhabit completely."

"Do you actually expect me to do nothing knowing I could do something?" I demanded. His attitude shocked me; no wonder our world is so corrupt with crime.

"Yes. I do," he confirmed.

"But Kellan..." I tried but stopped in a notion of defeat. Physically brute before me, I realized that I was weak still compared to him. Despite my attempts, I would fail to make it out the door so I might as well surrender.

"Lexi. This is not what I want; this is what I have to do. If I stopped every crime I came across or heard, there would be a media uproar. They're nosy and would push until they discovered me. Once exposed for my 'good deeds', I would be on the run forever from the human, vampire and vampeen worlds," he explained in a firm and

final tone. "Either that or I would die for my 'noble actions'."

I shook my head, though I should have been waving the white flag.

"As a human, you act with your heart. As a vampeen, you act with your mind. And as a vampire, you act on your instincts. There is a distinct difference between each race. The weakest will always be a human and the strongest always a vampire because of this."

Without speaking a word, I climbed back into bed. I sunk down beneath the covers feeling like a failure. I didn't think I could consciously accept doing nothing. Morally, I felt like I allowed an innocent man to receive the death penalty. I understood why I shouldn't do anything, but it didn't clear my conscience for not doing anything.

"Lexi," Kellan spoke softly. I felt him beside me on the bed. "Why don't you take a shower? I know you used that to clear your mind before."

"I... I never told you that," I stuttered. "Are you sure you're not a..."

"I'm sure. I think because you were slipping under you couldn't read my mind, but the moment we connected, I read all your thoughts. I saw all your memories and you probably could have mine too. I got a good look at you as a person."

"So, you know all my secrets?" I swallowed hard feeling self-conscious, praying he didn't.

"Yes."

My stomach dropped in that instant. "Ugh," I groaned.

“Lexi, you really don’t have anything to be embarrassed about. Aside from the random crush, you have no secrets. You’re an innocent; better than I’ve ever been.”

“It’s just that... I feel swindled. We shared a connection, but you’re the only one who got the dirt,” I insisted cringing deeper into the covers.

“Go take a shower, clear your head,” he repeated.

“Fine,” I pouted getting out of bed. I walked to my closet for clothes, but quickly realized that I didn’t have any that fit. “I don’t have anything to wear,” I announced grabbing a new pair of panties from the pink bag sitting on my dresser.

“Just wear the same outfit.”

“It’s nice, but I kind of wanted the homey, comfy feeling I get in pajamas.”

“So borrow a pair of shorts from your mom and wear my shirt,” he said, removing and extending his shirt out quickly.

I froze, captivated by his physique. He was built, muscles defined and chiseled sharply in some spots. His chest was a perfect plain with a solid dip in the center. His abs a soft steel containing the subtle outline of his muscles below, yet at first glance were flat without contrast. Of all his features, his arms are the most magnificent. His biceps protruded whether at rest or mid flex, which alluded to my feeling of security around him.

‘Tap, tap.’ I heard the knock at the door. I was so engrossed in Kellan that I zoned out all the subtle noises surrounding me; a chore I needed to perfect for reasons attached to my sanity. The constant clutter of sounds left me with no peace of mind.

“I heard you needed shorts,” my mother said dropping a pair of short cotton striped PJ bottoms on the bed. Looking at them, I recognized them as the ones she purchased with my set during Victoria Secret’s semi-annual sale this past summer.

“Thanks.”

“Your aunt wants to take you shopping later today.”

“Awesome. I sort of forgot about the whole clothing thing,” I said feeling relieved to know I’d have options soon. Despite my hatred of sifting through rack after rack of clothing I usually didn’t fit; I was hopeful for a better experience with my new slender figure.

“I’m going with them,” Kellan told my mother in an authoritative manner.

“I’d appreciate that. You can never be too safe. Claire is planning to shop in Savannah to ensure Lexi stays hidden.” She turned to go back downstairs but added, “Oh, Kellan.”

“Yeah?”

“No complaining about the length of time they shop. You are choosing to go,” she warned.

“I’m patient.”

“Good,” she said and flew down the stairs to my aunt who had paused the CSI marathon they were enjoying. I heard their whispered guesses periodically, though thus far they were all wrong.

“So, I... uh, I’m going to shower now,” I announced grabbing the shorts and Kellan’s shirt on my way to the bathroom.

“Take your time.”

Stepping out of the shower, as much as I hated to admit it, I felt better. I felt even better when my mom’s shorts fit me and Kellan’s shirt was big.

“Was I right?” Kellan asked as I exited the bathroom.

“Yes. You were right,” I droned sarcastically.

“Are you tired?”

“I just slept for twenty-four hours and you’re asking if I’m tired already?” I shook my head and returned to my spot on the bed.

“Maybe I’m bias, but my shirt looks good on you,” he smiled, looking at the navy blue shirt he gave me to wear.

“Thanks. It’s comfy and smells good, like you,” I replied, blushing with his compliment. “Want to watch a movie?”

“Sure.”

We ended up watching an action comedy with a romantic twist, very date appropriate. It was more of a background piece for me since my mind was lost in earlier concerns. The movie did bring up several good questions for me to ask my aunt later though. The full two hours, I rested within his arms and allowed my thoughts to wander.

“How often do you have to feed?” I asked near the end of the credits.

“That depends on how much energy I exert. On average it’s about once a week if I drink blood and once a day if I sustain on human food.”

“I know you’re mainly vampire, but do you know how often I need to eat?”

“Do you feel a watering within your throat?”

“Yeah. I mean my stomach isn’t growling but I feel something like juice in my throat and have the urge to bite something,” I explained slightly embarrassed by the situation. Since when does anyone have to ask a stranger if they themselves are hungry?

“It’s show time!” Kellan slid on his shoes by the bed.

“Showtime? What are you talking about?”

“Your first feeding will decide your taste.”

“English please.”

“Put on your shoes just in case,” he said opening the door. At the bottom of the stairs my mother and aunt grabbed my hands and led me into the kitchen.

“Can someone please tell me what’s going on?”

“It’s simple,” Aunt Claire began. “If eating this steak quenches your hunger, meaning the serum in your throat goes away, then you’ll survive mainly on human food or animals. If it doesn’t go away, then you’ll need to feed on humans to sustain good health.”

“But I’m mainly human. I’ll eat their food, right?”

“Not always. Your mom eats the rare meat and occasionally drinks animal blood, but I am the same as her and feed off human blood. It depends on your body’s needs. No two vampires or vampeens are alike, the same as humans,” she explained.

“I thought both could sustain us?”

“Sustaining and maintaining are different. Eight glasses of water a day will sustain a human without food,

but he won't maintain his strength or function. He would need food for that. It's the same for us."

"Oh," was all I could muster. I heard my dad rustling out of bed in his room. It sent me into a brief panic. Just thinking about my dad and the idea of feeding off him or my friends repulsed me. I couldn't consciously do that.

"Come on sweetie. You won't know until you try it," my mother coaxed.

"Good morning," my dad called grabbing the milk from the fridge. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay," I answered. Seeing my dad innocent and unaware of the danger he could be in drove my determination. Regardless of whether the steak rid the liquid in my throat, I would not and could not feed on humans. Morally, I just couldn't condone such behavior let alone partake of it.

"See you later sweetie. You're still gorgeous," my dad said, kissing my forehead on his way back to the room.

I moved towards the island slowly staring at the oozing red steak on a plate. I chanced a glance at my aunt, mom, and Kellan. All three of them were carrying the same anticipatory expression.

I picked up the fork and knife, positioned them correctly and sliced a piece to taste. Lifting the piece inch by inch, I opened my mouth and placed the food inside. Chewing the steak was like eating a piece of bread. The new strength I possessed made it easy to process. In swallowing, a new feeling of relief projected through me. It worked. The liquid in my throat seemed to fade down slightly. "It worked," I announced with a smile.

“Thank God,” my mother sighed clearly relieved by my normal palate.

I was about to place a second bite in my mouth when, like acid reflux, the liquid surged in my throat, more lifted than the time before. Placing my fork down abruptly, I tried swallowing several times. It was useless. It felt like trying to breathe with a mouth full of water; you can through your nose, but it doesn't generate the same relief.

This couldn't be happening. I wouldn't let it happen. I was not drinking human blood.

Pull yourself together Lexi! I couldn't let them know any different. I didn't doubt that Kellan would happily force me to drink a human. So I had to finish some of what was in front of me at least.

I was able to stomach four more bites before dropping my fork indefinitely. Like an angry volcano ready to erupt, the liquid in my throat was verging entry in my mouth. How could I ever sustain on human food like this? I was about to choke right now!

—

Chapter Eighteen

“Go change and we’ll leave early,” my aunt squealed excitedly. “And you should probably put your shirt back on Kellan,” she said with a wink.

I should have been weirded out by the wink, but wasn’t. That’s just Aunt Claire. And in all fairness, Kellan’s upper body is magnificent. But my aunt was very open in that essence; she was the opposite of my reserved, well-organized mother. She’s carefree, fun and flirts with every man, young and old, she comes across.

I returned to my room to change. Kellan beat me there, of course. I headed straight to my bathroom and took off his shirt. I slightly opened the door and threw it at him.

“Thanks,” he chuckled, not missing a beat.

“Yup,” I started to close the door, but realized my clothes weren’t in the bathroom.

“Hand me my clothes, will you?” I prompted pointing to the neatly folded clothes on my dresser through the tiny opening of my door.

He swallowed hard. “You’re lucky I’m a gentleman. Most guys would have tried to sneak a peek already.”

“Ah. Well, you’d have to get through the bathroom door first,” I smiled.

“That wouldn’t be so hard.”

“Don’t push it mister. Just hand me my clothes.” I shook my extended hand once more. He finally obliged.

I slid into my pants and pulled my shirt over my head. I stepped out to put on my tennis shoes and matching velour

jacket without looking at Kellan. The liquid in my throat was bubbling a bit, heating up in temperature. I tried to distract myself with the tiny details of getting dressed, but didn't succeed.

I went to open my bedroom door and stopped short as he planted himself in front of me.

"Lexi," he said pulling my chin up, forcing me to look at him.

"Yeah?" I was caught off guard by his blockade. I was missing more than I should have due to my concentration.

"You're the most beautiful woman I know," he smiled, dimple present, sincerely delivering the lines and melting my heart.

I felt a huge grin spread across my face as I rolled onto my tiptoes, wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him. It was nothing fancy. It was soft, simple in touch yet sent chills through every part of my body. More impressive than the sparks that flew was the liquid in my throat seemed to disappear while our lips were in contact with each other.

I pulled back and it refilled quickly. I pressed my lips to his again testing this new theory, and instantly, as if the plug was pulled on a drain, my throat emptied concurrently. "Interesting," I noted aloud.

"What is?" Kellan prompted.

"Nothing," I said moving past him down the stairs.

Aunt Claire literally squealed with delight once we were in the car. "Are you sure you don't mind driving Kellan?" she pressed for the millionth time.

"I'm sure," he said speeding off down the road.

We had to take Kellan's car since my aunt, being a single woman with no man, kids or pets drove a red, two-seat convertible of some sort. I'd never looked to see what kind of car it was only surveying its expensive European design.

Like my mom, my aunt sold real estate, but was exclusive with million dollar properties primarily in California. From what I heard she had multiple celebrity clients.

"So, I don't mean to drill you Aunt Claire, but I feel more comfortable asking you than mom."

"Sure honey, anything," she offered.

"Okay. When I turn twenty-five, my body will no longer change so does that mean I have until then to get pregnant? Is that how it works?"

"Yes. To get technical with you, you shouldn't be able to have a child past your transformation because you don't get a period at all. Our systems are so healthy, and like the blood we drink and food we eat, our bodies, every vampiric cell within us breaks down everything and utilizes it. Nothing is waste and nothing is wasted - no potty breaks, no period, and no cold/flu - none of it. But back to your question, yes, you only have until you're twenty-five," she explained.

"Detailed," I commented. "And... can you tune us out for a minute Kellan?"

"I'll try," he said placing earphones attached to his iPod Nano in his ears.

I waited to hear the music blasting before I asked my embarrassing question. "And sex. Once you do it with one

human, you can do it with any other human after but no vampires or are you limited to that one human?"

"Again, I'm going to be technical with you," she stated. "You can be with unlimited men of the race you lost your virginity to. The tricky one is a vampeen. If it's a boy who's fifty-fifty, well only a vamp doctor can decipher which kind you'll be restricted to. If he's seventy-five percent human and twenty-five percent vampire, then it's humans for you and vice versa."

"We have vamp doctors?" I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. We have a vamp army for crying out loud.

"But of course. Who do you think delivers your baby? Certainly not a regular doctor; he would have a heart attack at the results of your blood tests," she laughed.

"Oh. Okay. So you'll never have kids then, huh?"

"No. But I'm not cut out for it. I get my fill from you and the stories your mom tells me," she smiled. "Anything else you want to know?"

"Since I'm mostly human, umm... What happens if I bite another human or drink their blood?"

"The same thing that happens when a vampire bites them."

"But when you bite, do you paralyze them with venom?"

She broke into laughter and Kellan began to snicker up front.

"Hey! I thought you weren't listening," I said over the music still blaring in his ears.

“You said to try and zone you out. And I’m trying. I’m just not being successful at it,” he smirked.

“Ugh. Fine. You can tune in and laugh some more just as long as someone answers my question.”

“I’ll take it if you don’t mind,” he sounded distinguished yet in a mocking way.

“Be my guest,” she agreed.

“When we attack a human, we over power them with our strength. When we bite them, they feel it. We suck their blood so quickly that they lose consciousness, that’s how they’re paralyzed, as you say,” he chuckled on the last line.

“Then what’s the liquid stuff in my throat?” I pressed, confused by it all.

“It’s the healing serum. It’s like a gluey substance that seeps into the bloodstream replenishing it quicker and forces a human’s skin back together to heal over within seconds at the withdrawal site. It’s the same medicine that flows through your body and keeps your system from getting sick,” my aunt explained.

“But why would you want to heal them when you just drained their blood?”

“To cover your tracks. We would have been exposed long ago if the police found bite marks on the necks of ninety percent of their murder victims. Also in the event of an emergency, this allows for a donor. You can simply take a little bit of blood from the arm or a less vital flow line and heal the wound after as if nothing took place,” Kellan added.

“Wait, the human gets their blood supply back quickly when the serum is passed into their bloodstream, so why

would ninety percent of the murders be because of us?" I was trying to make sense of everything I was being told.

"Because, in most cases, we drain the human entirely of blood. You can't manifest something out of nothing. The healing liquid simply replicates what is already there. Place it in a hole and the hole will be filled with the substance surrounding it. Within your body, it is constantly reproducing the healthy bacteria and maintaining balance in your red versus white blood cell counts. It replicates the good, meaning the bad germs or illnesses are easily destroyed within seconds of entry," he thoroughly reviewed for me.

"O, okay. So the human could live then if we didn't get greedy?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't we do that? Or give the humans the option to be a donor? You know, give them a way to live," I asked.

"Lexi, did you hear what you just said? You would have to tell a human in order to give them a choice," Kellan answered.

"Oh. Right," I stated fidgeting with my hands. "So then if the serum is for healing, then, well, how is someone changed into a vampire?"

"Vampeens can't transform a human. Only one hundred percent vampires can create their own kind and that's due to their mixture of serum with their own blood. When they're thirsty and their mouth waters, it is their serum that swarms their tongues and coats their teeth. When their serum of ninety percent blood enters the bite wound initially out of thirst, it quickly contaminates the human's blood like HIV. As he feeds, he literally sucks his

own blood back out with the human's. Between each sip, a small volume of the serum is passed. Should he take less than half the human's blood, then the bit of healing serum induced will reproduce the vampiric blood cells since they're always dominant unless completely eliminated. The transformation is complete when the victim's heart stops beating over fifty times per minute, which is usually about twenty-four hours later," Aunt Claire explained.

"Why less than half?" I never knew we were so scientific by design. I always assumed we were more magical, unexplainable, so this was killing me mentally with my over-analysis of it all.

"It's a complex formula but the more blood the vampire consumes, the cleaner his serum is, and therefore the less potent his bite. A vampire's system is healthiest when he's full of blood because his healing liquid isn't diluted. So if he drinks over six pints, then the human's blood should be clean and his serum will run clear also. So when he regurgitates the large amount of liquid, it will simply heal the human, not change them," Aunt Claire answered.

"Oh. So that's how your dad was changed," I noted aloud to Kellan. "If that vampire wasn't pushed off of him then he would have had a chance at living."

"Doubtful. Ninety-nine percent of vampires drain a human. They only stop if they're forced."

"But if they can take over half but less than seventy-five percent and allow the human to heal and live, why not do that?" I pressed.

"Lexi, that's the difference I told you about before. They would have to enforce a conscious decision to do so and vampires are ruled by instinct, not mind like you. There

are a small group of those that contain this pro-life mentality; my father is one of them. They do just what you suggested, but it takes brave, strategic discipline to deny your habitual heritage. This is like asking the alcoholic to drink water in a room full of rum barrels - far more difficult than you assessed," he explained.

"I feel so far behind. I've learned so much in lump sums, but your knowledge surpasses mine by generations, not single digit years," I commented with a sigh. It's overwhelming to consume mentally; so intricately detailed down to our metamorphic formulation. I wanted to understand everything about our make-up. I needed a book, a big book of everything vampire and vampeen.

"So what stores do you want to go in? Any one in particular?" my aunt asked switching to a more upbeat topic.

"Um... I haven't really thought about it," I replied with a shrug. Truth is, I'd never thought about shopping outside Old Navy and other stores with larger sizes available. I'd never been able to. I didn't even know how to react. It was strange. I'd seen myself in the mirror, but it hadn't set in mentally for me yet. I still didn't believe I could shop in any store I wanted.

"Well, don't hold back. Everything is on me and you're not leaving with less than two and a half closets worth," she stated.

"I'll do my best not to skimp."

I turned to look through the dark tinted windows of the backseat just as we passed the 'Welcome to Georgia' sign. "Holy crap! How fast are you going?"

"About one-eighteen," he replied casually.

“A hundred and eighteen miles per hour? What time is it? What time did we leave? It couldn’t have been longer than thirty minutes ago,” I asked frantically trying to calculate the time and miles traveled based off the speed and distance in my head.

“We left at 7:34 sharp and it’s 8:02,” my aunt announced.

“Wow. We’ll be in Savannah in seven minutes for a total of thirty-five minutes of driving to a place that takes the average Charlestonian two hours to get to,” I commented, still amazed at the time difference.

“The mall opens at ten so I figured we could walk around downtown looking for ghosts until then or we could just go to the beach,” she offered.

“The beach sounds good to me. Besides, if Kellan can get me here in forty minutes or less, I’ll visit downtown Savannah another time,” I said.

“Sounds good,” she agreed.

Surprisingly Kellan didn’t need directions and Aunt Claire never offered him any. We parked and walked along the beach for a solid hour. The wind blew strong and waves crashed loudly, but I never got cold. Absorbed in nature’s beauty, I didn’t speak a word the entire time we strolled. I just listened to the seagull’s squawking, the rough ocean singing and the random chatter within the beachfront villas.

Once we reached the fishing pier, Aunt Claire took off to chat up a fisherman in his late thirties. He was attractive I suppose, but nothing to fall over. Kellan’s appeal produced more heart flutters than this man ever could.

Kellan and I settled in the sand about thirty yards away. I cuddled into his arms without hesitation. Less than ten seconds after getting comfortable, the healing serum, as Aunt Claire called it, filled my throat again at a higher resting level. It never really left, but distracted before, I didn't give it any thought.

Hmm. Maybe this was normal. Maybe I'd carry this stuff in my gorge forever. Maybe it's not supposed to go away. But then I recalled kissing Kellan earlier; it went away when our lips touched... at least I think it did. There was only one way to certify this theory.

I turned to look at Kellan, a serenity was over him; I'd never seen him so peaceful. I felt bad for disturbing him but I needed to discern for certain if the liquid went away. I pushed him backwards into the sand and climbed on top of him. I didn't even give him the chance to breathe before my lips were to his. Just as before, the serum descended from my throat. For that reason alone, I didn't want to break away.

I began to feel an intense desire from within me. It ascended with every lingering second I kissed him. I could feel every crease in his soft lips, feel every breath on my palate, and hear every beat my heart pattered next to his.

I wove my fingers through his hair and suddenly he was on top. Though his arms held him off of me, the push of his lips to mine were strong. As we lay, the connection forged between us. The amount of energy exerted was un-chartable. I wrapped my arms around him, locking my hands behind his back. He mimicked my move. It's in this moment that I could fully sense what he was feeling; we'd merged on an emotional level.

Remembering the attainable mental connection, I pressed harder. I removed every mind block, erased every

distraction but him and allowed myself to sync into his movements. I was aware that we were kissing, but his emotions combined with mine, it's as if we were making love. The passion was overwhelming yet I slowly felt myself releasing, until I heard, *"I want more, I'm ready for more with you and you alone."* I listened for a second, but realized those words weren't spoken aloud.

"I'm in, we're in. I mean we're connectedly completely," I thought knowing Kellan could hear me as I did him.

"We are indeed, my love."

"Did you mean it? Do you want to be with me alone?"

"I did and do."

"Can I concur?"

It's funny, even mentally he chuckled a soft, *"I would love you to."*

"Alexa!"

"Aunt Claire?" I thought pulling away from Kellan. Like a rubber band snapping, I felt a strong push-pull-release of our force fields though the connection, the fury of love remained present.

The liquid rose in my throat again as I called, "Yeah?"

"Please keep it PG-13 with Kellan. I don't want to deal with your mom," she pleaded with a wink.

I blushed and nodded.

"So it was twelve girls at once?" I returned my attention to Kellan to dig for him to admit the truth that I had seen.

“But you’re the only one I have eyes for now,” he defended not truly acknowledging any fact to it.

“I know that, but I’m just shocked. You were a total playboy!”

“And yet none of them were as perfect for me as you,” he smiled. His gleam knocked the breath out of me. His eyes were sparkling and teeth reflecting brilliantly off the sun, even his dimple glittered the slightest under the rays.

“Ugh! Since when did we become such mushy love birds?” I grumbled sarcastically. In all honesty, I loved the gooey, corny parts of Kellan and mine's relationship. It was always those moments that seemed to touch my heart with a flutter of joy. It was at those points that love seemed innocent and pure once more in a society of lust. Even what I had with Mike, my boyfriend who I was continuing to consciously cheat on, was very worldly in its physical context.

“Are you two love birds ready to go?” Aunt Claire asked approaching us with a coy expression.

“Yeah.” I stood up in one swift movement. Kellan replicated my change and held my hand as we returned to the car.

Arriving at Oglethorpe mall, we were greeted by a well-dressed, flamboyant man by the name of Eduardo. My aunt gave him a double-sided air kiss before introducing him as her stylist and now mine for the day.

“Oh Alexa, you must be excited. You will be the prettiest of them all,” he stated. He reminded me of a younger, classically hip version of Tim Gunn but with a Spanish twist. Vocally though, he’s a cross between Tim and Ant. He was dry in tone yet enthusiastic in annunciation and delivery.

He held the door to Macy's for us, and, like entering the basketball game held in a sealed off gym, the noise swarmed me. Voices, shuffling of clothes and racks, some type of tapping on a glass counter, and so much more overwhelmed me. I forgot about the extended hearing since the last few hours had been relatively quiet aside from the random voice or car music and nothing else but waves. It felt as if I'd been electrocuted for a second. This wave of sound nearly knocked me over.

Kellan sensed my delay in movement produced by the expansion of clutter surrounding me. Who knew sounds so far away could echo so loud via tunnel hearing?

"And you sweetness, what is your name?" Eduardo asked staring directly at Kellan.

"Oh, this is Kellan," my aunt answered.

"Well Kellan, are you ready to shop till you drop with us ladies?" he smiled and sashayed.

"I think so," he replied with a half-smile. I grabbed his hand giving him a quick squeeze of assurance for both him and me.

"Eduardo dear, now don't hold back over price. I want Lexi to be the best dressed girl in school," Aunt Claire advised.

"Oh honey, you know I don't do price," he assured. "Now I was given VIP access to the store before opening and I've already pulled two racks full of stunners for Alexa here to try on."

"Yay! Let's go try on clothes Lexi," my aunt gushed, a crazy I'm-about-to-lose-control gleam sparkled in her eyes. "I'm so excited to see you in everything!" She grabbed my

free hand and I latched tighter to Kellan's dragging him along.

"This looks more like a lounge than a dressing room," I commented as an employee shut the back door that led us into this celeb-status changing room, intermittently drowning out most of the noise surrounding me as well. I imagined the many celebrities and high-spenders that had fancied this room at one point.

"What did you expect honey? You're celebrity status with me," he stated. "Now you two make yourselves comfortable while Alexa and I get to work," he told Aunt Claire and Kellan, pointing to a crushed velvet sofa against the far airy, light ocean blue wall. The grand painting hanging above it, very Monnet-esek, was what made the purple sofa and light blue wall work perfectly in coordination of style.

Kellan kissed my head and released me to go to the sofa. Aunt Claire was already seated and nearly bouncing like a kid at a theme park with anticipation. Eduardo and I strolled towards the racks. He closed a long curtain behind us to divide the room. The racks were full of pants, skirts, shirts, scarves, dresses and sweaters. Piled beside them were nearly twenty shoeboxes, no doubt to coordinate with each outfit.

"Here, let's start with these," he said holding out a pair of dark-wash, boot-cut 7-For-All-Mankind brand jeans. "We can change out tops until we achieve perfection," he added.

I nodded my head and slipped into the jeans. I felt nervous as I went to button them around the waist, for they appeared too small when he held them up moments before. "Oh my gosh. What size are these?" I couldn't believe they were a perfect fit for me.

“Those are a size twenty-eight, or a regular size six they say but really a four,” he replied concisely. “Now let’s pair those with this and, ooh, add this and top it off with this delight.”

Eduardo handed me a long sleeve cream turtleneck, a thin, long flowing grey sweater vest, though it was sleeveless and button free, and the piece de resistance – a dark teal scarf in the same fabric as the vest but with a minor fringe at the ends.

“Ah, yes. You’re stunning Alexa. I can tell everything will be gorgeous on you,” he commented fluffing the items on me. “Hmm…” he noted pursing his lips and placing his index finger to his chin. “I don’t adore this on you. Let’s remove the overlay.”

I removed the grey vest. “Is it better now?” I asked peering down at the ensemble.

“Almost. Be a doll and put these on,” he requested handing me a pair of brown leather, high-heeled, ankle boots.

“Love, love, love. I’m officially in love with you darling. Claire, your niece is stunning and so easy to dress,” he called sliding back the curtain.

I lifted my arms and asked Kellan and my aunt, “What do you think?”

“It’s perfect; very fall forward. Classic, yet interchangeable and a flawless fit,” she smiled looking my outfit up and down.

“Kellan, what do you think? Is Alexa gorgeous or what?” Eduardo pressed.

“She always has been,” he replied though his eyes never left mine. Amidst the fashion transformation, Kellan and I got lost in our own intimate moment via gaze.

“Ooh honey, save it for the bedroom,” Eduardo advised closing the curtain again.

This continued for another hour. We eliminated an entire rack of clothes but still managed to spend a gut busting \$5,437.72 on three pairs of jeans, two black pants, brown pin striped pants, two turtlenecks, two sweaters, three shirts, three dresses, six pairs of shoes, one pair of boots, three scarves, and the one lone slim fit tee I begged them for. My jaw hit the floor. Worse yet, we weren’t even close to done according to Eduardo and my aunt.

“I called ahead to Vivianne at Belk’s. She’s such a doll. She’s begun to pull items for us already,” Eduardo carried on to my aunt as Kellan and I silently walked hand in hand behind them. The purchase at Macy’s was loaded into Kellan’s trunk by valet assistants leaving us empty handed, weighed down by nothing but the gym echo of business carrying on in the mall.

I rested my head on Kellan’s upper arm and he lifted his arm around me. He didn’t say anything. Kellan knew first-hand from my English bout with Mel that I wasn’t a fan of shopping, but it had to be done.

Thus far, the liquid in my throat had remained close to my mouth, yet not bubbling over. It’s manageable. I’d already adapted to shorter, shallower breaths to compensate for the ventilation restriction.

Alas, we arrived at Belk’s. We were greeted by a thin, petite blonde twenty-something in grey pinstriped pants, a tucked in button up white shirt, a shiny black belt and pointed black heels. She was adorned with a long, silver

necklace knotted with black stones and diamond stud earrings. She was the epitome of a young and fresh professional.

“Vivianne! How are you darling?” Eduardo smiled kissing her cheeks.

“Wonderful as always,” she beamed in reply.

“Vivianne, this is Claire, her niece Alexa, and Alexa’s boyfriend Kellan,” he introduced.

“Oh, he’s not my boyfriend,” I corrected. Kellan didn’t say anything, but I felt the dark stare on me as if I had stabbed him silently with a knife. It slipped out so quickly. I didn’t stop to think.

“I have a new boy toy everyday honey. You learn to go with the flow if you catch me,” Eduardo winked.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” Vivianne nodded once. “Follow me. I’ve already pulled some wonderful clothes for you, Alexa.”

She led us through a back door with a sign reading ‘Employees Only.’ We then entered a side door into another room. The moment the door was closed, again, the blasting noise of commotion was muted, and thus allowed me to think straight. I was trying to get used to the overwhelming sounds and conversations that crowded the mall as we traveled through it, but I couldn’t seem to calm my nerves enough to drown them out. This could also be because of their sound. No distinction of conversation was audible.

Looking around, this room was much smaller than the last. It boasted cream walls, two extravagant art pieces and a large custom gold-framed mirror spanning floor to ceiling, the ceiling reaching nearly nine feet, and hung five feet wide. The only seating was a large 8’ across circular

distressed brown leather ottoman in the center of the room. Looking around, I realized there was no private changing area - no curtains, partitions or fold outs.

“Kellan you must remain a gentleman and keep that peeper down,” Eduardo commanded flipping through the rack of clothes Vivianne pulled. “This is magnificent Viv. I love all the pieces,” he smiled approvingly at her.

“I can’t wait. Don’t make me wait Eduardo. I’m dying to see them on Lexi,” my aunt squealed, running her fingers along a few items before retiring on the ottoman.

“Umm, are you okay Kellan?” I asked; he appeared to be uncomfortable. He nodded once and laid flat on the cushion, closing his eyes to maintain his “good boy” behavior.

“Here,” Vivianne extended a black satin sleeping mask. “Just in case,” she smiled. “Radio if you need me.”

“Of course honey,” Eduardo answered already handing me an outfit.

This time he paired medium toned distressed, slightly-ripped-strategically, skinny jeans with an empire waste three-quarter length sleeve navy blue shirt, a light chunky yellow scarf to cover my neck and upper chest and brown feminine loafers.

“It’s perfect. I love it,” my aunt gushed.

It’s strange because the entire time, change after change of outfits, my Aunt and Eduardo commented non-stop on my beauty and how every outfit looked great on me, but I still didn’t believe them. I still couldn’t wrap my mind around the size I was wearing.

The day was filled from mall opening to close with shopping. From Belk's to Gap to Forever 21, we spent over ten thousand dollars on clothes, shoes, and two hoodies I managed to sneak in. My aunt and Eduardo then insisted on several purses, a wallet, sunglasses - though it's almost winter - and the true battle began over jewelry. There were pushing for items galore to match each new outfit, which Eduardo had photographed with a Polaroid. Our compromise was on one of each - a bracelet, ring, diamond stud earrings, and a simple necklace - in white gold that matched everything. I knew myself too well. I didn't wear jewelry currently, aside from earrings, so I wasn't committing myself to a new set every day.

By the day's end, though I wasn't supposed to be, I was exhausted. The serum in my throat had begun to burn harshly by mid-afternoon, and chugging a bottle of water didn't ease the pain in the slightest. I snuck a few kisses in from Kellan to alleviate myself from time to time, but they never lasted long enough to enjoy relief.

Once all the garment bags, shopping bags and shoeboxes were stuffed in Kellan's trunk and half the back seat, I thanked Eduardo and Aunt Claire once more before sliding into the car and slumping my head back. It felt as if a weight lifted off me the moment my body rested in the seat; the same relief you get once you shower and relax after a gruesome workout.

My aunt hugged Eduardo and promised to call him in a few days. Kellan quietly shut my door. He'd been observing me carefully as the day progressed. I could tell he knew something was wrong, but he didn't say a word. We held hands every chance we could and he slipped in a few gentle kisses on my forehead more often than my lips. But the majority of the day he was silent, though I guess most men are when it comes to shopping trips.

The drive home took forty minutes, but by arrival at my parents, I was beyond drained in every way. I was beginning to worry. This wasn't normal. I felt empty inside and the serum in my throat was now hotter than boiling water burning my lymph nodes.

Kellan opened my door and gave me his hand, though ordinarily I shouldn't have needed it, and he knew this. I grabbed him nonetheless and lifted out of the back seat. No sooner had I stood up that I became wobbly and collapsed into his arms.

"Lexi!" my aunt panicked.

My mother burst through the garage door yelling, "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. She was fine all day," my aunt cried, both hovering over me anxiously.

"I'm... I'm okay. Just tired," I reasoned trying to stabilize myself.

"I'm going to take her upstairs," Kellan announced.

"Please," my mother pleaded with worried eyes. "I'll be right up."

One minute I was looking at my almost hysterical aunt and mother, the next I was flat on my bed. I sat up, taking in Kellan's upset expression, and repeated, "I'm okay. Really."

"No, you're not," he lashed. "Vampeens don't get exhausted by a day's worth of shopping. You're built to sleep very little and at the least don't desire to ravenously. Don't lie to me Lexi. What's wrong?" he demanded. I could see anger enflaming him, but what confused me was why he was angry with me. He was acting as if it was my fault;

I'd purposefully allowed this to happen to myself. Though he was covered in rage, the underlying cause was definitely worry, fear, and confusion.

"I... uh... I...don't know," I mumbled.

"What do you feel?" he pressed, moving on to the bed beside me. "Lexi," he said caressing my face, "I need you to tell me what you feel is wrong."

His eyes carried nothing but concern for me now. How did this day go so wrong? How did I go so wrong? According to Kellan, I wasn't supposed to feel tired; energy should still surge through my veins. Something was definitely off according to him and despite my rejection of this concept; I felt it in my gut as well. I wish I could tell him exactly what it was, describe perfectly what was plaguing me, but the only thing I felt was exhaustion. "I just need to sleep, that's all," I finally said.

After a long minute of intense staring he gave in. He gently pushed me back. He kissed my head and I pulled him beside me as I curled into him. "Don't leave me," I pleaded.

"I won't," he promised.

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Chapter Nineteen

I awoke several hours later to a middle-aged man shining a light in my eyes. He spoke in a language I couldn't comprehend. He was talking to my mother and aunt. I quickly sat up feeling re-energized though the serum still scorched my throat unforgivingly.

"Hello Alexa. I'm Doctor Hans Higlenburge," he introduced himself with a nod and a smile. He reminded me of a young Steven Weber.

Knowing I would completely mess up his name, I asked, "Can I just call you Dr. H?"

"Certainly," he smiled politely.

I looked around searching for Kellan, but he was nowhere to be seen. Knowing who I was after, my aunt explained, "We told Kellan to wait outside."

"Why?" I asked confused by their tight-lipped demeanor.

"To ensure your privacy," my mother answered.

"Mom, he saw me half naked hours ago. There's not much left to cover," I replied, upset that she would ban him. The moment the words escaped my mouth, I regretted their wrong impression.

"He what?" she fumed.

"Calm down Sharon. One of the dressing rooms didn't have a curtain. He didn't see her bits, just the skin between. He saw less than he would with her at the beach in a bikini," my aunt explained attempting to defuse the anger caked on my mother.

“I don’t care Claire. It’s the principle. I don’t want my daughter parading around like some floozy.”

“I’m not a floozy Mom. I’m still a virgin for Christ’s sake so I don’t think that’s possible,” I argued.

“Well Sharon, it appears that Alexa is in good condition. Her strength seems to have returned. Often if the body was carrying an illness, such as a cold, when she goes to transform, the body may be weakened easier the first twenty-four hours. What did her palate prescribe?”

“Human food,” my mother answered. A sinking feeling hit the bottom of my stomach when she said the words.

“When was her last meal?” he asked probing my tongue with a stick. “Say ‘ahh’,” he advised.

I obeyed in opening my mouth but I refused to say ‘ah!’ It’s completely unnecessary.

“About nineteen hours ago,” my mother replied.

“Yes, well her throat is coated beyond normal capacity; it seems her body has reached starvation level. Her body is crying for nutrients. She needs to eat at once,” he commanded.

“I’ll see that she does immediately,” my mother replied, worry seeping into her expression.

“Call me should you need me, but I’m sure Alexa will be fine once she eats. Just make sure she is consistent in portions, better to take more than enough over not enough. No skimping allowed Alexa,” he advised staring directly at me.

I shook my head acknowledging his orders. With that he gathered his medical instruments into a black bag, the

same leather bag a doctor would carry in a house call on the set of 'I Love Lucy,' and left the room.

"I'll bring you food honey. Just rest here for now," my mother said, kissing my forehead before following my aunt and the doctor.

No sooner had she scurried out the door that Kellan was by my side. "How are you feeling?" he asked promptly sitting on the bed beside me.

"You changed your clothes."

"Your aunt picked them up for me. How are you?" he repeated.

"I'm okay. I just needed to sleep like I said."

"And eat. Your throat must be burning by this point. Why would you put yourself through that much pain?" he demanded furrowing his brows.

I began to fidget with my hands answering an honest, "I didn't know. In *Breaking Dawn* Bella says she always has a sort of burning feeling in her throat."

"Damn it Lexi! This isn't a fictional book; this is your life!" His face scrunched and lips pursed as the belting fear broke his surface.

"I know. I just didn't know about that," I said unable to look at him knowing he was so angry with me.

"I'm sorry. I got scared, that's all. I've never seen any vampeens or vampires get like that before. An hour into your sleep, I was certain you would somehow die though you're supposed to be immortal," he explained pulling me into his chest and embracing me tightly.

“I’m sorry I scared you. But can I ask you something without angering you?” I attempted to set up the right mood. I needed to know for sure that I wasn’t killing myself by refusing my body’s desire for human blood. Despite putting two and two together, I couldn’t bring myself to hurt another human for my own survival. I may be a vampire in many ways but not when it comes to the ruthless murder of mankind for my appetite alone.

“Of course.”

“What happens if you eat only human food?” I decided to go with this approach so he couldn’t link it back to me and my earlier mishap.

“I could eat like that for probably a month before my body would be depleted of back up resources. Every vamp is different in molecular design. Your body craves what it needs. My body needs human blood, so eating human food would be like eating vegan without supplements. It would supply my system with several vital necessities, but the lack in the remainder would kill me.”

“I thought we were immortal?”

“We are. I would just live forever in a vegetative state. We don’t have vitamin supplements like humans do to falsely recreate the missing elements within us,” he answered.

“Oh. And this back up supply, we’re born with it, right?” I checked. My heart was beginning to beat faster in response to my stress. The repercussions of my choice were being placed before me verbally.

“No. Your body creates it with your first several meals. That’s why you’re so hungry. Your body needs more in the beginning to ensure a sufficient reserve. So you need to eat more.”

Oh my gosh! I'm committing vamp suicide! Even worse, I was a food-shoveling human and forty-eight hours later I was an anorexic vampeen. How did this happen? I didn't mean to deprive myself; it's just morally I couldn't harm a human. Every man would remind me of my dad, and every woman a mom, and every teenager a Mel or Mike. I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

I toyed mentally with telling Kellan, but opted to keep my secret. My mother returned with a glass of water, two eggs sunny side up and an oozing red slightly cooked steak. The steak was smothered in red gravy, no doubt a blood sauce.

Seeing the food made the liquid in my throat overflow into my mouth for the first time. I started swallowing repeatedly trying to down the bubbling juice to no avail. I began to panic. I bit a piece of steak smothered in blood, chewing rapidly to rid the volcano in my mouth. Like high tide at the beach, the serum lifted and retracted in intervals after my bite eventually leveling off.

It's working. Maybe I really was supposed to eat human food. Maybe I just didn't consume enough before. Maybe it's the sauce. I didn't have the blood gravy before. "What kind of sauce is this?" I asked my mother. "It's good."

"It's leftover from the other night. I sometimes do a human blood marinade on my steaks and that's one of them. For some reason it tends to enhance the flavors," she explained with an approving grin.

The sauce. The gravy of human blood was what's ridding the serum, not the food itself. I froze. I glanced at the food, then my mom, then Kellan, moving my eyes alone. I was torn. Did I continue to devour the marinade that

would cure me or stick to my guns in not participating in human slaughter?

Being ever rebellious, I picked up the fork and staked the eggs. It took me no more than two minutes to swallow both eggs. I pushed the plate away announcing, "I'm done."

"But you left the entire steak," my mother complained.

"I didn't like it," I lied, shrugging my shoulders.

"You just said it was good," she argued, hands on her hips and no smile on her face.

"It left a bad after-taste in my mouth," I reasoned feeling a bit guilty over the fib and insult of my mother's cooking. I couldn't think fast enough to concoct a less hurtful excuse.

"Well you have to eat more than two eggs," she pressed.

"I will after," I attempted to negotiate, but failed when Kellan got into it.

"No. Now. You don't want a repeat of several hours ago," he ordered firmly.

"Ugh!" I groaned looking back and forth between the two of them. Waving the white flag I said, "Fine. I'll be down in a bit."

"No, now," my mother insisted.

"Can I please shower and change first?"

"You and your showers! I swear you should live in the rainforest," she remarked in frustration on her way out the door. My mother didn't know the calming effect a shower had on me.

I could hear my dad sleeping soundly and Aunt Claire coercing Dr. H into a movie date later this week.

“Is your car unlocked?” I asked Kellan knowing I would need to tap into my new wardrobe for something to wear.

“Your clothes are in your closet. Your aunt insisted on organizing it all while you were sleeping,” he replied.

“Oh.” I hopped off the bed and flung open my closet door. There, filling every nook of my closet, organized by item and color, were my new clothes. Lining the floors were my shoeboxes with a Polaroid of what was inside pasted to each one. Installed on the once barren back wall were two shelves and two rows of hooks holding my belts, scarves and purses. On the opposing wall by the door was a freshly hung bulletin board with pictures from today tacked to it to remind me of what went together. Looking around, I realized Aunt Claire had thought of everything except... I forgot pajamas - my one comfort staple.

As if he heard my mental anguish, Kellan announced, “She bought you pajamas. They’re in your dresser.”

I lit with excitement and ran to the drawers. I opened every drawer one by one. My top two contained a mountain of panties and four new bras. The middle ones held tanks and a few simple tees. Opening the bottom two I was shocked at what I found. On the right side were two pajama pants, two shorts and a smaller pair of VS Capri sweats. Filling the other though was - *gasp!* - lingerie! I sifted through the pile of lace and silk sets varying in coverage. Beside it was a box of condoms with a note attached. I was mortified!

Lexi,

I'm not your mother. Every young woman has desires and passion flaring within her. The flames I see between you and Kellan are fierce so I wanted you to be prepared.

Have fun and be safe!

Love, Aunt Claire

"Aunt Claire," I called in a raised voice, enough to know she would hear me clearly despite her male distraction. She climbed the stairs and entered my room within thirteen seconds of my call, just in time for the angst to climax within me.

"Yes dear?" she asked.

"Umm... Ear muffs Kellan." He rolled his eyes and covered his ears. Though I was sure he could still hear me, knowing he wasn't supposed to should at least keep him from talking about it later.

"Aunt Claire," I whispered. "What is all this?"

She closed the door and replied softly, "It's for you to be safe when you're having fun with you-know-who over here." She motioned to Kellan with a side nod of her head. "If you don't need it now, just save it for when you're ready."

"He's not even my boyfriend. I have a human boyfriend named Mike."

"Ooh Lexi! I knew you were just like me," she cooed proudly. "But I'm telling you now, I've never met two people or vamps with more chemistry than you have with Kellan. Even I feel the heat between you two. I'm so jealous!" she said with a southern accent, abandoning her usual west coast one.

"I'm confused right now," I admitted.

“Well talk to me honey. That’s what I’m here for.”

“I don’t even know where to start,” I said sitting Indian style on the floor.

“Start from the beginning. Who’s this Mike?” she insisted settling beside me on the carpet.

I explained in depth who Mike was. I shared my original crush, the intimate details of our relationship, including my conclusion prior to my transformation. I told her all my discomforts and mental quandaries over the situation saving the worst, his monologue, for last. I will admit, recalling all those things officially made me submerge myself in slight regret, but it brought me relief simultaneously. I knew Kellan was the guy for me; it was only guilt bringing this bout over Mike because I knew at this point I was intentionally hurting him since I didn’t break it off before.

“He sounds like a great guy Lexi, but you clearly didn’t want to get together with him originally, so why did you agree?” Aunt Claire probed.

“Well, he’s a nice guy and to be honest, he was the first guy to even acknowledge my existence.” That line was beginning to sound lame even to me.

“Alexa.”

“Uh oh. You called me Alexa. What’s wrong?”

“What are your doubts with Kellan?” she asked.

I pondered this silently for a minute, but came up empty handed. When we connected on a spiritual level, I clearly saw and heard his intentions in commitment. I saw exactly how he viewed me as a human and discovered he never lied to me except with his age, which was for his own

pre-conceived rejection. It washed my doubts away and discarded any hesitations I carried over him.

“None that I can think of,” I sighed.

“Now compare that list to the negative one you have with Mike.”

“Oh, I see where you’re going with this.”

“I can’t tell you what to do, but as an outsider looking in, I can share my view. My philosophy is ‘When in doubt, you can live without.’ I have so many men floating around me and with every last one of them I can tell you why it won’t work, explain my doubts. I keep them around because I have to entertain myself somehow until the right one comes along. Seriously though, what you have with Kellan I’ve only heard and read stories about. You don’t throw that away, no matter what the cost.”

“Thanks Aunt Claire.”

“Like I said, anytime dear. And listen; don’t fret yourself into action immediately. You’re young; you have plenty of time,” she offered as a parting note.

“Thanks,” I smiled.

She winked. On her way out the room she pointed to Kellan and then flapped her hands as if to fan herself profusely. Bluntly – she said he was hot.

I chuckled, returning to the bed relieving Kellan’s hands of muff duty.

“Did you have a nice chat with your aunt?” he asked.

“Oh please! Don’t even pretend like you didn’t hear anything,” I scolded sarcastically.

He smiled wide and brilliant. Acting on impulse I leaned in and kissed him. Feeling the serum desert my throat amidst this kindle is what brought awareness to just how bad it was hurting. No hurting was too light. The healing liquid was literally roasting my throat. The relief I encumbered in kissing Kellan kept me glued to him. Whatever happens though, I couldn't let us unite again beyond the physical. He would certainly discover my bold secret with it fresh on my mind; it's a miracle he didn't learn the last time. Though after seeing the number of humans he had drained lifeless, I could never succumb to his lifestyle.

He gently laid me back on the bed and hovered over me. I sunk down cradling his body with my arms. His touch sent chills down my spine and left a tingling sensation wherever he caressed me. This new energy encompassed us and I knew I would have to pull away soon. So with one last ditch effort, I threw myself into him, let down my barriers and then quickly released from his lip lock.

We spent the next few minutes just gazing into each other's eyes. The liquid refilled my throat, but I remained peaceful in his arms. My aunt was right, Kellan was the right guy for me; I knew he certainly believed that to be true and I did too. It's strange to think that you've found your soul mate at sixteen, but destiny doesn't work by age.

I sat up, turned to Kellan now lying beside me and asked, "So you ready to teach me some killer moves?"

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why? You said I need to learn," I argued.

"You just passed out a couple hours ago, ate hardly anything and now expect me to work you physically?"

"Yeah?"

“Not happening. You need to eat. Then I’ll consider it.”

“I haven’t even showered yet though,” I whined trying to put off scarfing more food down my burning throat.

“Lexi. What’s going on? Why are you trying to avoid the thing that makes you stronger?” he pressed suspiciously.

Crap. He’s onto me. I didn’t want to add him to the list of people I’d lied to. It’s bad enough that I’d added three new people in three days – Mel, Mike and my mom.

“It just doesn’t taste good,” I replied remembering the weird after-taste of the first steak I consumed five bites of. It didn’t taste horrible, just wasn’t appetizing in any way.

Before he could reply, I was off the bed. I scurried grabbing my new green VS Capri sweats, which matched his eyes, and a white tank with an intricate black and grey design on the front. I kissed him lightly on my way to the bathroom and advised, “I’ll be out in a bit... unless you want to join me.” I teased flashing a devilish grin.

“Tempting, but I’ll pass,” he smiled.

“Still playing the gentleman card I see.”

“Hurry up,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Midway through letting the hot water run down my back, I felt a fog cloud me, a feeling of exhaustion and slight dizziness far stronger than the time before. I placed my hands flat against the tiled wall feeling the color drain out of me. My breath began to come in shorter spurts. The serum in my throat ran over again filling my mouth, burning my tongue. I spit the clear syrup out profusely into the running water, swallowing the rest repeatedly.

I began to feel weak. I managed to turn off the water and wrap myself in the towel over the glass door before I sunk down against the wall of the shower. My head was heavy, my body putty, and my excellent vision was beginning to blur at the corners. I felt how I did when I was going under; I was fighting to stay conscious. I heard a knock at the bathroom door, but nothing was audible to me; all surrounding noises had muted in my drowsiness.

“Lexi? Are you okay?” Kellan asked cautiously.

“Ye...uh...” I attempted to say yes, but could barely speak let alone announce. I was panting at this point, the serum bordering over flow again. I closed my eyes and gave up just as I heard Kellan bust through the locked door.

“Sharon!” he called my mother frantically scooping me into his arms. Two seconds later I was in bed under the covers, still wrapped in my towel only half my body dry and my hair dripping wet. Kellan and my mother were hovering over me; they were speaking a foreign tongue, the same as the doctor earlier. I closed my eyes and fell fast asleep, fatigue consuming every muscle in my body.

Groggily opening my eyelids, I awoke to Kellan pacing beside my bed. His head was sunken and hands clasped together behind his back. Looking at his face, he appeared angry, very disgruntled over something but not an ounce of worry filtered in.

“Kellan?”

He looked at me briefly but continued pacing.

“Umm. What’s wrong?” I asked sitting up. Looking down I saw I was in the same towel untouched. I glanced at the clock on my nightstand displaying 7:37am. When no response came I asked a new question. “How long was I sleeping?”

“Six hours Lexi. You slept for six hours trying to kill yourself. Why did you lie to me?” he yelled, his eyes piercing through me like a knife.

“What are you talking about?”

He closed his eyes and began rubbing his temples between deep breaths. When he spoke again, he was calm, but the anger still resounded in his lowered voice. “Dr. H was here. He diagnosed your problem. Your mother was hysterical feeling at fault somehow, your father was a mess unable to cope with it all and your aunt was, well she was just relieved to know what was really wrong with you.”

“Where are they?” I pressed hearing nothing or no one in the house but Kellan and me.

“They left. I told them I would stay with you. I promised to call when you woke up,” he replied.

I swallowed hard. It made sense now. I fully understood why Kellan was so irate. They figured out my secret. They now knew I’d been avoiding human blood. Worse, my mother felt that it’s her fault, that she forced me into this decision, which wasn’t the case. I felt awful. The whole purpose in me avoiding human blood was to not hurt anyone, to avoid inflicting pain upon other families, yet somehow I still imposed it on my own. I sunk back down into the covers, lifting them over my head in shame.

He climbed on top of me over the covers. With one swift move I was uncovered, lying in my towel. He stared directly into my eyes, I felt like I was looking at an angry bear disturbed during hibernation.

“I just need to know. Why did you lie?” he asked directly in a calm, tightly controlled voice.

“I didn’t technically lie, I just never corrected your assumptions,” I muttered.

“Lexi, please, I’m trying to understand,” he pleaded still rash in tone.

“I... I don’t want to kill humans for my appetite. I know too many good ones. I don’t want to be a ruthless murderer of mothers and fathers and brothers and daughters. I couldn’t imagine losing my dad! I can’t selfishly inflict that on someone else,” I explained, tears welling quickly in the well of my eyes, imagining the pain I would suffer over the loss of my dad.

The rage left Kellan; his muscles relaxed and his piercing eyes turned to that of a sad puppy. “I wish you would have told me. We can find an alternative for you,” he said.

“Is there one?” I asked feeling hopeful, my face lighting up at the thought despite the tears still silently streaming down.

“I’ll help you find one,” he smiled wiping away a few drops on my cheeks. He rolled off of me and firmly ordered, “Now go get dressed. You need to *drink*.”

I shook my head obediently knowing I couldn’t avoid this any longer. I changed quickly in the bathroom. I brushed my teeth and pulled my hair into a messy bun. I walked out to see him sitting up with a cup in his hand.

“What is that?” I asked.

“This is yours. You need to drink all of it.”

I sat beside him and rendered the glass from his hand. Looking in, there were a few ice cubes in a thick red liquid.

I sniffed at it, but couldn't smell anything out of the ordinary about it. "What is it?"

"It's human blood. Now drink."

Wearily, I sucked a tiny bit of the liquid into my mouth. I didn't know what to expect. You think of drinking blood as a human and you're ready to gag, but it was actually sweet and crisp like mint lemonade on a hot summer day, only thicker. It didn't bother me so much in that reference and it didn't smell bad. No rusty, salted metal here; I actually didn't smell anything at all from the cup. The liquid in my throat still sizzling dropped in temperature the very millisecond the red liquid trickled down. It was still very present, but not burning like before.

Feeling more confident based off my body's initial reaction to the tiniest bit, I sipped a larger amount. This time, the serum began to dwindle in levels. I looked up at Kellan who was eagerly sitting beside me, encouraging me to continue with his eyes and an adoring smile. I swallowed the rest of the drink in under thirty seconds.

I handed him the empty cup. The moment he retrieved it from me the healing serum, cold as ice now, spewed into my mouth. My eyes widened in panic as I looked at Kellan alarmingly.

"Swallow it. If you were feeding off a human that's what you would spit back into the bite wound to heal them quickly."

"Disgusting!" I yelled after swallowing the liquid. This time though it actually stayed below my esophagus. I took a deep breath inhaling through my mouth. It felt so great that I did it a few more times. I couldn't help but beam at feeling the relief I did.

"You were brave."

“With what?”

“Lexi, I got that burning feeling in my throat once and literally attacked the next human I saw. How you were able to put up with the pain, the stinging fire in your throat for so long... Well, let’s just say that I couldn’t do it.”

“Yeah, but my cause was worthless. I just drank a human’s blood. Actually... where did you get that?” I questioned.

“My dad bought a few pints of blood from the blood bank a week ago. Every so often he does this in case of an emergency like today with you,” he explained.

“Wait. So humans donate the blood and then you buy it; like how they buy their groceries at a store?” I pressed. A light bulb went off in my head.

“Yes. It only lasts about forty-five days though and it’s expensive,” he replied.

“Like how expensive are we talking?”

“Each time you feed, you’re supposed to take at least eight pints from the human. The average human has ten to twelve pints in their body. You need to feed for strong performance levels at least once a week but could get by with once every other week. The average unit of blood costs between one hundred-fifty and two hundred dollars. One unit is about two pints of blood. So total, you would need at least three to four twice a month so you would be looking at about a \$1,400 per month grocery bill as you like put it.”

I furrowed my brows and widened my eyes in amazement. “Wow.”

“I told you,” he shrugged.

“Not the cost. You.”

“What did *I* do?” he became defensive.

“I’m just amazed at the wealth of knowledge you have with all this stuff.” I began fiddling with my hands again. “That is expensive though. I can see why vampires just take it for free with that cost attached,” I sighed feeling frustrated.

Why is it that for humans the healthy, nutritious foods, like organics, are more expensive? You would think it was the preservatives that added the extra cost to it, but apparently not. I mean you don’t spray pesticides on an organic apple, which saves you money, but yet you charge twice as much for it. And with blood, I just don’t understand why something that is technically free when donated would have such a high price tag. You pay the nurse \$15 for an hour of work. It doesn’t take an hour to stick a needle in someone’s arm and extract blood. I know, I know, there are other costs in processing, testing and storage and yada, yada, but that is a lot of money. I will never judge the hospital for a high transfusion bill again! Unfortunately though, this definitely was not helping my cause.

“I have money in the bank. Why don’t we buy the blood for now until we figure out an alternative for you?” he offered.

“I have money in my account too. I don’t want to use yours unless I absolutely have to. I guess just ask your dad if he’ll buy it for me or show me how and where to buy it,” I said. Thinking thoroughly beyond this expensive alternative, I recalled the idea of breaking away at seventy-five percent. If I could master it, then I wouldn’t need an alternate. I could drink in the true vampire fashion without

sacrificing my morals. I would feel guilty for hurting a human, but as long as they lived, I'd have protected them.

"Sure. You're going to need more very soon though. What you drank was only a pint."

"It seemed like a lot more," I noted aloud. "I think eventually I will feed off humans but practice in the way we spoke before, taking enough but not killing them."

"I know my limitations and I can't control myself in consumption right now. I'll ask my dad to help you if you want though," he offered.

I nodded in agreement. "Umm... thanks again for helping me with everything," I said fidgeting with my hands nervously.

He smiled lovingly, putting the earphones in his ears and pressing play on his red iPod. I nestled close to enjoy the music in the arms of my love and he willingly embraced me.

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Chapter Twenty

“Are you fully prepared for this?” Al asked as we ran through the woods alongside a bike path.

It was early in the morning, 5a.m. to be exact, and though I was about to do what I’d been dreading, I was attempting to glue myself together mentally.

“Yeah, I think so.”

It’d been over a week since my family discovered my big secret and two days since I’d consumed human blood from a bag. Kellan provided me with three pints of blood, which sustained me, but more was necessary for my maintenance at full capacity.

The last ten days, both Kellan and Al had trained me non-stop. They’d done their due diligence in attack and feeding preparation. I’d slept merely two hours, yet I lacked no supply of energy. Sadly, this confirmed my body’s dependence on human blood. Al had been persistent in warning me of the temptation. He explained that once I bite and taste the blood, a rush of instinctual action would take over me. He said to guard my mind during this process to avoid surrendering to my vampire side.

After days of practicing physically and mentally, the time had come to test myself. Al forced Kellan to stay behind and he fed earlier to avoid temptation and focus on me. Should I get carried away, he promised to protect my mission and withdraw me. Nerves swarmed me as I prepared myself. The scary part was only in not knowing what’s to come... You can only train so much in simulation.

“I smell one jogging alone,” he prompted.

“I don’t. Am I supposed to?” I checked. I knew my nose worked because I smelled the dewy forest floor and the pine of the cones scattered about. Maybe I was just missing it. It was technically my first attempt to smell a human that should be appetizing to me; I would never view my dad or friends as a meal.

He stopped abruptly. “You don’t smell anything?”

“Well, I smell nature – the trees, the moss, the musky smell of a fire nearby but nothing else really.”

“Hmm. This is not normal Lexi. The scent of a human should entice you. Like a roast fresh out the oven, their smell should make your mouth water and adrenaline rush through you.”

I inhaled deep and released a quick, “Nope, I’ve got none of that.”

“I’ll guide you to him. You should retain more control than I anticipated without the scent to hypnotize you,” he stated thoughtfully. “But we must look into this. We rely on our scent far more than we should. You will be crippled, especially in battle, without it.”

We resumed our previous pace. As we got closer, I heard the pitter patter of a heavy sprint against the smooth concrete path. My nasal issues confused me, but at least I could default to my hearing.

Concurrent to each pound I heard two heartbeats muffled by upbeat alternative music. The closer I got the more anxiety built within me. I thought no enticing scent was making it worse. There was no allure to the man other than to rid my throat of this bit of serum. I wished I were extremely thirsty, so far hunger crazed that my mind couldn’t falter away to moral and actions.

I sprung onto the path slowing my pace to match the human before me. I heard Al following a short parallel distance within the forest. The dark haired man stood about 6 feet tall. Clothed in basketball shorts, a jacket and earphones, I was momentarily distracted by his likeness to Kellan from behind. *Ugh. Definitely the no scent of humans thing is a hindrance!*

Focus Lexi!

I located the major pulsing point in his neck, the one I was prepared, or at least I thought I was prepared, to tear into. Crouching slightly I increased my speed and mentally counted one...two... three!

Half a second later I was hovering over the man I knocked unconscious with my abrupt attack. I lowered my mouth, shaking in unison. I bit; my teeth punched through his skin as if I'd only bit into a sandwich.

Just as Al predicted, the moment the first drop of blood hit my tongue, my instincts dominated. The warmth of the pulsing blood that effortlessly filled my mouth was what drove me to want more. Kellan was smart with ice cubes before; it didn't taste the same. The blood was quenching a thirst I didn't know existed. Like a cold shower on a hot day, my body fell into a hypnotic mode caressed by a physical elation.

The blood still steadily pumping wasn't fast enough to satisfy my desires. I felt like the desert man who'd discovered a spring. I began inhaling, sucking the liquid in large volumes until I heard a voice.

"Lexi," Al called.

Though I didn't want to pull away, though my mouth still tingled and watered with an uncontrollable thirst, I lifted my head slightly to acknowledge him.

It was then that I peered down at the man I'd used as a life source. He was lying sideways and scattered. Dirt covered his once clean attire and rocks were stabbing at his arms. I saw the blood trickling down his neck just as the serum regurgitated into my mouth. I spit it onto his red stained neck where I bit into him.

Though I had consciously sketched every part of this man into my mind, I purposefully omitted his face. I refused to look beyond the healing wound of my unsuspecting donor. I couldn't face myself in the mirror should it happen to be someone I knew.

Seconds later I glanced at the wound once more before rising and was surprised to see it entirely scabbed over and beginning to fade. It had been no more than three seconds from the time the serum touched his skin. I quickly rose retreating into the forest swiftly as if I would be caught any minute.

I ran fast following close behind Al. Rounding back to his car my emotions and my conscience over the act I'd completed set in. I didn't kill the man, but I'd rendered him unconscious, drank six pints of his blood and left him deserted to awake in confusion feeling light headed. Avoiding murder, I still was soaked in guilt over my actions. I realized in this that humans are not at the top of the food chain like they boast. They are weak and I felt weak for having consumed the life flow of most of one. I knew this too would pass; I knew I would adjust to this new lifestyle, this new means of survival, but not until I'd rid my conscience of my human morals or rectified my senses.

I didn't understand why humans carried no scent to me, but I believed that was the key to pacifying my conscience in this new appetite.

Arriving at my house, we found my mother, Kellan, and my dad pacing the living room floor while Beth sat casually at ease on the couch. They rushed me through the front door and drilled me relentlessly.

“How was it?” my mother started.

“Did you kill him?” Kellan asked.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” my dad pressed. I could tell he felt uncomfortable, almost like he was encouraging a crime but wanted to remain the ever-supportive father.

Al answered for me. “Lexi did great. She didn’t kill him and followed through in healing him perfectly. I was impressed by her control. She pulled away the first time I called, but...”

“What is it?” my mother rushed at his hesitation.

“She told me she doesn’t smell humans.”

“You don’t?” she pressed, crinkling her forehead with concern.

“At all?” Kellan checked, tilting his head a bit in attentive confusion.

“Do you smell other things?” Beth chimed in.

I shrugged my shoulders unsure of what I was supposed to say or do. “I didn’t know I was supposed to until Al mentioned it. I mean, yeah, I smell everything else – trees, flowers, salt water, Kellan’s cologne – but not Dad or any other human really,” I explained.

I heard my dad breathe a sigh of relief. “Al, have you ever heard of such a thing?” my mother asked.

“Never, this is definitely a doctor’s call,” he replied.

“Beth?” she turned toward Kellan’s mother anxiously.

“Call the doctor Sharon. I’m sure he will figure it out,” she answered softly.

“I’ll call him. Lexi, why don’t you go shower and change, you’re a little dirty,” she prompted.

I obeyed retreating to my room shortly after I gave my distressed dad a hug and kiss. I knew he was relieved that I didn’t desire to eat him or any other human, but he was also concerned because he understood enough to know I should have wanted to and that I definitely should smell them with enticement.

Kellan, of course, beat me to my room. “How do you feel?”

“Okay,” I answered robotically though I hadn’t been able to look anyone in the eyes, especially him since I’d walked through the front door.

He grabbed my arms and centered me in front of him. He took my face in his hands and smiled brilliantly, dimple exposed and teeth shining, as he spoke, “I’m proud of you. Without smell driving you, I know you had to consciously bite him.”

“Yeah, I still feel horrible. I couldn’t look at his face. And now I can’t think about my broken resolve knowing I abandoned the man on a bike path half dead,” I gushed as a few tears trickled down my cheeks.

“You can’t cry now,” Kellan said quickly. “It’s blood.” He wiped away the liquid drops and held up his red stained fingers. I broke from his hold and ran to the bathroom alarmed.

“How? Why?” I yelled frantically. I ripped the toilet paper from the roll and began blotching like a mad woman.

“Calm down Lexi. It’s okay. It’s just that when you drink human blood, you’ll cry human blood.”

“What happened to my tears?” I pressed anxiously.

“They’ll come back. When you drink human blood, it’s quickly absorbed throughout your body. Like water, it hydrates so many parts of you including the reserves in your eyes. Once your body fully processes the blood, uses its fuel where needed, the salt water will return in a balanced chart. You’re still human in a lot of ways and still need to drink water regularly like you’ve been doing,” he explained.

I laughed. “I didn’t understand that; I’m too mentally jumbled right now. But as long as I don’t cry blood forever, I guess I’m okay.”

He smiled tugging me into his arms for a warm embrace.

“I’m sorry for being so crazy. Feeding was so much harder mentally than physically, more than I assumed. I know I’ll get used to it, I’m just overwhelmed by the memory of what I did,” I mumbled.

“You’re too innocent for your own good.”

Hugging him provided more than comfort; it surrounded me with his unconditional love and much needed relief. I was able to acknowledge that I wasn’t the

same as I was yesterday and further different in comparison to last Thursday. I felt like a soldier returning from war, I'd seen and heard things most hadn't and that'd altered me on a level I couldn't comprehend fully at this point.

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Chapter Twenty-One

“Hello again Alexa,” Dr. H greeted entering my room.

I stood from my bed and replied, “Hello.”

Kellan copied my movement standing beside me now. My mother, Al, and a man I didn’t know shuffled in.

“Alexa, this is my colleague Dr. Zhan,” he announced gesturing towards the short man. He must have stood merely five feet and was at least two inches shorter than me. He was quite the opposite of Dr. H with dark withered skin, salt and pepper hair, thick bifocals despite what should be perfect vision, and yet a strong aura of utter wisdom exuded him.

“Oh my!” he exclaimed staring wide-eyed between Kellan and me. He slipped into the tongue I was growing familiar of hearing yet still didn’t comprehend. Kellan’s stance tightened at my side.

My mother asked a question and now gave the same astonished doe-eyed glare.

Al muttered something incomprehensible in the foreign language, he sounded shocked and as if he was discrediting the words of the old man near the end.

I leaned over cautiously and whispered to Kellan, “What are they talking about?”

“You don’t want to know,” he answered coldly never leaving the eyes of Dr. Zhan.

Whatever was said upset Kellan. A calm façade was replaced with controlled anger, but what could he have said

that was so bad? I wanted to know. Regardless of the subject, I wanted to hear it.

“I want to know; I have a right to know. I am standing here listening, okay so more like being rudely ignored, but you are talking about me are you not?” I huffed towards anyone and everyone.

Kellan broke the silence, “He’s talking about us.”

I was puzzled. The confusion clearly plastered on my face.

“Forgive me. Please sit Alexa, allow me to detail your destiny,” he stated solemnly.

“My destiny?” I wrinkled my forehead, but obliged his request. I was curious, dying to know what had my mother awestruck, Al dismissive, and Kellan angry. Such adverse reactions towards the same words meant the words carried a heavy weight.

“Nearly two centuries ago, you were predicted,” he began before I interrupted.

“Predicted? Me?” I wanted to laugh, but didn’t.

“Yes. Maximus Arturo depicted a young couple, clearly soul mates by their unified red and purple aura that never flickers or fades. You see purple is the highest frequency, and the lowest frequency is red. You two are the perfect balance of love, life, of the material and spiritual habitants, the rarest of existence on this earth. Your permanent yellow halos depict a solid strength beyond your awareness. There is no break, no separation. Like two magnets melded together by their own pull, neither distance nor harm can segregate your bond. It is clear you act as one, love as one, and shall bring peace amongst our quarreling species as Maximus and Sir Staten claimed long

ago," he spoke thoughtfully, still awestruck as if he was in the presence of a royal family.

"You're joking, right? I mean I don't even know who those people are. And Kellan... me... we're... we're not even together like boyfriend-girlfriend," I stammered. I was dismissive, angry, and awestruck; I was the combination of all their reactions in one. It just didn't make sense. To think me - Kellan - us - together would bring peace to unruly ignorants ruled by their history lessons teaching hate. The man was clearly crazy.

"Maximus Arturo was a prophet, a leader of sorts to the vampeens, destroyed in the nineteenth century by a viciously raven vampire; and Sir Staten likewise to the vampires. Though they never crossed paths, their predictions were identical, flawless in description of one red and purple aura sharing young couple. I am a feeble vampire lucky enough to have been welcomed, embraced by Maximus. I have lived a full three hundred thirty-two years by the skin of my teeth. I have crossed far too many in my existence, but never have I happened a pair like you." Energy was surging through him, excitement projecting with each new line.

"You cannot pull from her side now that you are linked, am I correct?" Dr. Zhan pressed to Kellan.

He wearily looked at me before nodding his head once.

"And you both have kissed?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," I answered cautiously.

"You have touched his senses, felt his feelings as if they were yours, shared his mind and united as one soul feeling as if the universe shifted?" He was nearly jumping in exasperated enthusiasm as he clamored through the

intimate details of my kisses with Kellan as though he was there.

“How...?” I couldn’t put it together.

“My dear Alexa, you will rise to your destiny with Kellan, your eternal solitude of strength beside you. You cannot avoid fate; it will always find you. And I am not mistaken, you are the only two I have ever seen or heard of to carry a permanent unified single aura of red and purple. No other colors are flickering amongst them; you possess a solid ring of red followed by purple surrounding you both. While they are common colors, they are seldom together with such vibrancy. Heed my words, you are the ones we have long awaited for,” he cited with diligence and a sort of reverie.

Apparently Kellan wasn’t ready to hear this; I couldn’t say I was either. He interrupted, “What about Lexi’s nose? She doesn’t smell blood; she’ll resist humans easily without the scent to attract her.”

“Ah, yes,” Dr. H stated removing a few instruments from his black bag. He asked a series of harmless questions over what I did and didn’t smell regularly. He inspected every part of me to ensure my transformation was complete.

Dr. Zhan then handed me a cup of dark red syrup. He asked me to smell it. I noticed Kellan, my mother and Al all took one step away from me, as if the contents were something to fear.

Cautiously, shaken by their reactions, I lifted the contents towards my nose, yet smelled nothing. I relinquished the container back to Dr. Zhan shrugging, “I don’t smell anything.”

“Nothing?” Dr. H confirmed.

I shook my head acknowledging my original statement.

Dr. H pulled out a small silver canister. The moment he opened the lid one millimeter, the air filled of ancient dried herbs mixed into a sour, molten blend.

“Whoa! That smells bad!” I exclaimed pinching my nose between my thumb and pointer finger.

The doctors exchanged glances, as if they were speaking without words. “Alexa, do you want to feed off humans for survival?” Dr. Zhan asked.

“Not really,” I replied sheepishly. I was fully aware that most would shun my desire.

“Interesting,” Dr. H commented.

“What is it doctors?” my mother questioned.

“You truly are different Alexa,” Dr. H announced.

“Different good or different bad?” I pressed beginning to fiddle with my hands.

“That depends on how you view it,” he answered.

“What’s the problem doc?” Al interjected, arms folded defensively yet he spoke with sheer curiosity.

“Ah. It seems our dear Alexa here has a gift beyond her impeccable aura balance,” Dr. Zhan stated, raising his arms towards the heavens as a gleam sparkled in his eyes.

“Me? A gift?” I fumbled trying to piece it all together. “Are we still talking about my nose?”

“Of course, for your gift is will-power,” he answered.

“Will-power? That’s it?” I wasn’t certain as to what the big deal was. Everyone has will power and self-control to

some degree. I didn't see why they would make such a fuss over it.

"Ah, but yours is advanced. You see Alexa, your will-power is so strong that you are able to control your senses with your determination," he explained. "Once you set your mind to something, your senses react and adjust accordingly."

"So what you're saying is since she doesn't want to feed off humans, she has willed her scent of them to be muted?" My mother talked through her reasoning, wrinkling her forehead as she processed everything.

"That is precisely what I am saying," he acknowledged.

He shifted in front of me raising his hands to either side of my face. I felt Kellan stiffen beside me, his eyes darting at Dr. Zhan with intensity.

"You are who they've predicted. I am not wrong," he reiterated. Staring straight into his eyes, I saw through Dr. Zhan. He gave no hint of a fib, no deceitful glare. Even the creases of his weathered face and soft brown eyes appeared genuine.

"How do I smell humans? How do I unplug my nose?" I asked breaking away.

"You must will it into existence," he replied stepping back to gather his container of liquid.

"How do I do that?"

"Only you can determine that my dear. It is your will not mine," he riddled.

"So what am I supposed to do?" I panicked glancing at my mother who was still awestruck and slightly confused

by expression.

“Decide, believe, and enforce,” he stated.

“I know this sounds strange Alexa; you are only the second one we’ve crossed with this ability. Perhaps you should read a few books on the power of positive thinking and thinking things into existence. They should in essence detail what is happening to you and give you a few ideas on how to change it,” Dr. H offered.

I shook my head. I supposed I could purchase some books when I meet up with Mel later. They gathered their belongings and shuffled out. Downstairs I heard my dad silently pacing alongside an ever-calm Beth. I guessed my dad didn’t want to hear bad news or react poorly in my presence.

“Mom,” I called her on her way out the door. “Can Kellan and I go for a drive?” Kellan didn’t say anything though I could sense his disquiet.

“Where to?” she asked.

“The beach.” It was Kellan’s favorite place to think, and right now I needed to think and get answers from him. I knew he understood my motive behind the trip, but he remained silent.

“Can you protect her?” my mother directed towards Kellan sternly.

“I think I’ve proven that,” he reminded her rigidly.

“Yes Lexi. You can go. It’s probably for the best. Your father is struggling to cope with you despite his calm façade,” she stated before leaving.

“You ready?” I prompted to Kellan.

“Yeah,” he replied motioning towards the door.

“We should leave quickly. Like run. I don’t want my dad to see me,” I prompted. Glancing at the bedside clock showing 6:58am, I mentally noted my countdown to see Mel.

The car ride there was smooth and quick as usual. It gave me time to reflect though, to focus on me and Kellan, to correlate what Dr. Zhan was referencing earlier. How was he so accurate in description of our connection? I’d known Kellan three weeks as of today yet it felt like years. I felt like he’d always been a part of me, always belonged in my life. I didn’t dare say I loved him at this point; it’s far too soon, yet my connection to him surpassed that level of flattery. Dare I say I couldn’t live without him?

My hesitations were justified because my observations were all relationships started with such bliss, but none were as intense emotionally. What I had with Mike was nice; it’s cordially passionate in many ways but nothing close to the fiery pit of L’s associated with Kellan and me.

Oh God, I love him. With every fiber of my being I love him. Now that he’s in my world, I would be crushed should he abruptly leave. He overwhelmed me. Though he’d been with me every waking moment, my heart still skipped a beat when I opened my eyes to see him beside me. His eyes still captivated me as did his smile dazzle my senses. And maybe the over analytical side of me was in over-drive but our lips matched perfectly; Mike’s lips were smaller than mine which made me feel sloppy when I kissed him sometimes. Kellan and I aligned perfectly. Come to think of it, we fit together as if our anatomy was uniquely designed to interlock like a puzzle.

I looked over at him as he swiftly parked on the first try though it was a tight parallel space. He lightly squeezed

my hand before opening my door one second later. I couldn't help but sense his reservations in taking my hand as we walked towards the beach. I knew he was overcome with the same compilation as me, yet I wanted to see it, to feel it to confirm my assumptions and there was only one way.

I stopped myself though. I couldn't insist on prying the truth from him, invading his space over my selfish insecurities. I couldn't force a connection just to find answers. No, I needed to remain civilized despite the vampire within.

I respectfully broke the ice. "I need to know something."

He said nothing, but gave me a light hand-squeeze and one quick nod signaling his acceptance.

"Do you believe him?"

We continued walking for several minutes. I didn't press recognizing his faraway look. He was thinking, deciphering his response. I merely absorbed the sounds of nature's beast beside me and random clanks and chatter. He finally turned to face me. "I need to know first. Do you believe him?"

Normally I would argue that I asked first, but it seemed insubstantial to me. "I... umm..." I stuttered. I wasn't anticipating this, but gathered what thoughts I could and answered truthfully. "I'm confused. He sounded so confident, so sure of his claim. I can't help but consider the relevance of his words. But I also can't help thinking he could be wrong. What stands out is he knew our weird connection as if he felt it; like he was there in our minds when, well... you know..." I trailed off looking down at the

sand beneath my sneakers. I dragged my shoe in the shape of a heart.

Kellan took my face in his hands forcing me to look in his eyes, eyes I still get lost in. They hold my interest with their mesmerizing color yet draw me in with their depth, striations as deep as the walls surrounding a once cold distant man. "Maybe this makes me crazy, but I believe him. My mother told me the fortune long ago in Spain so I'm familiar with it. And racking my brain, I can't think of a better couple to make this happen than us. I'm vampire, you're vampeen. I want to devour humans, you don't; and no other woman could have me consider the pro-life eating habit. Whether I like it or not, I can't walk away from you. There are times when I can't take my eyes off you without feeling anxious. I'm in love with a strong vampeen who compliments every part of me including my vampire heritage. I was a wreck until I met you. You've sobered me into a warrior in weeks. I would fight until the end of time to ensure a safe existence for you, even if that means killing my own kind. Regardless of the hard front, I don't enjoy murder, but I do value my life with you in it. The only alternative is to bring peace among our kinds. And knowing that's the only way you will forever be safe to live outside a gang driven existence, I'll gladly take on the task," he answered solemnly.

For the first time ever, all my guards were plowed through with one speech. Never had I wanted to give all of myself to a man, but I did here and now to Kellan. Was this possible? Were we meant to act as a pair of Gandhis to the vamp world?

Strangely, it wasn't until he phrased it just right that I realized we were our own modern translation of West Side Story. He's from the vampire world, I'm from the vampeen world - rival kinds that are so similar, distant cousins in a

family, yet make the value on their existence be based off how many 'distant cousins' they kill.

I knew without hesitation now that Kellan was my destiny, *the one*, my future husband, father to my children, and lifelong partner. But was he also my business partner, my lethal advocate of peace with his kind to ensure no other vampeen endured the wrath my gran did? Maybe. Or maybe not. Either way, he was still my destiny. No other guy was capable of obtaining another look from me similar to the one I was giving Kellan now.

Though I acknowledged all this, I was still waiting. I took my choice seriously, and maybe I just wanted a choice left in my life. Everything else was pre-determined or forced upon me; from going to school to becoming a vampeen to drinking human blood, it's all set in stone. Sex was the one stronghold I still carried since I was a virgin. It's like the last remnant of power to a lonely royal heir.

"Lexi," Kellan whispered pulling me back from my mental analytics.

"Yeah?" I reply softly.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" he asked hesitantly.

"We're both crazy," I smiled leaning in to kiss him. I couldn't describe it since our last collision was so powerful, yet this one put it to shame. Entwined in his arms, I ran my hands up his shirt with a feeling only God should encompass. Right here, right now with Kellan, I felt like united we could control every celestial pool, every rebellious communist, every bomb set to explode before us in seconds.

I was closer than any girl had ever been to him yet I craved so much more. I felt myself being lowered to the sand but didn't break the moment to check. I lifted Kellan's

shirt revealing his chiseled chest pressed to mine, his powerful biceps visibly holding me in a protective delicate manner, and continued to kiss my love.

"I never thought destiny could feel like this," he said, though I was fully aware it was spoken mentally.

"I never anticipated forever with you," I replied.

"Are you disappointed?"

"Not in the slightest." I moved my hands to lock behind his neck, entwining a few locks of hair concurrently.

"Uh-hem," a gruff sound disturbed my bliss. My eyes flew open just as Kellan was on his feet.

"Can I help you officer?" he pressed politely.

"There are to be no indecent public displays on the beach. Now is that a problem?" he demanded.

On my feet beside Kellan now, I replied a stern, "No."

"You kids run along before my disposition changes," he ordered.

I kept my eyes cautiously on Kellan unsure of what to expect from him. When I saw the flicker of rage rush him, I knew what was coming. I quickly took charge. "Listen officer, we weren't doing anything criminal. No indecent exposure was placating before you, only a P.D.A., which may have been offensive but certainly not illegal. We're not the same teenagers you see uprooting your streets or causing a ruckus at school and therefore shouldn't be treated in such a manner. We're not all ignorant rugrats. Now we will leave but understand it's not because of your command, it is by our will alone. Let's go Kellan," I stated grabbing his arm and shirt at the same time with unwavering confidence and a feeling of empowerment.

I wasn't sure if I stepped in because I wanted to stop the officer from getting hurt or because I knew he couldn't arrest me if he tried. I no longer feared those who demanded respect yet didn't deserve it. No human will ever be able to bully me again.

I pushed Kellan out of the way to open my own door and slammed it shut declaring my independence abrasively.

He shut his door and was on top of me in a flash. "Damn. That was hot! You've never been so sexy."

I pushed him off with one last press of my lips to his, a definite stress releaser I must admit. "Well the guy was being a jerk!"

He positioned himself back on the driver's side but never removed his eyes from me. Staring into them, I saw a fire flaring, an erotic fit roaring beneath his surface. For the first time, Kellan was staring at me with pure unadulterated lust. And knowing how I felt about him, knowing how easily I could get carried away, I prompted, "Are you going to drive or do you want me to?"

"Can you?" he asked with a devilish grin.

Sticking to the clean version, I scoured, "No, but I can wreck your car trying if you'd like."

He laughed breaking away to start the engine and then pressed the gas pedal with a lustful vengeance.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

The day passed quickly after the beach. My mom and I went shopping. She was re-decorating her bedroom and needed to purchase everything. And when I say everything, I mean everything! It got me thinking about re-doing mine too, but I decided against it. My room was like a stabilizer right now. It's the one thing that didn't change with my transformation, because no doubt my relationship with Mel would change.

"How do I look? Am I overdone? No. What am I saying? I'm definitely overdressed. What do you think?" I frantically asked Kellan who was observing my crazy twists in front of my bathroom mirror. I was wearing the first outfit I tried on with Eduardo.

"You look fine," he replied.

"Fine? I can't look fine; I have to look perfect. I'm seeing my best friend for the first time in two weeks and, oh yeah, I weigh a lot less than I could lose in that time frame. A little help, please!" I ranted fluffing my hair in the mirror again.

"Okay. My honest opinion?" he checked hesitantly.

"Of course. Yes."

"Lose the designer look for now. Your best friend remembers you in jeans and a t-shirt. You did slim down a bit and that'll be shocking enough. Wear the jeans, sneakers, and a hoodie to remind her you're still the same person, just went from pretty to beautiful," he stated.

"You're right! I don't want to overwhelm her with everything all at once. You're a genius!" I exclaimed kissing

his cheek as I made my way to my closet.

“Cover your eyes!” I yelled walking out of the closet with my sneakers in place but a tank top absent over my bra. I quickly grabbed one from my dresser and put it on. I threw the hoodie on over my head announcing, “You’re safe now.”

Kellan opened his eyes, did a full visual intake before saying, “Perfect.”

“Good,” I noted aloud. Fidgeting with my hands in my pocket, I began to pace. I glanced at the clock only to find it was time to go.

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My stomach was churning, heart sputtering and mind racing. What would Mel think of me? I hoped she didn’t weird out on me. I thought shock would be her reaction tonight. She’s my best friend though. If she didn’t accept me now, then I knew what we had was superficial. And that was one thing my best friend was definitely not.

Last minute it dawned on me. Mike hadn’t seen me in two weeks either. *All the other times he failed to show, watch tonight be the one he follows through on.* Ugh. I was barely ready to see Mel and that’s only to introduce normalcy back into my life, but Mike... He was like the black plague to me right now. I needed to avoid him until I strongly re-establish my relationship with Mel. I would definitely need her support when I broke up with him.

“You ready?” Kellan prompted.

“Not really,” I squirmed feeling the color escape my cheeks as reality set in.

“You’ll be fine Lexi. I’ll be around the corner browsing if you need me,” he reassured me with a kiss on the forehead.

My palms were clammy despite my health, hands shaking as I grabbed my cell to call Mel. I swallowed the lump in my throat preparing to act normal. “Hey. Where are you?” I asked as Kellan held the first door open for me to the store.

“I’m at our table,” she answered.

“Okay. See you in a sec and please don’t freak.” I closed my phone so she couldn’t question my verbiage.

I lingered before the second and last door separating me from Mel. “Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh,” I whispered frantically. I took a deep breath, exhaling a while. Biting my lower lip and nodded to Kellan. “Okay, I think I’m ready.”

He looked me over once more and nodded in agreement.

I walked through the door and towards the table Mel and I occupied every Thursday night. Just as I suspected, shock struck her face and her eyes nearly popped out of socket.

“O. M. G. O. M. G. Holy sugarplums! What the... What the fizz? Is that you, Lex?” she exclaimed standing, mouth open, taking me in. Shock, pure and utter surprise, and clear disbelief were smothering her.

“Yeah, it’s me. Do I look okay?” I asked sheepishly.

“Holy... Sugar... Oh my! Wow!” she yelled.

“O. M. G. Mel, are you speechless?” I teased nervously, desperately wanting to pick up where we left off before.

“Holy sugarplums Lex! You’re freaking gorgeous! What the heck kind of vacation did your parents take you on because I definitely need one?”

She was still staring – okay, actually gawking – at me. I chuckled tensely avoiding her question.

“Lex, seriously, you’re beautiful. I mean you’ve always been pretty, but yeah... wow! Mike is going to freak.”

Taking the reins, I dished what I needed of her. “Okay, Mel. I seriously need my best friend right now. I know I look drastically different and I can’t even tell you how I got this way, but please don’t weird out on me. *So* much has happened and I’m dying to tell you.”

“Of course Lex. Don’t be silly. Nothing is ever going to change between us. Sisters for eternity, remember? I don’t care if you come back looking like Jim Carey. I’ll gawk for a minute then finally shut my pie hole and pass you the newest issue of Seventeen,” she replied. “You do know Mike is going to shit his pants though, right?”

Now I knew why I loved her so much. I really couldn’t have a better friend. I guess I was worried about nothing... except Mike.

I quickly spilled my guts and plans to my eternal best friend. I intricately weaved my vacation lie with the truth. I shared every kiss with Kellan, every weird moment with my dad, even the shopping spree with my aunt in Savannah, though I lied and said it happened yesterday.

“Okay. So I know I was really gung-ho about Mike before, but Lex, what you just described with Kellan is cigarette worthy,” she commented taking a sip of her macchiato.

“Oh my gosh Mel, it’s so much more and yet such a mess. I know we talked about it before I even left, but I have to break up with Mike. Just... How do you think he’ll take it?” I braced myself for her brutal lash of honesty.

“Lex, the boy is obsessed with you. And now when he sees how smoking hot you are... Let’s just say I don’t think the load will lighten. He’s a nice guy, love the boy to death, but yes, he kind of creeped me a bit. Do I think he’ll go all stalkerish? - No. Do I think he’ll try to pick a fight with Kellan? - Yes.”

“Ugh!” I groaned. “Kellan is super strong. I really don’t want Mike fighting him.”

“That’s a def,” she agreed. “O.M.G. I totally didn’t tell you.”

“What?”

“So it’s supposed to be a surprise, but something tells me your heart can’t handle much more so I’m going to spoil it.”

“What is it?” I pressed.

“Tomorrow night is your birthday party. Love your Aunt Claire by the way. She’s been planning with me the last two weeks. But Lex, it’s going to be huge,” she dished with excitement and caution concurrently.

“How huge are we talking here?” I nearly choked on my words as my nerves returned.

“Pinky swear not to kill me?”

“That was so fifth grade Mel. Now dish the goods missy!”

“So I may have posted a flyer or two around school,” she admitted.

I could tell she was bracing herself for my blow and I really don't know why I didn't but I shrugged, “Well, I guess this way at least they won't think I'm a new student.”

Mel stared at me for a solid minute. “What exactly happened on that cruise again Lex?” she smiled.

“Oh shut up! That's your free pass for the week,” I teased breaking into laughter.

“So, dress? Pants?” I prompted.

“Well, we figured since you just got back from the cruise, why not continue the vacation? O.M.G. Lex. Bible it's going to be awesome! Caribbean chic is the theme. Oh! And you have your own signature cocktail drink, minus the liquor of course, but it's called a 'Luscious Lex'. And the DJ is amazing! Oh and the best part, we rented out ten hotel rooms and have the ballroom all night on the beach at the Grande Marriott!” she gushed.

“Wow. Don't hold back.” I was partially sarcastic in my remark.

“Oh please Lex. Am I the type of girl who holds back?”

“You know, reservations aside, and now with my new look, I'm actually looking forward to it,” I smiled.

“I know. Holy sugar cane!”

“What is up with you and sugar tonight?”

“No. Genius but oh so wrong thought,” she admitted biting her lower lip to hold back a wide grin.

“Please tell me you didn't just hang me,” I frowned.

“Jason and Jenny broke up again and when she sees you and he sees you... Oh I have to video that tomorrow night!” she exclaimed bouncing in her seat.

“They’re coming?”

“Umm. Hello! Flyers... remember?”

“Oh yeah. Mel moment, sorry.”

“Ugh!” she scoffed sarcastically.

We broke into unified laughter. Elation and relief exuded all of me in this moment. Words couldn’t describe the joy I had right now, the confidence I held in knowing my best friend would be steady. We’d done exactly what I dreamed to be possible but believed not to be. She wasn’t even pressing with how or why I was different, just trusting me.

Guilt consumed me as I realized I discredited my best friend. I didn’t believe in her, in us, to pull through. I felt foolish for ever doubting her coping abilities. I sometimes forget the changes she adapted to with her parents’ divorce.

“Okay, enough cackling. Back to business,” she commanded though a few chuckles still escaped. “Wait, I just realized you didn’t get your frap. If you want one you should do it now, they’ll be closing in fifteen minutes.”

“Nah. I’m good. New figure, new diet,” I insisted.

“You’re not anorexic are you Lex?” she whispered.

“I know I lost a lot of weight, but do I really look starved?” I pressed with a smirk to ease the sudden tension.

“Hmm. No, I guess not. I just... wow. You really do look beautiful Lex,” she beamed. I could tell that she was genuinely happy for me.

“You’re the best. But don’t discredit yourself. You know you’ve got it going on. Speaking of which – why don’t you go with Caleb to my party tomorrow night?”

“Eternal sisters for sure. I already am!” she shrieked.

“You were holding out on me!”

“O.M.G. Two weeks isn’t long but long enough to miss a lot I guess. Okay. So we got to go now, but how about I come over tomorrow and get ready at your house? I’m ditching after lunch to get everything ready with your aunt.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Okay. So I’ll come over around one, we can get ready and then I’ll leave early to help your aunt.”

“Oh my gosh I’ve missed you!” I exclaimed standing just as Sam made the closing announcement.

“You have *no* idea!” she agreed.

Kellan was standing by the door. Mel winked, “Have a good night you two!”

“I’m letting that one slide,” I yelled out in the parking lot. Mel waved from inside her mom’s fancy SUV.

“Looks like things went well,” Kellan commented.

“Oh my gosh. They were perfect. She was shocked at first but nothing changed but my figure and I love it! The whole time we were talking, I didn’t even hear the buzz of sounds that usually overwhelmed me. Well, except the blender. My God can that thing grind some ice!” I smiled

catching Kellan off guard with a bear hug as he held open my car door. I buried my face in his chest, inhaling the exact spot where he spritzed his cologne. "I can't believe it's actually going to be okay. And don't tell me 'I told you so'," I quickly added at the end.

"Well, I did," he smirked.

"Ugh," I playfully smacked his chest and backed away. I couldn't stop smiling though. I couldn't believe I got it all - the perfect figure, perfect guy, and I got to keep my perfect best friend.

Kellan pulled me back into his arms. "I'm happy as long as you're happy, and I definitely have never seen you this happy."

"I definitely am," I beamed with an eternal sunshine of hope. *One down and one more to go - Mike.*

The adrenaline rush of joy surged through me for hours. Kellan was worried that I hadn't been getting enough sleep. He said I needed at least three hours a day not two hours every other. Around 5 a.m. we laced up and went for a morning jog in the neighborhood. He pushed for this activity to release the last of my energy so I would succumb to his sleeping wish. I would have laughed in anyone's face that told me I'd be doing this a month ago.

I mimicked Kellan's perfect form and synced our steps ongoing for forty-five minutes. Looking around, I realized we looked like the epitome of a happy, healthy, young couple. We appeared to be the picture of perfection in athletic pairings. Who would have thought me, an athlete? Not one bead of sweat seeped through my pores, and Kellan stood equally dry breathing seamlessly beside me as we rounded the final corner back to my house.

I slowed down a tad to catch a glimpse of him from behind. "Eyes on the prize," he interjected mid-linger.

"Okay," I smirked and stopped to stare at him.

"I'm not the prize."

"You're my prize," I tugged him into my arms.

I was still giddy over how wonderful things were panning out. Keira had been m.i.a. since my night of change, Mike didn't show up last night, me and Mel stayed best friends, my perfect guy was in my arms and felt the same towards me and I was no longer confused about him and us - I hated to keep declaring such a cynically cliché phrase, but my life was perfect right now. That combined with my parents' money and my new figure was hate-worthy. I was just happy Mel didn't feel that way.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

“What would happen if I drank a coke?” I asked Kellan as I scanned the fridge. I was anxiously awaiting my best friend’s arrival in the next twenty minutes. My parents were at work and we had the house to ourselves for once.

“Do you really want one?” he chuckled, clearly amused.

“Not really, just curious,” I stated grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. It was still strange to not consume three meals a day or snack throughout. I wasn’t lacking in any way but I suppose old habits die hard. I still found myself scanning the fridge and cupboards randomly when bored though the contents were unappealing.

“If you ever meet him, you cannot rat me out with this story,” he said with serious eyes despite his crooked smile.

“I swear,” I pledged leaning against the island anxiously.

He was laughing before he even started the story, lighting up in a way I hadn’t seen before.

“I’m waiting,” I reminded him.

“Craig drank one once. We used to dare each other to do stupid things and that was one of them. Oh God Lexi, you had to be there. He got the hiccups but each time he released a growl not a dainty little noise,” Kellan was rolling in laughter, twisting as he leaned onto the island huffing.

Seeing the way he lit to life when he spoke of Craig made me feel so guilty. He told me before that Mel and I were the girl version of him and Craig with dynamics. And

all I could think about now was how elated I was last night with my best friend. Looking at him, I realized I was his only friend here. He didn't hang out with anyone else, and he definitely needed that companionship. I felt selfish in my tirade of captivity with him; he left me for nothing more than necessity though I could clearly see now that his needs were unspoken. I became determined. I was going to kidnap Craig for a visit. Kellan needed it whether he admitted to it or not.

"You miss him, don't you?" I prompted reflecting the same smile he was penetrating me with.

"Yeah, but you make it easier."

"Yeah, but no offense, you're no Mel and I'm definitely no growling, hiccupping Craig."

"True."

It was amazing to see Kellan in that moment. He broke out of his social shell and I caught a sliver of who he was back in Seattle, the happy-go-lucky party guy he suppresses within. He'd begun to lie comfortably next to me; he's not so serious and withdrawn like before, but I still wanted happiness for him outside of me. I wanted him to have a friend outside of me here to share adventures with. I couldn't remain a selfish, sullen person capturing his interest all the time. He needed to break free of my reign, break free of our connection for some male bonding. I was still bringing Craig for a visit. It's going to be difficult to sneak him in with Kellan present 24/7, but...ugh. I'd figure it out. I wanted it to stay a surprise though.

I pulled him in for a kiss just as I heard two car doors shut. I was unsure of what came over me, yet still startled; I jumped back as an unsettling feeling filled the bottom of my stomach.

Bickering. They were going back and forth. It was Mel, my best friend I'd been anxiously waiting for, and Mike, the boyfriend I'd been trying to avoid. He had been calling me non-stop, and I'd been ignoring his calls. I must have had a minimum ten voicemails from him that I'd yet to play back.

Frozen in place, I heard Mel harshly say, "If she's not answering your calls then it's for a reason! I appreciate the ride but Lex is going to kill me if you come in. This is girl time and you are not a girl!"

To this Mike replied, "I won't stay long. I just want to see her. It's been so long."

"I don't care how long you intend to stay; it's a NO! Now go get back in your car and leave before you regret it!" she yelled.

"You can't tell me what to do! She's *my* girlfriend!"

With that I heard Mike stomp past her. She truly was my best ally against him despite her one-time support.

"You can't avoid him forever. He clearly won't let you," Kellan observed.

"Thanks for the tip," I sighed on my way to the door.

Thoughts flowed quickly. I was unsure how Mike would react to my change. One thing was certain, he would ask how. He's nosy like that and not considerate with my privacy like Mel.

Angrily, I swung open the door before he could lift his hand to knock. Mel shot me an apologetic look, which I quickly acknowledged with a lift of my lips and a quick nod. I knew she tried her best though she shouldn't have accepted his offer for a ride.

"What are you doing here?" I lashed at Mike.

His jaw dropped as he stood there in shock, dismay washing away his annoyance with Mel's previous words. He stumbled to collect himself. "Lex... uh... oh... Is... Is that you?" he choked.

"Yes Mike, it's me," I answered regretfully.

"I... Wow! You look... damn! You look...wow!" he stuttered.

"So I've been told," I answered robotically with a bit of malice. The anger slowly drained from me. Seeing his reaction, recalling the purity in his intentions, I felt the slightest twinge of guilt. It quickly left when he pulled me in for a kiss. Thank God for my new speed. I diverted his attempt, swinging past him to alleviate Mel's arms hidden by at least ten bags.

"Thanks," she smiled.

"Kellan, can you help Mel take this stuff to my room?" I called louder than necessary, playing to the human role. "I'll meet you in my room in a sec."

"Are you sure you're okay with him Lex?" Mel whispered.

"I'll be fine," I assured as she shuffled through the door. Mike had already made his way inside. As I entered behind Mel, I instantly caught the heated glares exchanging between Kellan and Mike. I knew they hadn't spoken a word, yet if looks could kill, they'd both be dead. The red ring of rage surrounding Kellan's iris seemed to ignite as Mike's retaliating stare bore empty hatred in return.

Mel wasn't oblivious either. "Here Kellan," she prompted handing him a few bags. I piled mine swiftly atop hers in his now full arms.

“What do you have in here?” he asked mindlessly.

“Just some stuff for the party,” she smiled wryly as she leapt up the stairs.

As soon as they disappeared, Mike pressed for answers. “What happened to you Lex? How did this happen?”

“I can’t tell you how. I don’t even understand myself,” I replied placating him with the truth.

“And him! Don’t think I didn’t notice his absence from school too. What the hell did you two do? I know he’s touched you!”

“Calm down Mike. Kellan and I are just friends. And he did come with me on vacation but it was my mother, not me, that invited him,” I explained. I tried to reason with his logic, sooth his overly jealous exterior bubbling with anxiety.

I knew this wouldn’t be easy. I knew he wouldn’t surrender me without a fight, but I was seeing it would conjure a war with several battles now.

“I don’t care who invited him. You should have thrown him off the boat. I’m your boyfriend not that prick! Do you understand me?” he yelled inching his way towards me. He appeared ready to hit me at any second with his clenched fists and snarling breathes. Fury was definitely about to explode from him physically.

I didn’t care though. I wasn’t weak anymore; no one could talk to me like that. “No Mike. I don’t understand you. You can’t disrespect me like that, treat me like a sinner and expect me to look at you with adoration! I’m done. I’m breaking up with you. We are no more so you can

go boss some other girl around.” The words flew out of my mouth like an arrow of attacks with intent to kill.

His hand released from the balls of rage they were. His face softened to a fault and all the anger left him to coddle me with charm. “You’re... you’re not serious, right? You’re kidding, right Lex?” he stuttered taking my hand in his, unleashing his adoration on me in hopes of my weakness.

It was working. I sighed looking away. *Stay strong Lexi! You can’t give in. Remember Kellan.*

“No, I’m serious,” I replied softly.

Within two seconds, his anger returned with a dangerous vengeance. He threw down my arm violently. “What the hell does he have that I don’t? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! You’re stupid. If you pick that jerk over me, then you’re blind and dumb!”

“I never said anything about dating Kellan! And I just broke up with you; I don’t have to explain anything!” I replied, rebelling against his ignorant coercion of sorts. My blood was curdling, my body reacting to my defense with an unruly thirst. My hands were beginning to shake as I attempted to control myself. Had I been a werewolf, I would have shifted by now. I wanted to lunge at his neck, to shred him.

He’s being irrational Lexi. Don’t blow your cover over the ignorance and impulsions that soaks him.

“You need to leave,” I ordered as I held the front door open for him.

“I’m not going anywhere. *He* needs to leave, not me! You’re mine!” he declared slamming the door and pushing me against the wall. Pressing with all his strength to my

shoulders, and standing inches from my face he proclaimed again, "You're mine. All mine, you got me?"

I felt his warm breathe in my face; his arms were clenching my shoulders as if he longed to crush my bones. I knew had I been human still, I would have been injured by now. He would have physically abused me, tortured me into surrender of his will. He was insane, clearly delusional in attempting to intimidate me into staying with him. I wasn't human though. I glared back, unharmed by his attempt though I was angry with myself for ever considering this boy so seriously as a contender.

"You think you can get all sexy and leave me behind? It's not happening Lex. You're *my* girlfriend. I'm not leaving you, and you're certainly not leaving me," he stated softly yet firmly. He reminded me of the Joker - controlled, delusional, and psychotic with a bit of charm about him and a love for mind games. I couldn't allow that to deter my revulsion though. If I were still human, I would be in agonizing pain. I couldn't forget that. My head had smacked the wall with his pounce; his hands were visibly attempting to displace my shoulders. He couldn't get away with such behavior.

I was battling my instincts to drain him. The serum was now burning, rising and heaving in my throat. The rage of a victim was raising my adrenaline levels, setting me off on a destructive tangent. I could easily break him the way he was trying to break me.

He gave one final slam against me, "Mine," he stated with finality.

I broke his hold, lifted my arms between his forcing outwards in defense. His arms flew out. He looked at me in shock, fear creeping into his expression. He realized I was stronger than he calculated.

I heard Kellan fly down the stairs. Faster than a bullet he was yanking Mike's arm towards the door. He began to jerk back but Kellan stood his ground.

"What the hell happened to you, Lex? What the fuck are you?" he yelled.

Little did he know he hit the mark. I stood watching Kellan dismiss Mike like a club bouncer.

"I am anything but yours," I scowled. My jaw was set, teeth clenched and body rigid.

"This is not over! You will be mine!" he declared still fighting Kellan's hold.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you to respect a woman?" Kellan snapped with calm yet sinister disgust.

Mike cockily replied, "Apparently your mother never told you not to screw another guy's girl. Then again she probably commits adultery too!"

Fear jerked to my forefront. I envisioned Kellan breaking Mike in half with one swift move; ripping his arm out of joint with one flicker of negative emotion.

To my surprise, he dismissed his accusations. He flung him out the door without as much as one word in a response. I stood frozen, stunned by his action or should I say lack of reaction.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm a vampire. No human can inflict harm on me now, remember?" I smiled.

He nodded once remaining serious. "Mel's waiting for you. I'll be down here if you need anything."

Somehow, despite speaking to me, I knew there was a quiet storm below his surface. Though I wanted to embrace him, to kiss him softly in appreciation, I didn't. I knew he wasn't approachable right now. Mike didn't inflict physical harm on Kellan, but he did initiate some sort of blow to him. It left me puzzled. It made me realize that despite our connection, despite seeing and knowing most of his past, there was still so much more I had yet to uncover, so many secrets still projecting the same dark mystery over him.

I ran upstairs as he drifted silently towards the family room. I burst through my door wanting to escape the tension downstairs.

"O.M.G. Lex! I heard yelling and a thud. Kellan looked pissed like he was trying to control himself! Are you okay? What happened?" she blurted nervously scurrying to my side.

I detailed the recent events including the uneasy feeling from Kellan just now.

"Oh gosh Lex. I'm so sorry," she murmured.

"What are you sorry for? It's not your fault."

"No, it is. I brought him here."

"Mel, seriously, don't guilt me with that. It happened. Good news is he's gone."

"Do you think he's gone for good?" she pressed carefully though I knew she held the conclusion prior.

"I know he's not. But I also know he's gone for now and I'm ready to spend time with my best friend who I haven't seen in a while," I smiled. "Now what should I wear tonight?"

To that Mel cheered up. “O.M.G. Lex, you are going to look fab! Seriously killer. Your aunt bought you a dress to die for! It’s so over the top. Oh and you have a hair appointment at three,” she announced moving towards the bags on the bed.

“Well what are you waiting for? Let me see it!” I prompted.

I could only imagine how much Aunt Claire spent and felt nauseous just thinking about it.

Mel carefully unzipped the white garment bag and held up the dress that was concealed.

I gasped. It was gorgeous, simple yet intricate with rich fabrics. I could calculate that the dress would fall just above my knees. It was a soft, aqua, silk fabric with a black lace overlay in a beautiful floral pattern with scalloped edging that overhung the silk at the bottom. The neckline was a sweetheart with teal spaghetti straps delicately incorporated. It was a body hugging dress with an over the top piece de resistance. Attached seamlessly was a teal five-inch wide chiffon ribbon engulfing the smallest part of my waist.

As Mel spun the dress I saw it melted in the back as an oversized yet stiff bow when the dress was zipped up. Lying in the center was a gorgeous antique black, gold, and blue rose broach tying in the entire color scheme exquisitely. A faux corset button up back had concealed its zipper.

This was the type of dress young and fresh European royalty would wear to an event. It’s modern and turn-of-the-century in one design. Even the lace seemed antique set atop the imported silk below.

“O.M.G. Mel. You weren’t kidding. It’s gorge! But what shoes will I wear?” I asked absently still in awe of the

masterpiece before me.

She pulled out a small shoebox from another bag. Set inside were four-inch high black satin under black lace peep-toe heels. I stood there stunned by my evening's ensemble. It was beautiful, divine in every way.

"Told you Jason will fall for you," Mel finally spoke.

"Too bad I've never had eyes for him."

She chuckled, "Yeah. You tend to leave that for the other airheads."

"Okay, let's get started," Mel said dumping a salon worth of make-up on my bathroom counter. "So I'm thinking light smoky eyes, a tiny bit of blush, and pale rose lips."

"Sounds perfect." I quietly set the toilet seat down and planted myself on top of the ceramic lid. Mel began blotching my face with a liquid of some sort. "What are you wearing tonight? Describe your dress," I prompted.

"Well, your aunt bought me one too but it's much simpler than yours. It's a strapless blue dress that totally gives me boobs. I love your aunt for that one alone! It's a little shorter than yours but flares out a bit at my boyish hips. Basically the dress actually gives me some curves. I love it!" she gushed excitedly.

"And shoes?"

"I have some strappy silver heels."

"You're getting your hair done too right?"

"Of course. I can't handle my rats nest alone."

"Awesome. What salon are we going to?"

“No salon. Your aunt is no joke. The stylists are coming here. Oh! And your aunt said no one can see you until the party so I hope you kissed Kellan already.”

“No, but I’ll survive I suppose. I just hope Mike doesn’t show up and cause a scene tonight,” I stated, praying even as the words left my mouth.

“Close ‘em,” Mel commanded, swiping the brush of smoky grey across my lids.

“So Caleb, is he meeting you there then?”

“Yeah. Pretty much. Your aunt called this morning and I guess she already set everything up because we’re riding together to the party.”

“What about Kellan?” I felt nervous and longed for him to be beside me even as I asked the question. I felt like I was missing something without him next to me.

“He’s driving his car,” she shrugged.

“I love how you know everything. I feel so left out,” I whined.

“Duh! Cause it’s a surprise party. Technically you shouldn’t even know why you’re dressing up so fancy.”

“Yeah, yeah. You almost done?”

“Hello. It hasn’t even been twenty minutes. Take a pill and chill. Perfection doesn’t happen in less than twenty.”

“Humph,” I grumped before resting in silence for a solid ninety-seven seconds as Mel applied piles of eye shadow.

“Lex, I know I don’t go serious on you a lot, but what do you feel with Kellan? Do you think he’s the one – like your forever guy?” she asked sheepishly. This was odd for

her. Mel was never awkward or shy when it came to getting answers from me.

I sat quietly for a bit reflecting on my feelings for Kellan. I'd never been asked to describe them, to entertain their foundation before. This was a subject I even avoided with myself. I never forced words around what we had; I never pressed to define it.

"I know I probably will sound crazy, but it's how they describe it in every romance novel. It's this instinctual connection that's unexplainable, yet continually drives me into his arms. Regardless of how much time we spend together, I'm always happy to see him again. Every time he touches me my skin tingles; my heart often sprints when he says my name, even if he's mad. He's stronger than me in every way yet makes me feel like his equal, like together the skies hold no limits, no gravitational bars.

"I think about him, dream about him. He lies in every part of me as if I couldn't survive without him. I would be an empty pit of hollow bitterness should he no longer exist in my world. My life didn't have meaning until he came along. It's like he spelled the definition of it with our first embrace. When he kisses me, not just a peck, but a passionate embrace, it's better than I believe sex will ever be. We merge on an uncharted level. I'm actually able to hear his thoughts, feel what he's feeling in that moment. It's as if the planets align and do a counter-clockwise turn just for us. I feel as if I'm impenetrable; nothing can touch me when I'm wrapped in his arms.

"I can't even describe how certain I am that, after feeling all I have with him, nothing could surpass our experience. Nothing and no one could sweep me off my feet with a stronger capsule to carry my interest alone. He brings out the best in me with each part of him he shares.

He strengthens my aura simply with his presence. He tugs my heart with even a twist of his lips. I desire every part of him. I want to forever see his dimple when he's smiling beautifully, hold his hand regardless of the amount of wrinkles upon it. My heart has made it impossible for me to leave him; my mind is always thinking of him. I'm forever tied to this man, yet, I find myself enjoying this sentence.

"I've never had a boyfriend before Mike, never held a man's interest in this way before so I am new to it all. But if this isn't love, I don't think my heart could ever handle an emotion more potent," I smiled mindlessly reflecting the words that poured from me. I was so involved I didn't even realize Mel had stopped her shadow application. I swung my lids open to see a stunned Mel standing before me. "Told you it would sound crazy," I commented.

"Not crazy Lex, just O.M.G! I feel like I need an inhaler. Damn. I can't even imagine feeling half of what you described. Until now I never even believed in a soul mate, but holy sugar suds if I do now. I hate to say it because I'm super stoked for you but I'm green with oozy envy right now. All I have are my dreams of that; my easily squashable hopes at experiencing an ounce of what you just described," she sighed.

"Seriously Mel, it's even more than I just said, but please don't be jealous. You are definitely going to find the same. Remember how long I had to wait? It just takes time."

"Oh my gosh! Time! What time is it?" she jumped scurrying to glance at the clock on my nightstand. She released a sigh of relief stating, "We're okay. It's only 2:02." She continued, "I know you're right. I told you the same line a million times before, but I don't want to end up like my parents and I know you and Kellan never will."

“Okay. Suck up the sap and let’s move on to a lighter subject. How many people do you think will be there tonight? I feel like I’m preparing for a red carpet event.”

“I know, right? Umm... My guess is like two hundred,” she said brushing my eyes with shadow again.

“Two hundred? That’s a lot of people.” My nerves crept up again. Mike could easily slide in with that size crowd.

“Flyers, remember?” she sarcastically reminded me. “That’s okay; you’ll still be the star. Your aunt planned this huge grand entrance for you.”

“What? You’re joking. Tell me you’re joking Mel. I don’t want to be the star; no lights on me *please!*”

“Lex, stop that. It’s *your* party. You have to be the center of attention; otherwise this whole thing is pointless. Plus, I’m definitely videoing Jason and Jenny’s reaction to you!”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “I’m going to be sick.”

“You’ll be fine Lex, I promise. It’s only one night. Now stay still so I don’t mess up your eyeliner. It’s black and permanent,” she ordered. When she finished the application to her satisfaction, she released me. “Open ‘em.”

I obeyed, fluttering my lids a few times. “O.M.G. Lex. You... Wow! You belong on a magazine cover. Now smooch ‘em,” she pressed imitating the move she wanted me to emulate with my lips. I obliged as she moved the liner along my lips with strict attention to detail. I didn’t feel the pencil slip one millimeter. She rolled the neutral rosy pink over my lips commenting, “They are going to die when they see you.”

“Am I done yet?”

“Let me do your blush and then you’re done,” she droned robotically with slight annoyance. She quickly brushed the powder across the apples of my cheeks.

“Finally,” I smirked, standing to peer at myself in the mirror. My jaw dropped when I caught my reflection. “Holy cow! Is that really me?” I turned back to Mel with an astonished yet appeased look.

She smiled smugly. “Told you perfection takes at least twenty minutes.”

“This is beyond amazing Mel. You really out-did yourself. I didn’t even know you could do this so... well... perfectly,” I noted, praising her work as I gloated in the mirror.

My eyes stood out with a smoky effect that played up the honey in my brown hue. The shadow held specks of gold inside the silver, grays, black, and blues to compliment my dress perfectly. My cheekbones were accented with just enough rose, but subtle enough to not know it was blush. My lips were flawlessly plump. The pink appeared almost sheer adding sufficient color against the liner to not be lost yet putting the fullness of my lips on display. My skin glowed a soft honey but still blended against the paler shade of my neck. It was dramatic, displayed my beauty in a way I’d never thought possible. I looked done-up, over the top in some areas yet far from gaudy. Nothing was overdone. For once, I was forced to see the beauty I’d always carried for what it was - hidden perfection.

I was startled by a tap on my bedroom door, so engulfed in Mel’s magic that I didn’t hear the footsteps ascending.

“Lexi? Mel? It’s Kellan.”

“Don’t come in!” Mel yelled running to barricade the door. She hit it with a resounding thud.

“I was just coming to let you know I’m leaving. You’re aunt and her friends are here. They’ll be up in a minute,” he announced.

“Okay. Thanks,” I called. “See you later.” My heart dropped knowing he was just outside my door, yet I couldn’t see him for hours. Another realization hit me. He could hear us the entire time. He must have heard my revelation about him in the bathroom with Mel. Surely if I could hear his quiet pacing downstairs, he could hear my talking upstairs. I suppose it was too late for regret or caution.

He didn’t reply; he just silently descended down the stairs as three sets of shoes clunked upwards past him. “Bye Kellan,” my aunt said in passing, yet I heard no acknowledgement from him.

Aunt Claire knocked quickly but didn’t wait for a response before barging in, “I hope you’re decent and if not, they’re gay.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four

The next two hours were spent on my hair. I never knew one could spend *that* much time on it. The guys, Javier and Ryan, had brought directors chairs to primp and style us in. My aunt was already dressed for the night. She wore a scoop neck coral dress paired with nude peep toe heels that somehow worked without seeming too summery. Her hair fell in a neat stack with small waves that flipped under ever so slightly at the ends. - She conversed with the stylists while Mel and I caught up on school gossip and her progression with Caleb.

“Flawless. You are definitely the queen of your own ball,” Ryan stated slightly awed over his masterpiece.

“Am I done?” Relief washed over me. In the hours I sat, though I didn’t fidget, I missed motion, movement. Plus, despite trying to drown out their conversation, my sensitive ears wouldn’t allow for it, and I was over Ryan’s client, Janet, and her extra marital affairs. I hopped down in one swift, graceful leap and moved into the bathroom to evaluate his work. My aunt and Ryan followed.

“Wow. I love it!” I gasped. “I could kiss you Ryan!”

“You wouldn’t be the first client to,” he winked.

“Amazing.”

“I definitely agree. It’s fabulous Ryan. You really outdid yourself. Lexi’s hair is perfect,” my aunt gushed approvingly.

They stood behind me peering at the same reflection I observed. My hair fell in curls that weren’t tight but weren’t loose but somehow resembled a beach blown look.

A generous portion at the top was gathered into a gold clip. It was a simple style yet my hair appeared perfectly tame, twisting and falling with a reflective shine illuminating a slight gold complexion despite its dark brown color.

Most amazing was not one strand dared to pull out of place. The products pasted on were light, leaving my hair soft yet nothing moved. It all framed my face and complimented my make-up as if it were styled to all along.

“Oh my gosh. I can’t wait to see you in your dress Lexi. I’ll get it,” she offered. She stepped out of the bathroom to retrieve my ensemble for the evening.

“Are you shaved, plucked, and waxed everywhere?” Ryan asked.

“Umm... I should be,” I replied, caught off-guard. Truth was I hadn’t bothered to check. I scanned my legs meticulously before I lifted my arms and pulled back my sleeve looking in, “I’m good,” I announced.

“And your girl parts?” he pressed.

“Not that it’s your business but I’m clean there too,” I replied. Despite my desire to wait on sex, I still made sure to tidy up regularly just in case I lost control.

“I’m a stylist Lexi; I do hair, and that’s not limited to the ones on your head. I’ve bleached, waxed, and styled the darkest of areas,” he stated with a swift shrug dismissing my defensiveness with a flick of his wrist.

Ryan really wasn’t an intrusive person from what I observed outside this moment, and I knew he meant well in his pry. “I know you mean well, I’ve just never talked about... well that stuff... with anyone, not even Mel,” I noted.

“I figured as much, but with how hot and heavy your aunt claims you are with Kellan... Well, I just wanted to make sure he wasn’t scared off by a jungle.”

I chuckled, unable to keep a straight face over his choice of words. “Thanks for the concern Ryan.”

“Anytime,” he smiled just as my aunt returned with my dress and shoes overlay with a pair of cream lace no-line panties.

“Claire, you mess up her hair and I’m red booking you,” Ryan warned.

“Red booking?” I questioned.

“Ryan has a black book of VIP clients which is where I’m listed now. But he also has a red book of people he works with only if he’s bored or broke,” my aunt explained.

“Oh. Okay?” I shrugged. My aunt’s acquaintances were nice, but reminded me very much of a Hollywood crowd in their arrogant tendencies at times.

“We’ll be back in a minute Lexi. And no bra,” my aunt advised. “It has a built in corset.”

I nodded and they closed the door. I heard them singing praises over Mel’s up-do outside. I undid the dress off the hanger and sifted into it from the bottom up to avoid a hair and make-up disaster. I slid the small straps up onto my shoulders; already the dress was hugging my silhouette from my hips down creating a gorgeous pear bottom. I put on the heels and called for my aunt, who I heard zipping up Mel’s dress from my room.

She fastened me in with an awe-inspired gasp. I had to admit I never dreamed I could look so breathtaking, even on my wedding day. The dress pulled tight over every part

of me, yet remained classy by design, not revealing too much though my cleavage jumped out a bit. Aunt Claire clasped a gold necklace around my neck with a single brilliant pearl. She gave me matching stud earrings. It was at the final result that I became speechless with her. Exiting the bathroom door, silence fell over the bedroom as if the Queen of England had just entered. My parents stood beside Mel giving me the oddest stare; it was a cross between shock and awe.

“Do I look okay?” I pressed. Their silence was killing my confidence.

“You’re definitely not my little girl, yet you remind me so much of your mother at your age,” my dad commented in a breathless exhale.

“You’re stunning sweetie. I feel like a peasant next to you. Gorgeous,” my mother added.

“Don’t say that Mom.” I looked at Mel for the first time. “Oh my gosh! You look gorgeous Mel.”

“Thanks, but it’s nothing compared to you. I’m okay with that though. You look beautiful Lex. Kellan is going to die,” she smiled sincerely.

“I’m gay honey and you have me second guessing,” Javier announced.

I chuckled, “Thanks.”

“You ready everyone?” my aunt prompted. “The limo is outside.”

“Limo?” I was surprised by the extravagance, but then again, Aunt Claire hadn’t exactly skimped on anything thus far. I don’t know why I thought this would be any different.

"Of course. You need a grand entrance, remember?" she winked.

When we arrived at the hotel, the scene awaiting shocked me. It was set like a red carpet event. Crowds of teenagers lined both sides of the hotel, roped off from a red carpet rolling from the street to the door. Security officers draped in black suits stood by the entrance. A gray suited Ryan Seacrest look-alike with a microphone stood by the road announcing my arrival as if I were a celebrity. I heard it echo over the speakers strategically dotting the hotel's exterior.

"Wait, Lex!" Mel called as the door opened. She whisked out a camcorder. "You have to let me video their reaction!"

"You were serious?" I was baffled by her eager sincerity.

"Hell yeah!" she said exiting the limo.

I scanned the audience and quickly spotted the band of preps and jocks that I equally despised near the front. I was infuriated over how anxious they were to attend the party of a girl they deemed a hungry hippo. In a way, I was eager to vindicate myself as neither of those anymore, yet I longed to do it outside their terms and advances.

Mel had the camera rolling and instructed the host to proceed.

"And now, the star of this event, the teen queen of this evening and birthday girl herself, Lexi Jackson!"

I heard the crowd pressing forward, my classmates craning their necks to catch a glimpse of me exiting the limo. Nerves twisted in my stomach, a faint feeling rushed over me in a second of self-doubt. I didn't belong on the

show Sweet Sixteen, yet that's what was in front of me by design thus far. I took one last steadying breath.

"Go on honey! They're all waiting," my aunt encourage. I nodded and exited the limo.

A unified gasp spread over the crowd. "Is that really her? She lost oobers of weight," one girl commented. A guy in my history class said, "Wow. I so want to tap that now."

I smiled and gracefully proceeded towards the door as quickly as possible ready to escape the embarrassment of being on display in such a manner. Near the entrance, I heard a male's voice call, "Lexi?"

I turned to see Jason, wide-eyed and nearly drooling over me.

"Hey Jason," I said as if he'd never insulted or tortured me before.

"You look... Wow! You look beautiful," he said pushing past a clearly miffed Jenny who was now glaring at me, piercing me with two blue knives.

"Thanks. I'll see you inside." I turned back to the doors.

Mel came running up beside me squealing, "Holy sugar plums Lex! That was so awesome! I got it all on tape! I knew he'd fall to bits over you now!"

Her words came out as a double-edged sword. I knew she meant no harm yet she smashed a reminder in my face. Apparently I did look like a fat ogre before and now I'd emerged a swan. I was beautiful, appealing to most men, but for some reason I still found myself cringing insecurely inside. I'm a vampeen, yet my humanity still reigns supreme. I wasn't ignorant to their changed expressions

and rather sickened by their newfound lust. If you couldn't accept me before, then I would be a fool to allow you access now. But I suppose Mel was right; there's no harm in having a little fun with them.

"O.M.G. Lex look!" Mel screamed.

I turned just as the announcer began to speak again. "Wait, don't leave us yet Lexi. You definitely will not want to miss your gift being driven in by your father, Stewart. Congratulations and Happy Birthday! You are the proud new owner of a Mercedes E350 coupe! I hope you're ready to rev it up!"

I stared in awe. I was shocked to see my dad behind the wheel of a two door white car adorned with a huge red bow on the roof. He drove up as the limo left.

"O.M.G. Lex! That, oh my! Wow! I love it, don't you?" Mel exclaimed. She had flipped open the camera again to film my reaction and then my dad exiting the car. I heard the gasps in the crowd, voices, some jealous, abuzz over my gift.

I walked down towards the car. "Is... Is this really for me dad?" I stuttered in shock.

"Absolutely. Kellan helped me pick it out."

"Oh my gosh. Thank you so much Dad!" I squeezed him tight caught up in the moment.

"Told you she'd love it Sharon." I turned to see my mom and aunt standing nearby.

"Let's look inside! You are so driving me to school Monday!" Mel squealed.

"But I don't have my license."

"You will Monday morning. Kellan has agreed to teach you tomorrow," my mother announced. "It's best I not have to lie to your father should you be a slow learner."

"Thanks for the confidence Mom!"

"You know I love you sweetie," she smiled.

"Yeah, I know."

My dad handed me the keys. The moment they touched my palm Mel was dragging me towards my new gift.

The exterior boasted a shiny, snow-white finish still coated with a thin layer of wax visible only to my keen eyes. Eighteen-inch six-spoke alloy wheels set abase the curvature of the frame projected a design for speed as if the car was already racing down the highway.

Inside, the seats were outfitted with gorgeous sleek black leather. The new car scent hit my nose immediately smelling of cleaning supplies and crisp leather. I instantly noticed the panorama sunroof followed by the exquisite walnut trim of the dashboard; centered was a fancy navigation system I would probably never master. Just above it though, a red iPod was attached to the dashboard. I recognized it as Kellan's immediately.

"That's Kellan's," I noted aloud. I lifted it out of the docking station and a note fell.

"What does it say?" Mel asked nonchalantly as she opened every compartment and compulsively touched every knob.

Happy Birthday to the only thing I value more than music - my heart, my life - you!

Love, Kellan

"I hate to kill your tender moment, but these people are getting impatient," Mel interrupted my melting heart. Kellan loved his iPod, his music. He was always with it, always toting it around his arm. I wasn't expecting this yet it's better than the car. Now I could hear all the songs he passed his days with. Ever improving, I couldn't wait to listen to them in the car together.

"Lex, let's go," she repeated.

"Okay." I put the iPod back in place and tucked the note in the glove compartment while taking one last look around.

I grazed my eyes along the black dashboard complete with satellite radio and many other dials Mel no doubt had messed with. The feel of the car was luxurious and it appeared to be built for thrill rides, nothing less than twenty over the speed limit. A surge of enthusiasm ran through me at the thought of driving the car. A feeling of empowerment jumped out at me from the steering wheel. There was no denying this was definitely the car of a vampeen.

I slid out, delivered the keys back to my dad for safekeeping, and returned to the entrance with Mel.

"I can't believe you got a car! I knew you were going to get one!" she shrieked as we entered the hotel.

Mel abandoned me along the way leaving me to blindly search for the ballroom. Turns out I didn't have to worry. Flowers and balloons marked the entrance as well as a large banner above the doors reading 'Happy Birthday Lexi.'

Inside the ballroom was Caribbean chic all the way in décor. It reminded me of an upscale resort. The far wall composed floor to ceiling windows revealing the ocean and

sunset outside. The center contained glass pocket doors opening onto a cedar deck of black high-end wicker sofas and chairs with tightly knit plastic weave. The coffee tables were presented with palm leaves and exotic floral centerpieces seeming drawn from the inner jungle plants of the Amazon.

Within the ballroom, the ceiling was draped with a sheer teal chiffon material intertwined with white twinkle lights. Located to the right was the dance floor built into a black square with a teal 'L' monogram projecting onto the center. The DJ was in the corner scanning a stack of discs.

On the left wall stood several buffet tables of seafood, chicken, sandwiches and other items grab-n-go style. Empty pineapples monogrammed with the same 'L' design filled the space between the platters. Like Halloween pumpkins they lit to life with votive candles inside and filled the room with a mild pineapple scent. A dessert bar was stationed beside it followed by a cake table.

The cake itself was an extravagant art piece. It reminded me of a colorful five-tier wedding cake. It took me a minute to piece together the resemblance: the cake was designed after my dress. It held a soft aqua fondant base with black lace on the first four levels. The top tier was cream with an exact wrap around teal bow holding a replica broach centered within. It wasn't until I saw the cake that I realized in absorbing the scene before me that the entire party was colored and designed via inspiration of my dress, no doubt on purpose by my Aunt Claire.

Stationed next to the pocket doors was the bar. Its top was covered with red and blue drinks. The remainder of the inside center space flowed with round tables and the same sofas and chairs filling the patio. Every chair held a teal pillow monogrammed coordinately and the sofa cushions

were the same light aqua. Exotic floral arrangements of red, coral, and pink were spread throughout. Each table was adorned with a silk teal or chiffon light aqua cover, reversed of the fabrics on my dress. It was all very matchy-matchy, but not overdone. It all worked cohesively without feeling thrown together.

My aunt approached me with a drink in hand. "I hope you approve of everything."

"It's gorgeous Aunt Claire. More than I imagined."

She smiled. "We incorporated red into your color scheme for your drink. Here is your extra special 'Luscious Lex'," she winked.

I took the chilled martini glass shimmering with a red liquid. I sipped to taste and discovered it was blood. "Thanks."

"Of course. You know you are the closest I will ever come to a daughter. That's why I go overboard with you sometimes. I want to give you everything I would have given my own child had I been blessed with one. I'm proud of you Lexi, and I love you as my own."

"I love you too. And you do go overboard and spend way too much but I appreciate it all," I said giving her a one-armed hug.

"You ready to get this party started?" Mel chimed in beside me.

"Absolutely," I beamed eager to mix amongst the gathering outside rather than stand out.

"Mr. Hustle, hustle on over to your booth and start the music!" Aunt Claire hollered to the DJ.

"Okay. That was super elementary corny," Mel laughed. My aunt just shrugged and walked towards the guard at the door.

"Do you know if Kellan's here?" I searched the visible areas for him.

"Umm. I saw his parents talking to yours in the lobby," she said.

"How do you know his parents?"

"Your mom introduced me on my way in after you."

"Oh. Okay."

"Come here. You have to taste this," Mel grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the food tables. I hadn't noticed the table of plates and monogrammed napkins on the wall beside the door. It came to create an L-shape of precise flow.

I also hadn't noticed the huge 'L' monogram blue ice sculpture standing solid in the center of the room. It was at least six feet tall and showed exquisitely amongst the décor. Everywhere I turned I noticed tiny details my perfect vision seemed to overlook prior.

"You have to try the spicy pineapple wings," Mel gushed. "They're delish!"

Just the thought of it sent the serum soaring into my throat. I took another sip of my cold bloody-Mary-esk drink. "Maybe later. I don't want to endanger my dress right away."

The music pumped into the walls of the room. I heard a herd of footsteps and chatter approaching the doors. I knew they were piling in when I heard the first exasperated, "Oh my God."

Within minutes the room filled with buzz, motions, and swirls of bodies over the floor, in the seats. It wasn't like prom. There were no stragglers; no one-off exclusions huddled in a corner despite the obvious cliques. Nerds, drama-geeks, Goths, preps and jocks all filtered together at one event yet each was adorned in their own slightly dressy attire appropriated to their group.

Several girls approached me, cheerleaders to my surprise, exclaiming, "Cool party Lexi. We love the vibe."

I muttered a polite, "Thanks. Have fun," before moving past them giving a shocked look at Mel. She just shrugged.

"Let's dance. I see Caleb over there," she tugged me in that direction.

I passed my drink to my mom on the way with a guarded, "Don't put this down."

Along the way we ran into Justin and Sasha sashaying to the music.

"Great party Lex! You look good too," Sasha yelled over the music.

"It's awesome! And she's right. You're gorgeous," Justin agreed.

"Thanks guys. Have fun!" I was yanked away from them towards the dance floor once again. Did I mention Mel is quite impatient?

Caleb met us on the dance floor twisting and moving to the edgy hip-hop beat. He greeted Mel with a smile and a kiss on the cheek fawning over how beautiful she looked tonight. He was dressed in khakis and a blue button-up shirt that was undone several buttons down at the top. It complimented his dark curly hair and hazel eyes.

No sooner had Mel turned her attention to Caleb that I felt a light tap on my shoulders. Expecting it to be Kellan, I spun around and froze... in front of Mike. My heart sputtered erratically as my serum held strong in the lower levels of my throat.

"Hey Lex. You look gorgeous. I would envy any guy you belonged to. I'm glad your mine."

My skin crawled at his words. "Mike, I don't want to fight. It's my birthday party. But be clear, I'm not yours anymore."

I wanted to placate him, avoid any eruptions of fighting amidst the faces I would see daily at school. The last thing I needed was more rumors surrounding me.

"Oh, but you are, unless you want me to announce your little secret to everyone," he grinned devilishly.

"What are you talking about?" I questioned cautiously, though anger still filled my tone.

"I think we should take this somewhere private," he said motioning towards the door.

I hesitated, scanning the room. After careful weight, I decided to go. Everyone, including Mel was distracted, but should I lose control, I'd rather it be in private. He guided me out with a firm hand on the small of my back. He carried himself with an egotistical, annoying, nose-up grin. Out in the hall he grabbed my hand but I jerked away heading down away from the ears of any attendants.

"Now what are you talking about?" I demanded.

"Does the name Keira ring a bell?" I didn't reply, didn't move or give any indication of recognition. "Okay, how about the word vampire?" he pressed arrogantly.

"I'm not a vampire Mike," I defended with technicality. I corrected myself mentally. *I'm a vampeen*. I felt the serum rise with my sudden panic of apprehension and anger. Keira got to him, but how?

"That's what your little friend said. After I left your house, she followed me and spilled you and Kellan's secret. Now, if you don't want to cooperate with me I'll call her right now and hand you over to her. Of course, I'd rather not do that. You really are very sexy now. I would like to touch you a few more times before you're destroyed," he smirked running his hands up and down my arms, repeating the motion with his eyes on my body.

I pulled back. "Mike, you have no proof of this obscenity. You've lost it. You're crazy."

"Then explain this!" he yelled holding up a photo. I scanned it quickly. It was a picture of Kellan, obviously taken from afar, perched over a man - *gulp!* - teeth barred and inches from the man's neck.

"That could easily be faked with a photo editing software. No one will believe it's real," I argued. I was proud for thinking so quickly on my feet. It was true though. I didn't believe people would take it at face value.

"I don't take threats quite as mild as your ex-girlfriend."

My head flew up to see Kellan and his father standing twenty feet down the deserted corridor.

"Ha! You can't touch me!" Mike whipped out his necklace - a silver cross. Kellan, his father, and I burst into unified laughter. This angered him. "What's so funny, blood suckers?" he yelled.

"Those are myths. Vampires can enter churches, say God's name, and even wear crosses," Al stated displaying his own gold cross around his neck.

Mike stood flabbergasted, surprised by the response he received. "I'm still going to tell everyone. You can't stop me," he announced with a satanic edge in his voice. "Isn't that right Keira?"

"I already prepared the announcement to post to their networking sites which were quite easy to hack I must say," the girl beamed, startling me in her surprise presence from around the back corner. Where the heck was my supersonic hearing when I needed it?

Caught between Mike and Keira, I made a quick bolt towards Kellan but was apprehended before I could escape. Keira's cold hand clenched my upper arm.

"What a pity it would be to die the night you announce your true self to the world," she teased in sarcastic pity. My fury having been initiated by Mike now boiled with Keira.

"You either release her or I will be forced to take her. Either way you've broken the law in telling a human. You will be punished by death," Al insisted.

"You have to catch me first," she laughed an evil cackle that sent chills down my spine. Her grip tightened around my arm; had I still been human, it would have snapped in half by now.

"You better let go of me," I hissed. "You better start running."

"Or what? I'm not afraid of you or your so-called friends. In fact, Kellan and I share a past, don't we sweetie? He wouldn't lay a finger on me."

My rage overflowed with her remarks. I hit my breaking point. Everything drew to my surface. My past embarrassment, torment over my size and affiliations, welled as the base to my overflow. The animosity I felt towards the popular crowd mingling within my party now spiced it up. My internal battle over my life being ripped from me to be a vampire produced relentless resentment within me. The agitation I felt with my parents for holding out on my fate scratched deeper into the surfaces. Losing my remaining childhood bridged to the forefront of my mind, but losing Gran to a vampire just like Keira filled me with a hatred only the devil himself could hold. Being forced to consume human blood for survival produced a slight animosity within me. Mike's stunts from earlier, his random threats and disrespect of me all infuriated me, pushed me towards the edge little by little.

Keira's insult smeared in by Mike's egotistical presence was what demolished my apprehension. It all flowed together, meshed, pushed, pressed into me over time, yet her snide remark was what propelled me over the edge. I knew only bits of who Kellan was before because I saw it in his mind, but I loved who he was now. Just as my past didn't matter, his didn't reflect in my feelings towards him. "I don't care if you *HAD* something! We *HAVE* something and I'll be damned if you're going to mess it up! I'm tired of your crap and his crap and AHH!" I yelled breaking free and attacking Keira at a speed I could barely keep up with.

We tossed and turned at the speed of light; no human eye would have been able to keep up with our commotion. I didn't let up though. I was relentless in my pursuit of her. She was the culmination of all the things I disliked and sought to destroy.

Her long nails scratched at me, clawing my dress as she attempted to launch me, but failed with my final, powerful pin. She hissed, growling with barred teeth below me. I can't explain what came over me; a rush of harsh adrenaline curdled in my blood. I punched her repeatedly, was crushing her bones with quick knee jabs, and had bit her wrist when she flung her hands with the purpose of shredding me.

Al was at my side in seconds with a steel blade engraved with symbols. With one swift move Keira's throat was cut, blood pouring onto the floor. Though she still fought me, she weakened slightly with the acknowledgement of defeat. She could never win against both Al and me.

He rested his hand on my shoulder as Keira began to silence below me. "Lexi. That's enough. I'll take it from here."

I froze staring down. She was still jolting, though I felt no flinch of resistance. After a moment of hesitation, I gracefully dismounted myself. I stood backing myself into Kellan who had moved beside his father as backup. Looking around, I realized the hotel was empty of activity in this area because we were in the housekeeping section of the hotel.

Kellan placed his hand on my shoulder. "Lexi, are you okay?" he asked cautiously.

I watched silently as Al dragged Keira out the back exit like the criminal she was. A wave of emotions overwhelmed me, shock setting in. I didn't know what came over me. I felt like I erupted into a monster all of a sudden. Now I know why people snap; they can only take so much. But I almost killed someone. I tried to kill someone. How could I ever bring peace like this?

Granted Keira was evil. She murdered many of my kind, but I will encounter many more replicas of her in the vampire world; they're filled with the same hatred. If I attacked them all as I did her, I would be no better than them. Worse. I would be one of them.

Taking this into account now, could Dr. Zhan have been wrong? A disparaging vampire paired with an impatient, withdrawn vampire did not equal tranquility amongst hostility. The opposite would transpire in our actions - amplified war.

"Lexi?" Kellan spoke again softly.

He gently tugged me back towards him. I spun around. Looking into his usual bright green eyes, I saw a flare of surprise, of weariness in them. Staring at his expression of guarded concern, I realized he was leery of me, almost frightened. It slammed the realization into my mind: I really did transform into a monster.

"Are you okay?" he pushed again.

"I'm sorry," I gasped clutching my arms around him, officially ruining his outfit with blood as tears welled in my eyes.

"It's okay, Lexi. You didn't do anything wrong," he reasoned.

"But I attacked her."

"You defended yourself. She attacked you first," he argued.

"I... I don't know what came over me. I... I just lost control..." I did my best to retain the water threatening to overflow.

"Listen to me Lexi," Kellan stated firmly pressing my shoulders back so he could look into my eyes. "My heart stopped when you pounced her. I was scared for you. But you took down a two hundred year old vampire in one blow. She couldn't even defend herself. I've never seen a vampire overpower a vampire like that. I need to train you more in fighting, but you did a damn good job without me. I'm impressed. You should be proud of yourself. I know I am."

"Really?" I blubbered losing the fight to hold back the waterworks.

"Yes, really," he kissed my forehead wiping my tears away simultaneously. The salty tears burned along my cheeks as he swept them away from the new wounds Keira inflicted on my face with her nails.

"Thanks," I muttered. I looked down to see my arms scratched and bloody but beginning to scab and heal already. My dress on the other hand was ruined.

"Oh no. My aunt is going to kill me," I whined stepping back to peer down at the ripped lace and frayed bow. There was a long gash across the entire front of the dress baring my thigh below.

"You still look gorgeous. I had to keep myself from pouncing you when I saw you. No one has looked more beautiful than you tonight."

"Thanks, but she's still going to kill me."

"Your shoes are fine," he smiled.

I still heard blaring music behind the closed doors down the hall; buzz still hummed loudly in the background. Looking around the halls, I realized Mike wasn't there.

“Where’s Mike?”

“He ran off.”

“And you let him?” I pressed baffled.

“I saw his face. He was scared shitless when you attacked Keira. He threw the picture at me and took off. Coward,” Kellan scoffed with amused disgust.

“I guess I did look pretty scary. I even shocked myself,” I acknowledged.

“Scary? No. Sexy? Absolutely,” he grinned, displaying his dimple and melting my heart in unison. Something about his trademark was irresistible.

“Lexi?” my mother called stepping out into the hall searching for me. “Lexi! What happened?” she yelled at my side in half a second despite me being a minimum ten yards away.

“I’m fine, Mom. Keira showed up with Mike. I sort of attacked her and Mike ran off,” I explained.

“Attacked her? Lexi, you could have been killed!” she freaked.

“No, Sharon, I don’t believe she would have been,” Al stated strolling casually in the same door he exited.

“What do you mean?” she pressed.

“Sharon is everything okay?” my aunt called rushing over with Beth and my dad when they caught sight of me.

“Lexi, what happened?” my dad exclaimed. He got down on his knees and began examining me as he did when I got hurt as a child.

“Lexi attacked and single-handedly took down the vampire radical,” Al announced.

I grew nervous with the new awed, wide-eyed glares I received from everyone in unison. I began fidgeting with my hands.

“Um, Lexi, why don’t I take you to clean up a bit so your parents can talk to Al,” Aunt Claire prompted.

I nodded in agreement. Kellan kissed my forehead, “I’ll see you in a little bit.”

I smiled slightly and followed my aunt back to the lobby where the elevators stood. She pushed the button as the front desk attendants stared on in horror, no doubt attempting to guess my shaken fate. I didn’t even want to guess the terrors sprawled out in their minds.

Once inside the elevator, Aunt Claire pulled me in and squeezed me with all her might. She didn’t say anything probably realizing that I needed comfort, reassurance without words in this moment. And I was grateful for that moment.

—

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Well, we can’t salvage the dress, but I do have a backup I bought just in case of a blood shed emergency.” She smiled encouragingly.

Inside the closet of her suite, Aunt Claire retrieved a red mini-dress. It was a strapless dress that fell mid-thigh on me. The bust was overlaid with matching red lace and ended empire with a coordinating red ribbon lining it, below the ribbon, a layered chiffon type material merely grazed my skin to my hips where it fell into the perfect A-line design.

Luckily Ryan had made an appearance at the party and fixed my hair and make-up. Oddly he didn’t ask a single question regarding the event that lead to my disheveled mess of cuts, tears and dress destruction.

Once I was all cleaned up, my wounds healed, revamped to return to the party, I was finally able to return the smile my aunt lovingly projected.

Mike was gone, I’d killed Keira and Al dispensed of her, Jason’s jaw dropped over me, Jenny turned green with envy, Mel still loved me as her best friend, my dad was beginning to accept the new me, I was learning to love my previously absent aunt and, best of all, I had a boy - no, scratch that - a man named Kellan whom, though he lied about Keira, clearly cared about me in a way no one ever had, and I was anxious to return to him now all tidied up.

“Let’s go Miss Fierce,” Ryan called. “You look like a sexy cougar in this dress. I’m loving it, and I’m guessing everyone else will too.”

As I re-entered the party, Mel ran up to me exclaiming, "There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you! You had me scared to death that something happened to you!"

"I'm good. Just a little blood... I mean a drink mishap," I caught myself just in time.

"Well I love the new dress. It's hot!"

"No you did not just pull a Paris! I'm definitely fining you for that one."

"Yeah, yeah. Put it on my tab." We broke into unified laughter.

Glancing around, I realized no one missed me in the time I was gone. I was thankful for Caleb's presence; Mel certainly would have been aware of my absence sooner had he not been distracting her.

"Lexi, do you mind if I have a word with you?" Al stood patiently before me.

"I'll meet you on the dance floor in a bit," I told Mel turning back to him. Suddenly nerves flooded my stomach.

"I know Kellan told you about me, and I don't want to take you away from your party, but I would like to talk to you about a position within the ranks of the vamp army. We could use a fierce offense like you, especially with the proper training. And I believe your nasal restraint may be an asset in the position as well. I wanted to mention it now so you can consider your options, but they'll be actively pursuing you soon," he stated.

"What options?"

"This is a full time job, a career that you can't put down on a whim. You must agree to a minimum ten years of service and are bound to serve on any battlefield you are

called to in any continent," he answered. "College, a regular life, will not be easy to maintain. I offer you this position because I see you as a great strength. No inexperienced vampire has ever defeated a vampire in one mighty strike. I was impressed, and that does not come easy with my years on earth."

"Thanks Al. I'll definitely think about it."

"You did good Lexi. You should be proud. All of us are."

I smiled and nodded. I didn't know what else to say. The vamp army, the recruitment only team, wanted me. They saw potential in me I'd yet to acknowledge within myself. This was an honor I didn't want to decline, but I knew it was far greater a commitment than I was able to accept without apprehension, if I could truly at all.

How would this affect me further? I was lucky I didn't lose more than I did with my transformation alone, but a move like this would withdraw me from the human world completely on many occasions. Being submerged as I was currently, I wasn't sure how I could explain frequent absences ongoing, yet it was still an honor, an opportunity I had to consider for the chance alone.

I moved to the dance floor, locating Mel quickly grinding unashamed against Caleb. I began swaying to the music near them and was abruptly pulled against someone. I was startled to turn and see Jason.

"Great party," he yelled over the music; little did he know he didn't need to.

"Thanks," I replied dancing with him. Mel shot me an 'oh my God' look.

"I like this dress more," he winked placing his hands on my hips.

I just grinned. I bit my tongue against the obscenities rising, begging to be screamed at him. 'You're a pompous, sexist jerk' was one of them. But I wouldn't stoop to his level. I was as pretty as the girls in his league of followers, his social clique of prepsters now, but I didn't want to be compared, associated with, or deduced to any of them.

Just as Jason slyly moved his hands to my butt; an aggravated Kellan thrust him away from me. His eyes pierced Jason in a way I saw made him shudder.

"With that move I'm cutting in," Kellan announced. I noticed he had changed his clothes to dark-wash jeans and a black button up shirt.

I laughed and Kellan smiled baring his dimple yet again. Grooving to the beat for a solid minute, I commented, "I didn't picture you being a good dancer."

"I'm surprised at you too."

"Guess we're even then?"

"Not even close," he winked. He pulled me in swaying against my body. This was the closest to raunchy I'd ever been with Kellan. He kissed me lightly on my lips yet never lost his rhythm.

We danced the night away. One good thing about being a vampeen is not exhausting easily, granted you eat (or drink) your proper diet that is.

The party started to die down around midnight and the stragglers disappeared by one. I had successfully avoided... okay so I threatened them all, but it kept them from embarrassingly forcing over two hundred classmates to sing 'Happy Birthday' to me.

“O.M.G. The party was awesome Lex!” Mel gushed, radiating with excitement as she entered my hotel room pajama clad. I was already in my comfy attire on the bed – Victoria Secret Capri sweats and a tank.

“I know, right?” I replied.

“Very action packed,” Kellan winked as he came out of the bathroom in the closest thing to pajamas I’d seen him wear. He fashioned a pair of navy blue basketball shorts, a sleeveless white t-shirt displaying the muscle definition in his relaxed arms and a pair of socks. He sat next to me on the bed and kissed my forehead.

“You have to watch this!” Mel squealed as she plugged her video camera into the TV with a cord. “You have to see Jason and Jenny’s reaction to you! I already uploaded it on YouTube with my laptop!”

She played the scene several times through bursting with avenged laughter each time.

Seeing myself as I exited the limousine sent chills down my spine. It forced me to see the strong, beautiful woman I was today, and allowed me to pack away the fat, insecure girl I was just two weeks ago.

The expression on Jason’s face was priceless. It was a cross between a deer caught in headlights and a man about to burst with lust. His eyes lit up with a desire not even Kellan had projected at me.

As for Jenny, her blue eyes literally shimmered green with envy for a millisecond as she caught Jason’s expression. Her cheeks reddened and her beauty burned away with hate as she watched me.

As gratifying as this moment was, it was also sad. Why must the human world revolve around the outer

representation of a person? Beauty isn't flesh alone. Even Jenny, who was attractive to most men, turned ugly the moment her inner hatred seeped into her outward expression. Maybe I was the example they needed to see. Hopefully my Cinderella story would make other Jasons think twice before picking on the porkers, the four-eyes, and the awkward women.

I can't change humans, vampeens, or vampires. I've realized I can only hope to inspire them to change, lead by example.

Yawning, Mel announced, "I'm exhausted Lex. I'm going to go to bed. This beauty doesn't come without sleep."

I chuckled. "Thanks for everything. I loved it all! You are definitely hired for next year."

"Next year? I'll think about it. My rate may increase substantially by then though just to warn you."

I glared sarcastically at her, "You wouldn't dare Melanie."

"Good night Alexa. Good night Kellan," she taunted on her way to the door.

I laughed as I threw myself back on the bed. "Kellan?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for my gift. I love the iPod. I'm really excited to listen to all your songs."

"I hoped you would."

"Kellan?"

"Yeah?" he asked, brows rose with anticipation.

“Kiss me.”

“I love a woman who knows what she wants,” he grinned staring down at me.

“...so are you going to kiss me?” I questioned seconds later.

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” he said as he playfully pounced me.

I laughed as our lips collided. All my worry, anger, elation and reflection from tonight poured through me into the intensity of my grip. I ran my fingers through his hair.

Knock - knock - knock.

Frustrated for the interruption, I broke away. “Yeah?” I called.

“Lexi, open the door. Your dad and I want to say good night,” my mother called.

I protruded my bottom lip in a pouty face as Kellan rolled on to his side. I opened the door. My dad had his hands on his hips and a stern look on his face.

“Alexa, you better not have been doing something you shouldn’t be doing,” he scolded.

“Dad, we were just kissing. Mel and I aren’t those types of girls, remember?” I smiled. Putting on my ‘daddy’s little girl’ charm, I hugged him while kissing his cheek.

“You better not be. I don’t care what you are. I will take you down if you hurt my little girl Kellan,” he called.

Kellan appeared at the door. “Trust me when I say I have no intention of doing that.”

“Well good night sweetie. Good night Kellan. Keep your hands to yourself and sleep in your own room tonight,” my mother warned while hugging me.

“I can’t do that,” Kellan said. “But I can promise we won’t have sex.”

“You better not,” my dad fumed, fire lighting behind his words. He recovered quickly, stating a calm, “Good night kiddo. I love you.”

“Love you too Dad. Night.” They entered their room across from mine for the night.

“Good night Lexi! Good night Kellan!” Aunt Claire called down the hall, hand in hand entering her suite with the DJ.

“Good night Aunt Claire. Thanks again.”

“Make him wear a condom!” Kellan yelled. I elbowed him, but he didn’t seem to notice. He only chuckled with amusement.

“Always,” she winked.

I was happy, relieved to see Kellan out of his shell with someone other than me; I just hoped it would be with Mel, not my aunt. I was slowly seeing the side of him that I had somewhat enjoyed in Mike - a sense of humor; of course Kellan’s is darker, more cynical, but still present.

I smacked him several times on the arm as we retreated into my room. “I can’t believe you said that!”

“I believe you requested a kiss,” he prompted.

“I believe you owe me a kiss,” I smiled.

“Yes, of course. How rude of me.”

He threw me on the bed hovering me one second later with his lips locked and loaded. We picked up where we left off, hands grasping at each other as the energy of tonight exploded in our feisty caress. Melding into his arms effortlessly, submitting yet holding my own, I was falling into him layer by layer.

Peeling back our shells of defense, corrupted with anxiety, we connected emotionally. I felt his heart jumping, though it doesn't beat often with his vampire side reigning supreme internally, resounding with love and adoration, strength and protection. Merging beyond, I felt the cosmic explosion of color; felt the thrust of passion in an unspoken alignment.

"My words scared you tonight?" I thought, reflecting his reaction to my heart pour to Mel over him during my make-up session.

"I've never felt so strong towards anyone, and never had a woman love more than my body. It's scary."

"I agree. But I can't change how I feel."

"I would never ask you to," he answered internally, caressing my face with his hands. *"The vamp army? That's a big honor. What have you decided?"*

"Can't you see or feel that?"

"Not until you solidify it. I'll support you either way."

"I know," I replied beaming inside. *"You lied about Keira. I should be mad."*

"But you're not. Why?"

"Because I clearly see you would pick me over her."

“Any day for all of eternity. After all, you are my forever girl.”

“And you my forever,” I whispered aloud between the gentle brush of his lips. Rolling sideways, he cradled me in his arms, holding me tight as if to protect me from anything that would jeopardize forever with him.

—

Epilogue.

“Want to go for a walk? The sun should be rising in about twenty minutes,” he offered.

“Sure,” I smiled taking his hand as I slid off the bed.

We put on our shoes and walked down to the beach below. Side by side, hand in hand, we strolled parallel to the ocean. The sky was just beginning to reflect a dark blue at the tip of the grey mass. The sun had yet to peak yet her brilliance was already beginning to appear.

So much had changed for me in two and a half weeks. I’d gone from girl to woman, teen to vampire; from weak and insecure to a strong, confident vamp warrior.

I’d decided I was going to decline Al’s offer for now. I needed to adjust to my new life currently without further complications via impulse of opportunity. Just because a door is open doesn’t mean you have to walk through it. If I’m meant to be a soldier for my kind, then the offer will stand when I’m ready.

I would go back to school Monday. I wasn’t sure how Jason’s crowd would react to me ongoing, unsure if the tides would change. My looks were different, yet I was the same person inside; that’s a relief to me. My biggest fear wasn’t being accepted after, but being rejected by the ones

I loved the most; losing them over something I couldn't control. I'd learned that in not changing who I was, who I stood for, in coordination with my outer transformation, that was the biggest factor in why I didn't lose what I had with Mel. She realized I was the same person. I didn't snide her along the way which allowed her to embrace me for who I'd always been - Alexa Lorrayne Jackson - best friend and soul sister to Melanie Anne Hartford. My dad was coping on the single breath that I was still the same inside as well; I was still daddy's little girl despite my new womanly figure to boast.

As for Mike, he was the one that changed. A tiny part of me wondered if he would ever threaten me again, but my intuition informed me that I'd be prepared for him if he tried. Krav Maga master or not, I'm a vampeen - one step above a human, one up on a vampire in the realm of humanity and control. I don't self-destruct on instinct; mental clarity leaves me pure. I don't mind a mental block on blood or humans; in fact, I've embraced it as a gift. I will never feel like an alcoholic who loses control when a bottle of scotch is opened nearby.

The royal cake topper of all I'd been bestowed was Kellan. Reading, living through the character experiences in my books and fairytales I'd read, they all painted love mildly in comparison to what I shared with him. Many times the heroines, the leading ladies, love and lose or love without reciprocation, yet I had been blessed by God - Yes a vampire, vampeen, immortal can be blessed by God.

I have discovered that we are treasured above all others by Him, or at least I like to view it this way. I'm not speaking in an effort of favoritism, but rather in creation. We are the closest to his exact likeness. We bear his physical resemblance, as humans do; but we are exact in

other realms of comparison beyond what any human could fathom possible.

We are infinite in lifespan should we live admirably; though He bore no creation, no manifestation, we are offered the same forever as He holds dear. We run at optimum speed, have the strength of the strongest predator; both of which are every soldier and athlete's prime goal of attainment. He allows us the enhanced senses He used to make the earth; we are the ones who enjoy all of its glory from hearing the tiny spring of a grasshopper to seeing through the cocoon at a butterfly's transformation with our enhanced vision. We are given the ability to wipe out nations with our muscle, yet are taught to roam idly with compassion for humans; warned against mass manslaughter despite our feeding habits.

Above all else, the greatest proof of choice by God I've confirmed through Kellan. Humans are limited to love in one lifetime, yet vampires and vampeens alike are granted love for eternity, the same length He embraces us for.

"Look," Kellan returned me to my reality with a pointed finger towards the ocean's infinite horizon. The sun's beauty was rising to greet us with a rainbow of colors announcing its arrival.

"It's beautiful," I smiled.

"As are you," he grinned baring his irresistible dimple.

I watched the sun rise in the reflection of his bright green eyes, reliving the last three weeks in three minutes knowing it would seem like three seconds in my eternity.

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And now, a sneak peek at book 2 in the Vamp Chronicles,
Vamp Yourself for War.

VAMP YOURSELF FOR WAR

Love will be tested and loved ones will be lost as Lexi's journey carries her directly into battle. She quickly finds that all isn't fair in love and war, especially when you are dealing with the most powerful and skilled vamps in the world. War brings out the best and worst in Lexi. She will be forced to question not only herself and her relationship with Kellan, but her safety and security in all she's known until now.

—
Vamp Yourself for War

Chapter One

“This is a super car – think Batmobile. You don’t have to pound the gas to get somewhere. Ease down gently on the right pedal,” Kellan instructed.

I sat in the driver’s seat of the new Mercedes my dad gifted me at my birthday party yesterday. As he promised my parents, Kellan took me out to a deserted lot for driver’s ed. I’d carried my permit for seven months now and had an appointment to get my license at 7am on Monday. This left me roughly forty-three hours to learn everything.

“You know, I’m glad you’re a vampire,” I babbled aimlessly to Kellan with a smirk on my face.

“Why is that?” he chuckled.

“Quick reflexes and harder to kill. I can’t give you a heart attack if I royally suck at driving, which seems to be the case thus far.”

“Just press the gas pedal,” he stated moving past my unexpected appreciation over his vampiric DNA.

I gently tapped the pedal sending the tiniest bit of gas into the engine yet the car leapt forward with a vengeance. Thinking fast I slammed my foot on the break sending Kellan against the dash and myself into the steering wheel despite my similarly enhanced reflexes.

“Ha... ha... oops,” I smiled sheepishly.

“Okay. Next time don’t hit the break, just ease up on the gas and the car will steady itself,” he advised. Despite the almost smash of his body into the dash, he remained calm, patient.

“Okay,” I agreed inching my foot down again. The car sped off reaching fifty-five miles-per-hour in two seconds. Heeding his advice, I let up a few centimeters and the car steadied to a safe thirty miles-per-hour.

“Good. That was really good,” he praised. “Now lightly come down on the break.”

I removed my foot, switched from gas to break apparently too fast since the car abruptly jerked to a halt. From the corner of my eye, I saw Kellan tossed forward a few inches though my speed wasn't outrageous.

“Sorry,” I said. My facial expression showed my embarrassment. I'm stubborn sometimes. I don't like the learning process - it clearly displays my ignorance on a subject.

“It's okay, you'll get it,” he encouraged. “I won't let you stop until you do.”

“You really are better than my parents when it comes to this stuff,” I commented. “But we've been going at this for an hour and I'm bored, not to mention frustrated.”

He opened the door and came around to my side. I put the car in park as he opened my door.

“Umm... What are you doing?” I questioned hesitantly.

“Teaching you how to drive. Get out for a sec.” I sat for a minute before giving in to his request. As soon as I exited he adjusted the seat back and slid into the driver's spot. “Now sit on my lap.”

“You're joking, right?” I was dumbfounded.

“Not at all. Sit,” he ordered.

I stood staring at him cautiously. Apparently becoming a vampire hadn't erased all fear and rational from me, which is definitely a good thing in my book.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Hey, no trick questions!"

"Come here Lexi."

"Okay, I'm trusting you," I said slipping into his lap.

"Now, hands on the wheel," he instructed. I properly placed my hands on ten and two; he placed his directly below mine. "Put your foot on top of mine. You're going to feel how I drive, how much pressure I do and don't apply on the pedals," he explained.

"Umm. Okay. I trust you," I reiterated, more for my self-assurance than anything since I was blind and didn't see how this would work.

"Good. Now put the car in drive."

I obeyed. I copied his move from the break to the gas never losing his shoe beneath my own. We started out with him in control and I just mimicked his moves as a puppet. I calculated the push he pressed each time to the break and gas pedals; stop and go, right turn, left turn, up and down the aisles of the abandoned parking lot.

After a few minutes he let go of the steering wheel allowing me to control our direction as he determined our speed. We sat silently as I maneuvered through the course. Having stationed my foot atop his for at least five minutes now, having crossed atop his from break to gas so often, I didn't realize until I stopped at the far end of the lot that I was in control; that I had been driving the last two lanes. I pulled into a spot and locked the car into park.

“I did it!” I squealed.

“Very nice,” he commented. “But we’re far from done.”

“Ugh. Way to burst my bubble,” I pouted.

He chuckled, “The worst is over. Coordination of the pedals is the hardest part to master.”

“Okay, what’s next?” I prompted.

“Three point turns,” he announced sliding from under me to the passenger’s seat.

It took one try for me to successfully complete a three-point turn, although my enhanced vision and new mathematically driven mind did assist me in this objective.

“Perfect. Now, last but not least, parallel parking,” he grinned.

“How do I practice without cones?”

“Easy. With me.” He got out of the car and stood acting as the position of the front bumper of a vehicle. I swung the car into reverse moving sideways and backwards simultaneously until I was inches from Kellan. One second later he was in front positioned as a rear bumper. I chuckled devilishly to myself before hitting the gas pedal. Kellan heard the acceleration instantly and jumped out of the way. I slammed the break stopping abruptly several centimeters from where he was standing prior.

I rolled down the window smiling innocently, “I for sure thought you weren’t afraid of anything.”

He tried to keep from smiling but couldn’t. “You got me. That was good. Actually, that was a Craig move.”

Kellan's best friend, Craig, still lived in Seattle. I knew he'd missed the male companionship since he moved to Charleston, South Carolina a little over a month ago. Yesterday, Kellan gave up his iPod for me, gifted it to me as a birthday present though I knew it was his favorite possession. So in return, I was going to secretly get Craig here before the end of the month.

"So, now that I've passed the course, can I drive back to the hotel? I promised Mel I'd have brunch with her."

"As long as you stay out of the slow lane," he stipulated.

"Now I have to drive like a grandma just to irritate you."

"Don't even try it," he warned.

"Kiss me and I won't," I leveraged. He slid into the passenger's seat. He gently took my hand, despite me being close to indestructible he was still gentle in his caress, and kissed the back of it.

"You know that doesn't count, right?"

"You know you didn't specify where I had to kiss you," he smirked. "Drive back in the fast lane and I'll revisit your request."

"Okay. You got me. You may want to buckle up though," I suggested at the challenge.

Every day I'd spent with Kellan, I'd discovered a new part of me. I didn't realize I held a competitive lever within me. Even more telltale was my rebellion surfacing from time to time since his appearance. Of course, he appeared just as I learned of my true heritage.

“O.M.G. Lex!” Mel cried as I entered her hotel room fresh from my lesson. “The video already has 5,237 hits!”

Of course, my best friend was referring to the tape of Jason and Jenny, the king and queen of the pop crowd, reacting to my remarkable transformation at my birthday party last night. I admit it was a drastic change. I went from a fat, blemished teen to a fit, attractive vampeen blurring the lines between a human and a vampire. Even I was still amazed when I caught my reflection; another vamp myth killed.

Mel enjoyed their faces though. So much so that the moment it ended she raced back to her room to upload her masterpiece to YouTube.

“Holy sugarplums!” I sarcastically replied.

“That was such a low blow. I’m blonde but so not stupid,” she grumbled.

“Yeah, yeah. You know I love you,” I smiled as we slid onto her unmade bed, cozying up to her laptop near the edge.

“I do. That’s why I put up with you.”

“Ha. Ha. I can’t believe we have that many hits in what, seven hours?”

“I know. The whole class must be pasting the link. I’m not the only one who despises those two.”

“True. So are you going to breakfast in your PJ’s or are you going to change?” I pressed as Mel closed her laptop.

“I have to get dressed,” she whined.

“Why?”

“Lex, have you checked your reflection lately? If I ever want to get a guy around you I have to practice and present,” she said, standing to cipher through the clothes in her bag.

“Practice and present? Do detail,” I insisted.

“Practice as in make sure I primp myself daily with make-up, nice clothes and the curling iron or flat iron to be best presentable. Practice and present,” she explained with precision and pep.

“Uh huh... Don’t you already do that most of the time anyways?”

“Most of the time... before. Listen Lex, please don’t take offense but I feel like I have to work overtime to stand a chance next to you now. Before I could bum-it sometimes, but I don’t feel I can anymore,” she sighed with a twinge of depression seeping in.

The worst part was I’d felt that way next to her before. The difference however was I didn’t even try to hold my own. I allowed Mel’s size zero beauty to swallow me whole. At times I would get depressed, experience a stint of jealousy, but for the most part I ignored it allowing myself to drown in low self-confidence, to sit in comfort within her shadow.

The design comparisons separated us though. I was fat, had acne, wore glasses sometimes and made no attempt to appear fashionable. Mel is skinny, has perfect skin, always has the cutest, coordinated outfits and carries the personality of a bubbly Funshine bear. Bottom line was she stood a chance beside me now but I never did before. It still baffled me as to how, or even why, she felt so insecure.

“Okay. Number one, wake up! You are gorgeous. You’re the whole kit and caboodle fit into the perfect, tiny

package. Number two, hello! I'm not single. So even if some guy was stupid enough to pass on you, I would reject him and shoot him back to you. And last, there is no freaking comp Mel. I would never compare myself to you as the standard or one to beat. So don't do that to me. We're a team. We together put people like Jenny in that position not each other. Now get dressed and I'll be back in a minute," I commanded.

"Where are you going?" she asked still processing everything I'd said despite her curiosity being voiced.

"To change. I feel like bumming it," I winked as I left her room.

It's never my intention or desire to overshadow anyone, especially Mel. I recalled every emotion harbored within my self-esteem plunge over the years. I could be crowned Miss America tomorrow and my self-doubt would still linger. Though I looked like a model now, I still felt like the old Lexi inside which was just how I wanted to be. Just because I was part vampire didn't mean I should lose my humanity. And if dressing down in sweats and a tee would make my best friend feel better about herself then I would.

I was shocked still at how quickly the tables turned. I was still adjusting to my alternate form of travel, a.k.a. running or speed racing as my dad called it. Another twist is the constant noise. I hear beyond concrete walls to their keeper's chat and the blip of a frog hopping in the rain. And now I heard my Aunt Claire chatting away with a friend in her suite, my parents getting dressed and discussing last night simultaneously in their room. I heard another couple down the hall in quite a promiscuous rumble - wish I could tune that out.

My hearing had magnified in such a dramatic way enhancing my surroundings with both good and bad

echoes. The first few days my head was pounding non-stop. I often wished it came with a remote containing up and down volume controls and a mute button. However, given my time, I had adjusted as well as expected and possible. Kellan had supported me every step of the way. He and Mel had kept me from losing my sanity.

I zipped into my room for my two-second wardrobe change.

“That was nice of you,” Kellan stated from the balcony.

“You know you really shouldn’t eavesdrop,” I replied as I swiped my hair into a quick ponytail. “But since you did, you think this is scruffy enough?”

“I don’t think you could ever look scruffy but you do look casual,” he commented.

“Casual and comfy, though I haven’t worn an outfit that wasn’t since becoming a vampeen.”

“It comes with the territory. Your skin is no longer sensitive to the environment and surfaces it contacts,” he casually explained, taking a sip from his coffee mug, though I knew that’s not what was in there.

“Can I have some? I need to make sure I can swallow at least half a plate of food with Mel,” I asked stepping outside to take in the morning air and high tide with him.

“Of course,” he said passing the warm mug to me. I took a sip of the contents to taste for flavor.

“Let me guess... B positive?” I raised the cup to my lips again.

“Getting close. AB positive,” he answered, beaming over my progress.

A smile lifted within me. He still takes my breath away especially when he smiles. His dark brown hair was being blown slightly by the wind. And his emerald green eyes are deep and sultry; they lure me into him every time. And his lips are perfectly proportionate and highlighted by the dimple on his left cheek. When he grins and displays his little quirk I just melt, even though it's physically impossible for a vampire. Inside though, I was pudding. And his dimple drew me down to his jaw, strong yet soft at the edges.

All of his allure doesn't lie in his face alone though. His body is solid muscle clearly defined yet not overwhelming. He is slim, far from lanky but not quite army beefcake material. Standing at around six feet, he is the perfect height and form to encapsulate me with a hug. My face fits perfectly within the center dip of his chest where he always spritzes his cologne for me. I guess my main point is he's perfect for me, alluring and captivating in every way. I so easily get lost in him, beside him. This is the only time I'm able to successfully tune out the world around me, when I'm lost in the wonder of him.

"Lexi," Kellan whispered breaking my concentration. I didn't realize how close he was. He took the mug from my hands and gently kissed my forehead. "Mel is walking to our room now," he announced.

"Oh. Right. I hear her. I'll see you later," I replied.

I opened the door just as Mel was about to knock. "Perfect timing. I was just about to go get you," I smiled.

"Awesome blossom," she perked in response.

Taking in her appearance, I saw that she'd decided to bum it as well. We were paired in our favorite Victoria Secret capris, mine green and hers pink. And while I went

with a white slim fit tee with flip-flops, Mel decided on a navy blue tee and sneakers.

Noticing my quick eye she explained, “You were right. And yes write it down cause I’m admitting it, but what you said was true. I shouldn’t try to compete with you. We’re a team, sisters, and I shouldn’t allow my insecurities to ruin that.”

“I’m glad you came to your senses,” I chuckled. “Now what do you want for breakfast? I hear your stomach growling.”

“Would I look like a pig if I ordered one of everything?” she groaned and laughed at the same time as she moved her hands to her stomach.

“As long as I don’t have to match what you eat,” I smirked as we stepped into the elevator.

“It’s a deal.”

We entered the lobby and made our way towards the onsite restaurant. It baffles me how the cheap hotels always have free continental breakfast yet the ones that charge an arm and a leg make you fork over more cash to eat. I suppose their rationale is if you can afford our rooms, you can afford to buy your own breakfast.

Nonetheless we entered the restaurant and were promptly greeted by a hostess wearing black pants, a button up white shirt and a nametag displaying ‘Heather.’ She led us to a window table peering directly out on the ocean, though every table had some sort of view. Three walls in the four-walled restaurant were entirely floor to vaulted ceiling glass, broadly displaying the painted view of the beach, pier and historic homes surrounding the coastline.

Most of the tables were vertical and lined up to the windows with the larger groups within the center. A closer look showed these were the same collection of pieces the hotel used at my party for seating, though no couches were in sight.

“O.M.G. It smells so good in here. I feel like I haven’t eaten in a month!” Mel exclaimed, flipping through the menu on the table.

The restaurant was fairly empty with a total of five couples and a large family dining in; luckily, the waves crashing outside helped filter out some of the chatter surrounding me.

Reluctantly I picked up the menu to sort through my fate. I’d decided ahead of time to seek out a steak and eggs, which shouldn’t have been difficult given the caliber of this establishment. A quick-eyed skim located my order on page three.

“Have you decided which part of the pig you’re ready to eat?” I prompted Mel.

“I’m not thinking part, I’m thinking all,” she answered enthusiastically. “But for now I think I’ll settle with the Dream Breakfast. It has three sausages, four pieces of bacon, three eggs, hash browns, a slice of ham, two pieces of toast, three pancakes and a bowl of fruit to even the caloric field or at least trick yourself into thinking you did.”

“Whoa! Would you like to upgrade to a size two?”

“Apparently Caleb would like me to. He left with Amber or “Miss Hips” last night,” she wallowed.

“Are you serious Mel?” She just slightly nodded her head. “I’m sorry girl. But you know if he can walk away it

wasn't anything to begin with. This just means you're available for the perfect guy when he comes along."

"If he comes along," she corrected.

"Okay, I'm gonna need you to snap out of the sap. You know that's not true. I'm living proof of that."

"Good morning ladies. My name is Tony and I'll be your server this morning. What can I get for you today?" asked a sixty-something, white-haired gentleman with a strong southern accent.

"I'll have the Dream Breakfast, eggs sunny side up with a diet coke to drink," Mel spewed.

"And just where do you intend to put it all little lady?" he chuckled in an endearing manner.

"Oh I can hold my own, trust me."

"Good to know. And for you dear?" he turned towards me anticipating my order.

"I'll have steak and eggs. Rare steak, lots of juice and eggs over easy and extra runny with water to drink and icksnay on the toast," I requested.

"My, my you two are an interesting pair of customers," he muttered. "I'll be back with your drinks in a moment," he announced as he collected our menus.

"Since when do you eat rare steak and nearly raw eggs?" Mel asked the moment Tony walked away.

"Since when do you eat the entire football team's breakfast?" I chucked back.

"Guess we're both full of surprises," she replied.

“More than you know,” I commented, though she was oblivious to the truth weighted within my statement.

“Here are your drinks ladies. It’ll be just a few more minutes for your food,” Tony said as he set down our beverages.

We both echoed a quick, “Thanks.”

“Okay. So dish. Tell me everything I missed at school. I’m super nervous about Monday.” I took a sip of my water.

“You didn’t miss much really. And after last night I doubt anyone will talk about the old stuff. Congrats. You’ve replaced a thousand rumors with one... you!” she exclaimed with sarcasm and dread. “Seriously Lex what are you going to tell those people when you can’t even tell your bestie?”

“I don’t plan on telling them anything. It’s none of their business. Plus I guarantee every speculation will be wrong, but even if I told the truth, the pops would twist it. They always do,” I replied. I took a risk. I delved into reality with my words praying she held tight in respect for me and my vow of silence on the subject. I’d gained and lost so much these last few weeks. I wanted to be able to share with my best friend. There were so many limitations preset by vamp laws and secrecy, but, outside of the security, I wanted to be able to breeze through the loopholes with Mel. I didn’t want to lose our open relationship built on trust and honesty.

“The others may let it go, but you know after last night that Jenny will not. The witch is going to be hot on your trail for the rest of the year.”

“She’s the least of my worries. There’s not much she can do or that Kellan will let her do. I’m more worried

about Mike. Did I tell you he showed up prepared to fight me last night?”

“O.M.G. Lex! No! You sort of left that one out. Dish!” she yelled, a cross between excitement and horror choking her breath.

I detailed the night, minus the vampeen and vampire bit. Keira, the vampire radical who had been murdering vampeens during their twenty-four hour transformation, had worked with my ex, Mike, to take me down. They, nor I, expected the end results. I lost control and attacked her; gave her a solid run for her money and ended up winning. Kellan’s dad, Al, a vamp army officer, completed the job. Of course I couldn’t tell this to Mel so I stuck with the innocent parts. I told her about Keira being Kellan’s ex, her teaming up with Mike and even went as far as to detail our fist fight but on a human scale.

“Holy sugarplums Lex! I’m so mad. I totally missed all the juice! I can’t believe you actually got into a fight! You. Calm, quiet, bookworm Lex kicked butt. Amazing,” she reveled in my memory even though our outlooks differed on the events.

“You know what they say about the quiet ones,” I shrugged revealing a sly grin. We both broke into laughter at the same time as Tony delivered our food.

“Whoa Mel! Do you want the antacids now or later?”

“I’ll probably need both but it will so be worth it! This looks delish,” she squealed inhaling a bit of eggs simultaneously. “Mmm... so good...” She closed her eyes and let out a moan of pleasure clearly enjoying the meal before her.

“I will take that as my queue to leave. Let me know if you need anything,” Tony advised before stepping away.

“Cool it with the big-O Mel. It’s breakfast not a porn meal,” I scolded lightly.

“That was sad Lex. Pornmeal... as in cornmeal? I get it but... so lame,” she sighed, shaking her head in mock disapproval. “And if you were eating at all you would probably share in my ecstasy.”

“So I bit the slim Jim and didn’t retain my appetite. I’m not anorexic and am going to eat. Look.” I sliced a piece of the steak from the rarest point – the center – and started chewing.

“That’s my girl,” Mel smiled with a mouth full of food.

The rest of breakfast continued just the same. Of course we were able to squeeze a bit of talking amidst Mel’s pleasure-fest. In the end I was able to consume just under half my meal before I got away with a “stomach ache.”

“Well if you didn’t insist on eating the cow that still moos maybe your stomach wouldn’t hurt,” she pressed as we stepped into the elevator.

“Yeah, yeah. Do you really need to play mommy dearest and scold about preference?”

“Nah. I guess not. What are you and Kellan doing today?” she asked as we stepped out of the elevator onto the maroon carpet. I will never understand the drab carpet taste of hotel owners.

“Not sure yet. You?”

“I’ve got to be home by noon. My mom has a “work function”,” she stated, her fingers emulating quotation marks.

“Nice. So I take it you have babysitting duty?”

“Of course.”

“You’ve been watching Kyle a lot lately.”

“Ugh. Don’t even get me started,” she groaned. She swiped the card for her room. As we walked in, I observed the neat and tidy room overhauled by room service while we were out. Every item had a place. I smelled the lingering scent of detergent implying fresh linens on the bed and new towels had been delivered. I was surprised however to see little butter mints on the pillows. I’d only heard of such a service but never seen it at any of the swanks I’d visited.

Amidst scanning, I heard my mother speak from down the hall. “Lexi, your father and I are going out. Your aunt booked the rooms until tomorrow so don’t check out. I love you and your father loves you too.”

I said a quick, “Okay, love you too,” while Mel was gathering her toiletries from the bathroom.

I listened quickly for Kellan but didn’t hear him in our room. I decided this was the perfect time to involve Mel in my plan.

“Okay, so I’m going to need your help. I’m working on something top secret, a surprise, for Kellan.”

“Ooh. Sounds good. I’m all ears,” she perked up as she plopped down attentively on the bed.

“Okay. Well since we came back from vacation (the lie I had to tell her while I went through the change) he’s been in a bit of a funk. He won’t admit it but I know he misses his best friend Craig from Seattle. So my little plan is to surprise Kellan by bringing Craig down for a visit. Where you come in is in a few places...” I detailed topping it off with a pleading expression.

“Name it and you got it. But I have to be allowed to video K’s reaction,” she stated, squeezing her hands together in her lap.

“Deal but no YouTubing it,” I compromised. “Now I need you to distract Kellan for a bit so I can call Craig. I plan to steal his cell for a sec to extract his number. Then when Craig arrives, I have to pick him up at the airport so I’ll need you then,” though mentally I was picturing him racing on foot. “And last. You know I love you and I’ve so done this for you before so you have to say yes. You’re tied by bestie obligation.”

“Just give me my sentence,” she demanded.

“You have to go on at least one double-date with us.”

I braced myself for her adverse reaction, a phase of whining followed by a sitcom of whimpering pleas, but I received none of that. I glared at Mel taking in all of her. She appeared calm, thoughtful.

“That’s it?” she finally broke the silence with.

“Yeah...”

“Oh. Well consider it done,” she breezed. “So when are we calling this guy?”

“Well I’m here until tomorrow with my family and Kellan so I’ll try to steal his phone for a sec today. How about we plan for tomorrow afternoon? Say two-ish?” I proposed, speaking a bit fast since I heard Kellan coming our way. It amazed me how distinct he was to me though his stride was no different than another human; he had mastered it.

“Okay. I’ll have my mom drop me off.”

“Oh, speaking of. How are you getting home right now? Do you need a ride?”

“Nope. Your aunt has me covered. Now go enjoy your day!” she pushed shooing me out the door.

“Well then. I know when I’m not wanted,” I cried sarcastically.

“Oh shush!” she yelled throwing a pillow at me as I wedged through the door.

“One last thing,” I yelled.

“What now?”

“Thanks for everything. I really did love the party.”

I heard her saunter off the bed and walk towards the door. “Anything for you Lex. You know that,” she smiled.

“*Y tu tambien,*” I replied, returning the loving adoration spread on her face.

“Uh. English?”

“You too.”

“Thanks. Now go!” she ordered closing the door on me.

Okay. Something strange was going on. It was definitely like Mel to be bossy, but certainly not like her to kick me out. She either knew something or was up to something. Either way I supposed I’d find out soon enough.

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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.

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