

VAMP CHRONICLES  
BOOK 4

*Vamp Versus Vamp*

CHRISTIN LOVELL

*Vamp Chronicles*  
VAMP VERSUS VAMP  
*Book Four*

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VAMP VERSUS VAMP

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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!)*

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## VAMP VERSUS VAMP

*Vamps don't get a day of rest. Or so it seems to Lexi Jackson, especially when a new predator comes at her, and this time, he's hitting close to home. With her best friend Mel's transformation approaching quickly, Lexi must gather those she trusts to face the enemy from her own bloodline.*

*But when there's a kink in your front line, when your relationships are rocked to the core, how do you face the threat with confidence? Lexi can't, which forces new protectors to step forward, and old insecurities to eat away at Kellan.*

*Kellan's fought hard for his fiancé in the past, but with others continually intruding on his territory, his anger is brewing. With a lot to prove and more to work through, he unites forces with several power players in the vamp world creating his own attack unit. It's his place to protect his fiancé, not anyone else's.*

*With the enemy closing in on them, will Lexi and her friends be able to put aside their differences in time to defeat the newest legion of discontented vamps together?*

*Will Kellan and Lexi's personal struggles chip away at the foundation of their relationship, causing all to crumble, including the prophecy?*

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*This book is dedicated to you, the fans of the Vamp Chronicles. Thank you for the inspiration, the motivation, and the ability to continue writing!*

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*But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness,  
you are blessed. "AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO  
NOT BE TROUBLED,"  
1 Peter 3:14 nasb.*

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## Vamp Versus Vamp

### Preface.

"Wow. I can't believe it's been two whole months with no vampy woo-woo going on," Mel said as we made our way to fourth period. We all had the same schedule; Kellan made sure of that.

"Really, Mel? Now you just went and totally jinxed us." I sighed. "Ugh. Kellan, find me some wood so I can force her to knock on it."

Kellan laughed. "You don't really believe in that crap, do you?"

I shrugged. His brow shot up. "Please." I gave him a small smile.

"Very superstitious; writing's on the wall. Very superstitious; ladder's 'bout to fall," he sang, grinning before he sped out of sight around a corner.

"So I take it things are going good between the two of you," Mel chuckled.

"Yeah. These last couple months have been great between us. We're stronger than ever as a couple."

"But?" She pinned me with a knowing stare.

"But I can't help feeling like... I don't know. Like something is off or maybe what we have isn't strong enough or..." I heaved a heavy sigh. "I don't know."

Something just feels wrong despite how right Kellan feels to me.”

“Hmm. Maybe you two need to go on a romantic weekend getaway or something. I mean, you’re rarely alone. Every time I stop by someone’s always there.”

“Yeah, well, since you’ve been practically shacking up with Craig, you haven’t exactly been by often,” I teased. We laughed together, before silence fell between us, replaced by a more serious atmosphere.

“Oh, God, Lex, I can’t believe I’m going to be a vampire in three days. I’m finally going to be in on everything. I’ll no longer be the outcast human hanging with a bunch of vamps,” she stated, her eyes a porthole to the excitement and vulnerability she felt.

“I know.” I smiled. “It’s been a long time coming. Who would have thought all those years ago when we met that we would be here today?”

“I’m excited, but nervous. I can already tell you’re going to have to talk me off the ledge Thursday.” She shuffled her feet beside the classroom door, clutching the strap of her book bag tightly.

“I’ll be there. I promise I’ll be there every step of the way.”

We stared at each other, the years passing between us. She understood in that moment that this would be merely a pinprick of a memory in the timeline of her life, but it was one that we would look back on together.

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# Chapter One

“I wonder what the guys are planning on doing,” Mel asked as we walked into my house.

“Who knows with those two? My guess is they’ll head to the beach.” I raced towards the alarm box, prepared to shut it off, but stopped short when I didn’t hear the beeps, signaling it was on.

I flew to Mel’s side, standing protectively in front of her. I looked around the house, straining my ears to listen for any subtle noises that indicated the intruder was still here. When all I heard was silence, I signaled for Mel to remain where she was so I could check things out. She nodded her head, her eyes full of fear and worry. She knew I would protect her, but as I’d found out through experience, we were a lot more vulnerable than we liked to boast.

I took one step forward and froze when he walked around the corner into the family room. His predatory glare sent chills racing down my spine as serum flooded my mouth.

“Hello, ladies.” His rose-colored lips lifted slightly at the corners, the only indication of his amusement.

There was a distinct European flair about this man. His shaggy black hair contrasted against his tan skin. He didn’t have much muscle tone to him, or so it appeared through his suit. *A suit is an odd thing to be doing dirty vamp business in.* He was medium height, and while he was thin, he wasn’t etched muscle thin. It was his green eyes, similar in shade to my mother’s, that cast a familiar glow about him, though.

“Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?” I demanded, pulling Mel against my back.

“God, why couldn’t the myths about invitations be true?” Mel groaned behind me. I bumped her with my butt to get her to shut up. I didn’t know who the heck this guy was or if there was more of them.

“Who the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing in my house?” My voice was louder this time; my tone took on a harsh quality as my anxiety began to skyrocket.

He started to walk past the sectional towards us, undoing the top button of his jacket casually. I backed Mel up towards the back door to the garage, ready to shove her out so she could run at a moment’s notice. He stopped three feet in front of us.

“Now, is that any way to greet your grandfather?”

I shook my head. “Guh...grandfather?” I stuttered. I knew he was vamp, but without my nose, I couldn’t tell if he was a vampeen or a vampire.

“Yes. Didn’t your mother tell you about me?”

I studied him up and down before cautiously shaking my head ‘no.’

“Such a disappointment that woman was. I swear, she and Claire were the worst of the lot.” The hairs on my body stood at attention. Something was majorly wrong with him.

“How old are you?” I was surprised I had found my voice and that it didn’t shake.

He chuckled. “Old. I’m the second vampeen ever born.”

“I thought Cristianna was the second vampeen,” I countered, finally feeling like my feet were landing on solid ground.

“Given how my father was, you are truly to believe that he remained in one woman’s bed when he was looking to create an army?”

I stared at him, unsure whether to trust him or not. “What’s your real name?”

“Very good, granddaughter. It’s certainly not Charles Maxwell.” He laughed; it reminded me of chalk scraping along a blackboard. I cringed as if he had.

Abruptly he was in my face. I leaned back, covering Mel. “Cesar! My name is Cesar Euskadi.”

I closed my eyes, trying to calm my reaction. Over the past couple months Kellan and I had practiced controlling my new surge of electricity; it was still a work in progress though.

I heard him walk away from us. When he opened the fridge, I opened my eyes, my gaze locked on him. “What do you want?”

“I’m merely here to protect the girl.” He flicked his hand beyond me to Mel.

“Why would you want to protect her?”

He slammed the refrigerator door and was a few feet away again within the blink of an eye. Suddenly, I was very grateful for Sir Staten’s blood. By the looks of things I would need to activate my gift just to have a chance at survival against my own flesh and blood. “You need my protection,” he bit out.

“Why would you want to protect me? And where were you five months ago when I needed protection?” I leaned forward, aiming myself in his direction.

He calmed down in a flash; it was as if someone had turned off his internal switch. “Because she’s one of us.” He locked eyes with me. “And they aren’t. But she is, so I’m offering you my protection. Do you want it or not?”

I looked at Mel. She was scared, starting to curl into herself; her arms couldn’t wrap any tighter around her ultra-slim waist. “It’s going to be okay, Mel. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. They’ll get you over my dead body.” That was a promise I intended to keep.

“I would reconsider that if I were you, Alexa,” Cesar casually stated, the slightest hint of repercussions imminent.

“Why? What is it that you want from me?”

“I want you.”

“Why me? Why now?”

“Because, without Kellan, with the two of you separated, I can do exactly what I want and get away with it. No political power plays to hold off.”

“You’re the reason I’m taking a stand. Blood or not, I don’t take kindly to racists.”

“You are naïve.”

“Maybe I am, but I know for certain that your prejudice will be your greatest downfall, Cesar.” His features began to scrunch before he replaced his frown with a tranquil façade.

“Boys! Get them!” Cesar stood back, his hands folded in front of him, watching the scene unfold with pleasure.

Three vampeens, faster than most of the vamps I came across, raced towards us. Two came directly at me; the last one went straight for Mel.

“Let me go!” she screamed, pulling on her arm to no avail. The vamp laughed in her face and had her pinned to the ground in half a second.

“No! No, no, no!” I yelled, illuminating like a Christmas tree. Within seconds I snapped the necks of the two who attacked me. I grabbed the third by the back of his shirt and threw him across the room, slamming him into the cupboards, effectively wrecking my mother’s beautiful kitchen.

“What the hell, Lex?” Mel gasped, slowly inching away from me towards the corner. She was visibly shaking.

“It’s alright, Mel. I promise I’m still me.” She swallowed hard. I threw my arm out, knocking the vamp into the wall again as he launched himself at me. She glanced at the vamp; averting her eyes from me, she nodded.

“Well done, Alexa.” Cesar clapped his hands dramatically. He was already grating on me. I gathered that he was theatrical about everything despite knowing him less than an hour. “So what’s it going to be, granddaughter?”

“Go to hell.” I scowled, disdain clear in my tone.

He laughed, as if I’d merely made a joke. “I’ll give you some time. Clearly you don’t understand the stakes here.”

A chill ran up my spine; foreboding twisted my gut.  
“What stakes?”

“This.” He held out a smart phone showing a live video stream.

The lighting was ample despite the dark environment. Stacked cement blocks created the wall behind where Kellan and Craig were in chains. It appeared to be a cellar, though where I couldn't ascertain.

Kellan was the worse for wear. He'd been stripped down to his boxers. Cuts and bruises covered his body; he wasn't healing quickly, as blood pooled near his feet. Abruptly someone poked Kellan, electricity running through the metal chains and over his body. He grunted in pain, still trying to be brave; abruptly he collapsed to the ground. Craig yanked and pulled with all his might on his own restraints, but they were soldered tight.

“Craig's a vampire. He's one of us,” I said. My voice was flat, devoid of all emotion. I'd almost turned off what I saw, and would have gotten away with it had that one traitorous tear not escaped.

“The moment you protect a vampire, you become one of them. You become our enemy.”

And just as quickly as he'd appeared, he was gone, leaving me with no clues as to what city, let alone what neighborhood, the basement cellar where my fiancé was being tortured was located.

Rage burst through me. My body shook with tension. My heart was breaking, slowly blackening at the thought of a life without Kellan. My palms flew open, facing the heavens as wind slapped my face, swirling throughout the space. My veins illuminated, taking on a red light, finally

the color of blood. My vision blurred at the edges as a heavy power sprouted from my core.

“Ahhh!” I bellowed my cry over the suffering of my love right as electricity began to crackle around my skin. I threw my hands up, electricity shooting out from my palms.

The ceiling cracked along its surface above me, spiderwebbing outwards, with my harsh blow. My breathing became labored and my balance tilted as I fought to remain conscious. I had to control this. It was a power, but it used my energy, my emotions, as fuel. If I hit empty, so did my body.

I stumbled, catching and ripping the back of the sofa with my enhanced strength right as my world was covered in darkness.

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## Chapter Two

I slowly became aware of male arms encasing me. My eyes flew open. Al stared down at me, frowning.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” Beth asked, drawing my attention towards her. She stood off to the side, a wet washcloth in her hand.

“Where’s Mel?” I croaked. I sat up, grabbing my head as a dizzy spell set in. I closed my eyes for a minute, breathing deep, waiting for her answer.

“I called her father to come get her. They left about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Fifteen minutes? Oh, God. How long was I out?” I couldn’t contain my worry.

“According to Mel, you’ve been out a little over two hours now,” Al stated.

“Two hours?” My voice was loud, panicked. I leapt up, looking throughout the space anxiously. The bodies were gone, but the damage I’d done to my parents’ once beautiful home was crushing.

“Lexi, what’s wrong?” Beth grabbed my arm, forcing me back towards them.

“He has him; he has them.” I stumbled to think clearly enough to communicate.

“Who’s ‘he’?” Al pressed, worry creasing his brow. Beth pursed her lips, taking in my behavior.

I fidgeted, wringing my hands together. “My grandfather, Cesar Euskadi.”

Al was on his feet in a split second, phone in hand.  
“Shit.”

My eyes widened at his curse. Al never cussed. If he was this upset just over who had Kellan, I could only imagine how angry he was going to be once I told him what they were doing to him.

“Um, they were torturing him. All I could gather were electric chains and some sort of charger that they prodded him with.” I closed my eyes, tears gathering. I winced as the image flashed in my mind. “The metal of the chains was something strong, too, because he was pulling hard.”

“It’s probably laced with a chemical compound that weakens him.” Al ran his hand through his hair, yanking at the roots. He walked past us, obviously needing room to pace.

“This better be an emergency, Bancroft,” I heard Auggy grumble through the line.

“It is. Cesar Euskadi has my son.”

“Shit. Where’s Lexi?”

“Here.”

“I’m on it. Give me a second to pull up the tracker.”

“Tracker?” My ears perked up; it was the first spark of hope I’d felt.

“Relax, honey. It’s under his watch. It blends right in,” Beth replied.

“When did this happen?”

“When you returned from Puerto Rico.” She tucked her hair behind her ears, shifting as she waited with me.

“Damn. They’re out of the state already,” Auggy sighed. I heard the frustration in his voice. “Meet me at the launch pad in Bellawood. I’m sending troops on foot who’ll arrive shortly behind us. I have a feeling we’re going to need a hell of a lot of backup.”

“See you,” Al clipped, ending the call. He was already walking out the door; Beth and I ran to catch up. I grabbed my cell and keys on the way out, not even bothering to set the alarm.

I slid into the back seat of my Mercedes coupe, immediately pressing all the security buttons and features.

*“System activated. Shield activated. Satellite active. Software available.”* The computer talked us through every control I pressed. I was grateful to the Bladangs and Kellan for insisting on it. Sadly, I’d used the advanced technology in my car on multiple occasions.

Al took my keys and shoved them into the ignition. With the garage door merely halfway up, he peeled out of the driveway. I was thrown backward as he sped off.

“You’re familiar with Cesar, I take it,” I stated, my eyes studying him. His muscles flexed, telling me that he heard me, yet he remained silent as he continued to drive. I placed my hand on his shoulder. “Al? Please.”

Beth reached over, gathering one of his hands. “Go ahead, honey.”

“He killed my parents, or had them killed.”

“But I thought they died of old age?”

“No. I don’t particularly care to talk about it. Just know that I fell on the wrong side of a political debate gone

awry.” His brows drew together; his lips formed a thin line as he ground his teeth.

My heart was beating erratically as I watched his reaction to it all. Al was always calm, cool, and collected. He was the sanity in the midst of every emergency. Yet here he was on the verge of breaking my steering wheel as he zigzagged through traffic at well over a hundred miles per hour.

I studied my striking engagement ring; the green of the diamond reminded me of Kellan’s eyes. Elephants stomped on my stomach as I recalled the image my grandfather had showed me. Kellan didn’t deserve this. Few vamps chose this life, and vampeens didn’t have a choice at all. They were thrown into this life at the tender age of sixteen, told to hold on tight and pick sides.

As Al swerved around a car on the exit ramp, my gut clenched. I realized that slowly my human life had faded away. My life was but a fragment of the same reality. Was it so much to ask for normality? I suppose that was why I clung to the rituals of a human: attending school, eating food, despite it being drenched with blood, and having girls’ nights. Yet here I was, speeding past humans on their way home from work, praying that my vampire fiancé was still alive and not suffering too much.

I closed my eyes, trying to send out a message of strength to Kellan. How I wished we could speak telepathically from afar. The lone tear hitting my cheek awoke me, brought me to the present, to right now. I was in my car with his parents on a mission, hell bent to find my soul mate and his best friend. Thinking of Craig shifted my thoughts to Mel. I would have to call her later, explain everything. I’d seen the fear in her eyes during my outburst; electric energy charged me too quickly to slow

down. I was knee deep in lightning before I even realized it. I sighed. I was a mess. I couldn't even concentrate on one thing. My head was all over the place and my heart barely keeping up.

I looked out the car, my eyes doing a double take when I saw the sign. "Aiken? We're already in Aiken, South Carolina?"

"The launch pad Auggy was referring to is here, as is his personal office," Al stated.

"Oh."

Less than five minutes later, we were on a dirt road, surrounded by trees. The gravel shot up as the computer said, "Unidentified object repelled." When it repeated the verse over and over again, I nearly ripped the wires in half. I was on edge, anxious to get to Kellan and Craig, anxious to hold my fiancé in my arms, to soothe him and protect him.

We finally pulled into a clearing, the dirt road dead-ending right where the helicopter was parked. Off to the right was a ranch-style house. A porch stretched the entire width of the front; several rocking chairs sat abandoned, yet inviting, beside one of two large windows.

I barely resisted shoving Beth out the car to get to the air transportation quicker. Auggy stood by the entrance on the helicopter's side, a headset in place. He said something into the microphone dangling by his cheek and the blades whipped into action. Al handed all of us a headset before climbing aboard. Beth leapt in after him, squeezing on his lap behind the pilot's seat. The moment my foot touched the metal floor of the craft, I spotted Aunt Claire. She held her arms out wide and I rushed into her embrace in the back row. Her hug was welcome, reminiscent of the few

good ones with my mom. My life wasn't the same without her.

"How are you holding up, sweetie?"

"I'm fine." She gave me the same look my mother did when she knew I wasn't telling the truth. "Okay, so I feel sick to my stomach with worry. Why didn't you tell me grandpa was still alive?"

She smoothed my hair as the helicopter took off into the air. It scaled the trees with ease as we headed north.

"He hasn't been in our lives since your mom and I were young. He popped in once or twice a year to drop off a wad of cash, say 'hello,' and then take off again."

"You know who he really is, don't you?"

She pursed her lips, her eyes gazing beyond me as she nodded. "Auggy told me about a month ago when I showed him a picture."

I grabbed her hand, squeezing it gently. "I guess we were both ambushed."

"Not that it matters, but you have very little vampire in you. Learning that Cesar is only twenty-five percent vamp, all of our numbers have dropped." Her voice was sad, as if this new revelation had knocked us all down a notch on society's pole.

"What exactly does that mean?"

"That you will have more human weaknesses than vamp strengths." Her tone was matter-of-fact. The conversation itself felt forced, as if she dreaded the topic.

"I don't mind." I shrugged. How could I? It wasn't like I could change it. It was what it was; *it is what it is*.

“Lex, you—”

“We’re going to land a couple miles away out of earshot. I’ve loaded the tracker’s signal to my phone so we can follow it. I don’t care what the hell you see in there, you’re not to make a peep. No human emotional shit; that will only make you careless. We can’t afford to make a mistake. Now follow me,” Auggy ordered, jumping out of the moving helicopter before it landed. Beth followed, then Al.

My stomach whirled again, fear knotting inside me. I swallowed the serum that chose this moment to finally erupt into my mouth. I looked down at the empty highway beneath us. Trees lined the pavement, forests on either side of the road. I took a deep breath and leapt out. I landed on my feet, quickly seeking refuge in the woods behind the others.

Aunt Claire placed a heavy hand on my shoulder. “He’s my father, but he’s cruel. Blood means nothing to him, honey, so brace yourself.” Her words hit me like a sharp knife, cutting deep, cutting hard, splashing me with ice-cold water.

We dashed through the trees, shuffling our feet to avoid leaving a solid trail behind. Serum coated my tongue; the longer we were on the ground, the more anxious I became. Several miles in, my thoughts were in disarray as my veins began to glow.

“Keep your shit under control, Jackson,” Auggy ordered.

I stopped, the others flying past me. I took a few deep breaths. It would do me no good to go in like a glowworm, not only attracting attention, but also running the risk of exploding, only to pass out. I didn’t have control over this...

this thing that Sir Staten had given me. It seemed more like a science experiment gone radioactive bad than a gift.

Knowing Kellan was up ahead in need of me, I pulled myself together the best I could and doubled my speed to catch up with the others. I reached them just as a large home came into view. My gaze traveled the area; it was an odd location for the size of the property, but the build itself fit the landscape in the middle of the woods. Cedar shingles covered the outer surface of the home, giving it a homey feel, but I recognized the misgivings. I knew beyond the white French double-door entry lay the worst of my kind. I knew I was about to enter the battle of my life to save the man I loved.

We'd stopped just short of the opening. Auggy turned to Al. "I'm sorry, but you can't come with us. You need to stay behind."

"He's my son! I'll be damned if I'm staying behind." I'd never seen Al's features crumple so tightly on his face.

"Lower your voice, dear." Beth seemed sallow, peering at the forest floor. She was caught in the middle. She knew no vampire could safely set foot inside; even vampeens weren't safe. "We're trusting you with our son's life," she stated, lifting her face to Auggy.

"You have our word." Auggy nodded as Aunt Claire came to stand beside him.

Aunt Claire's eyes held the ferocity of a jostled lion. I knew she loved me, but seeing her here, I knew for certain that she'd come to love Kellan, too. She saw what he meant to me, all he'd done for me. He kept me sane; he kept me grounded. "I'd do anything; I'll do anything," she assured them.

Beth shook her head, gripping Al's arms strongly. Her knuckles were white as snow, her shoulders shaking as if she was silently sobbing. Al pulled her into his chest and kissed her head. My stomach knotted. Kellan was their only child. I couldn't imagine a world without him, but he wasn't my child. The bond between child and parent was incomparable.

Serum swamped my mouth as Al and Beth turned and headed deeper into the blanket of trees. I faced Auggy and Aunt Claire, determination rooting inside me. "Let's do this." A look of understanding and respect passed between us. Somehow Auggy knew what I was going through.

I followed them around the perimeter of the house, staying behind the trunks of the tall oak and pine trees. My nerves were ratcheting up. The moment we stopped across from the cellar doors peeking up from the grass, my slow heartbeat sped up. I unblocked my mind, praying Kellan could hear me.

*"I'm here. We're here. Just hold on a little longer."*

—

## AUGGY

Every bit of military instinct said this was a trap. It was too damn easy to access this house, especially considering the level of command behind those doors. No guards roamed the perimeter, scanning or listening for trespassers. Given that they had soundproof walls capping this place, they would have that, at the very least.

I'd checked the outer shingles of the home, every roofline, every slope and crevice, and no cameras were present, either. I couldn't bring myself to warn the women, especially after hearing Lexi's cry to Kellan. After all these

years, I guess I still had a bit of coward hiding beneath my hard heart.

I slipped my hand inside my pocket, pressing the button that would call off every soldier headed this way. I didn't want a massacre. We were on their turf. We'd be the ones massacred.

I turned towards Claire. In a short amount of time, she'd wiggled her way into my ice-covered heart. She warmed me. She and Lexi were my family. They were all I had, all I'd ever wanted. Time hadn't erased my desire for a human experience. Love was the single thing shared across all races, even the paranormal.

—

## Chapter Three

Auggy motioned for us to stay behind as he ventured beyond the tree line. He headed straight for his target, not bothering to double-check his surroundings. He reached down and yanked the thick metal lock right off the aged wood doors. They rattled beneath his strength, creaking as they slammed back into place. Auggy seemed angry. His face was a hard line of focus, his lips nearly invisible.

I clasped Aunt Claire's hand, giving it a death grip; my lungs barely cooperated as Auggy leaned down to lift the doors open. I heard her inhale and hold her breath as he threw open the first door. A single wavering heartbeat could be heard inside. *Craig*.

Nausea consumed me as Auggy threw the other door open. Something was wrong. Kellan hadn't answered me. I couldn't hear him, either.

I didn't think; I just acted. I let go of Aunt Claire and raced past Auggy, down the rickety steps into the darkness below.

"Stay back!" Craig yelled.

I froze. A second later the overhead light flickered on, illuminating the cinder block walls of the dingy space. The space was empty, cobwebs mucking the corners. The two light bulbs dangling from the ceiling were the only décor. It was obvious whatever studio lights they'd used earlier were gone.

Auggy came up behind me, Aunt Claire on his tail. "Shit! I fucking knew it!" His voice was a growl.

My heart stopped as I took in the scene before me. Both men were locked in solid iron chains at their ankles and wrists. Kellan's naked chest barely lifted as he inhaled; his head hung down. I wanted to run to him, embrace him. Rub his wrists, his ankles; console him the way he'd always comforted me.

"Pick him. Save him," Kellan stated, his voice mangled. A blue light flickered at his ankle, causing him to jerk.

"What do you mean?" I swallowed my serum.

"No. You're meant to be here. I'll be blister-efin tastic to die here, mate. I know you'll do what's right. I know you'll rip the crufflin' bastard to shreds in my honor." Craig lifted his head, narrowing his eyes at Auggy. He was daring him to defy him, to say it wasn't true.

"Why do we have to choose?"

"Their ankles are connected to a bomb. When one side of the chain is detached, it sets off the alternate bomb."

My eyes widened as I looked between the two men. My chest constricted. I was being forced to choose between my brother and the man I loved. I was being forced to choose between saving the man my best friend loved and the man I loved.

"There has to be a way around it! No. I... it...they... No!" I shook my head vehemently, trying to control my reaction. Tears welled in my eyes as I looked at Kellan. He struggled to lift his face towards me; his eyes glistened beneath the light. "It's not fair."

"It's the way he wanted it, babe. He's forcing you to choose between vampeens and vampires. He's making you choose your side."

Slowly I closed the gap between us. I cupped his cheeks as I pressed my lips lightly against his. "I'll always choose you, no matter what side that puts me on."

I felt a tear slip down my cheek as I skimmed my fingers over his war wounds. He was healing slowly, the scratches just beginning to scab over where they'd tortured him. The deeper cuts appeared to have barely stopped bleeding in the minutes before we arrived, which explained the blood trailing down his flesh.

I kissed a few of the purple bruises that were beginning to fade to yellow. I kissed his shoulder, my lips gathering a bit of the dirt that created a layer of smut over him. I ran my hands over his chest and down his muscled core. I adjusted his boxers for him.

He chuckled lightly, his eyelids at half-mast. "Thanks."

"I figured you would have moved your hands by now if you could."

"They laced the cuffs."

I swallowed the serum drowning my mouth at his announcement. I bit my lower lip, drawing blood as I peered into his muggy emerald eyes. "We'll get you out of here. Somehow."

*"I love you."* His lips lifted slightly at the corners.

I choked back a sob. *"I love you."*

I turned away from him. He didn't need to see my weakness. He needed strength. I sucked in a deep breath, stood straight. Kellan needed a fighter, not a wimp. He needed someone who wouldn't give up or crumble in the face of adversity. He deserved someone who would move

heaven and hell just to save him. Crying wasn't included; it didn't help. It only wasted time and energy.

"Energy!" I swung around to face Auggy. "Can you tell what kind of bombs those are?"

He nodded once. "E-bomb."

"E-bomb?"

"Electromagnetic pulse bomb."

"What would that do?"

"It can release billions of electrical watts in one strike, knocking out communication over an extended area."

"I don't get it. Why put it on them?"

"Because the electrical current running through our system will disable our vamp cells and make all the damage irreversible... not that there'd be anything left of us."

"What do you mean, 'us'?"

"It's a trap. There is no saving one or the other. There's no saving anyone down here when that thing goes off."

"What if we covered ourselves in rubber?"

"This isn't lightning." Auggy frowned, pursing his lips as his gaze passed along the chains.

I looked at a silent Aunt Claire. She seemed stunned. Her eyes were wide as they searched the cellar. I couldn't figure out what was running through her mind, only that she was trying to think of something.

I met Kellan's eyes. "I'm a conductor. I have to be with the electricity that comes off me. Maybe I can absorb it, too."

“Your electric force would have to have a positive and negative field that is so close they were on top of each other. Plus, two hundred volts can kill a human. Ten times that will kill a vamp, and we’re talking about a hell of a lot more probably,” Auggy said.

“We have to do something. I can’t just stand here anymore. They’re absorbing some chemical every second they’re still in those chains. Unless you’ve thought of some other ingenious idea, then I think it’s worth a try.”

“You’ll die, Lexi.” I heard the plea in Aunt Claire’s voice but couldn’t acknowledge it. Maybe I was being selfish; maybe I was being self-less. Regardless, we had to do something.

“We need something that will absorb the electricity without spreading it. Unless you can think of something else that will do it, then I have to at least try, Aunt Claire. I wouldn’t do it unless—”

“I got here as soon as I could,” he interjected, sounding breathless.

My jaw dropped. I’d recognize that English accent anywhere. “Will?”

I turned towards him. He stood in pristine khakis, his button-up shirt tucked in neatly with a belt helping to secure it. His pale blue sleeves were rolled up haphazardly, and the top few buttons were undone, giving him a relaxed appearance. What caught my attention, though, was that his oxford loafers had a bit of mud around the edges. He really had rushed.

“I am still your mentor, aren’t I?”

I smiled, but quickly frowned at the realization. “You knew this would happen.”

He nodded. "I can't change fate, Lexi, but I'm willing to help you try." He looked at Kellan and Craig. "Bloody bastard did a stellar job of hooking you two up, I see."

"What do you know about electricity and e-bombs?"

"Not much. But I know about you, Lexi." He pulled a small notebook from his pocket and flipped through the pages of the leather-bound book. "He changed the membrane potential of your cells."

"My what?" I raised my brows in question.

"He changed your ion channels to that of electricity, rewired the membrane potential of your cells to be charged by your emotions."

"In English?"

"Your emotions conduct electricity. You are a conductor."

"Can I absorb electricity, too?"

"You create electricity, but you do not absorb it."

"So I can power a house, but can't take any electrical shocks from it?"

He squinted his eyes as if he was trying to blur everything out in order to concentrate. "Electrical currents would run through you in order to do that," he mused.

"Do you think it's possible?"

"The possibility is minute. From all I've gathered, you are a conductor, and nothing more." He flipped through the pages of his micro-ledger.

"I don't like this at all, Jackson."

“If you were in my shoes and Aunt Claire was on that chain, wouldn’t you at least try?”

“Don’t flip the switch on me. You know the damn answer, but it doesn’t change what is.”

“What about an electrician?” Craig chimed in.

“They cut off the electricity before they go to work. They couldn’t do anything with those.” Auggy pointed towards their bare feet.

“An engineer?” Craig posed.

Auggy shook his head. “The individual pieces are built by hand, but never assembled by a person. It’s too dangerous.”

“Okay, new plan. What if we yanked them both off the chains at the same time?” I asked.

“Both bombs would go off and we’d all be dead.” Auggy’s expression was grim.

“I don’t get it. Isn’t this stuff supposed to affect electronics, satellites and communication stuff, but not humans or vamps?” Craig leaned forward, pulling on the chains with his arms though his hands were limp beyond the cuffs.

“There are different kinds, and we’re not dealing with someone dropping this in the sky over a city. We’re dealing with two vamps connected to the bomb itself,” Auggy replied.

“What if we had something to absorb the electricity attached to the chains?”

Auggy shook his head negatively. “Nothing can absorb electricity. It’s basically free electrons. They can only be

transmitted, passed through something, or blocked.”

“You know a lot about electricity.” I hadn’t decided if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“Maybe it makes me a bad person, but we test it on vamps in the concentration camps.” His voice was devoid of emotion; he had to be numb to a degree to torture others, I supposed.

“Let me be ignorant of that for now. If I survive this, then we will be having a talk about those places. The High Authorities are more like Hitler in that regard, and quite frankly it disgusts me.” I gritted my teeth, blocking out any visuals.

“It’s nothing compared to what a human endures as a prisoner of war.”

“But those vamps aren’t prisoners of war.”

“Maybe not war, but they’re still prisoners. The human justice system can’t handle them, so we do.” Auggy’s voice bellowed throughout the space, his conviction a foundation to his words.

Will cleared his throat. “Wood and rubber are excellent electricity repellants.”

I struggled to recall everything in elementary school science I’d learned about electricity. “A conductor is part of the circuit. Electricity always needs a circle of flow. It’s why birds don’t get shocked when they land on live wires. The bombs are the conductors, which are connected to the chains wrapped around the guys, who are standing on the ground. The four components are the circuit.”

“Go on,” Auggy prompted.

“A conductor has electricity flowing through it before it’s sent it out of it; it’s part of the circuit. So if I grab a cuff in each of my hands, you can pull the guys off the cuffs and I will become part of the current chart. The bomb will go off and the electricity will travel through me, the ground, and the chains. If we’re lucky, I’ll have the same charge as the bomb, so if I light myself up, the two charges will repel each other and I can break away.”

“I brought you rubber gloves,” Will offered, pulling a pair of yellow gloves from his pocket and passing them to me. “They won’t repel that high of an amount of electricity, but they will help lessen the sting of it passing through you.”

I tightly gripped the gloves, trying to disguise my unease. “Do I make it?” I couldn’t bring myself to look him in the eye, where I knew the truth would be.

“I hope so, but no city is the same as it was two hundred years ago. Every prediction has its flaws, particularly when electricity didn’t exist at the time it was written.”

I popped my head up. “They didn’t mention this?”

“Claire and I will free Kellan; you release Craig, Augustine,” Will directed. He ignored my question. I was beginning to feel like a pawn.

*“I would argue and try to tell you to stop, but if those three are letting you do it, then there must be some validity to your idea. I failed science, though, so I wouldn’t know.”*

*“I hope there is. Some things sound logical but turn out to be all wrong. Just know that I’m willing to try because I love you.”*

*“I’ve never doubted your love.”*

I studied my ring on my left finger. I slid it off my finger. "Aunt Claire, will you please hold onto this?"

She frowned but acquiesced. I placed my ring in her palm and then put on the yellow gloves.

"You don't have to do this, love," Craig said.

"I know, but I have nothing to lose."

"We do," he replied.

"Not if you survive."

"Not if you don't survive," he countered.

"Shut your gabber, mate." I tried to imitate his Australian accent but didn't quite pull it off.

"Way to cut the tension." He laughed, quickly sobering again. "Thanks, Lex."

I forced myself to keep my fingers straight, not balled in fists at my sides. It was important to focus on the task rather than the risk.

"You better not leave me." Aunt Claire's voice bit through my concentration.

"I love you."

"No. None of that goodbye crap, Lex. You better not leave me." She swung on her heels to face Auggy.

"Augustine, if she doesn't survive this, you better make room in one of your damn camps because I will go postal on my father's ass."

"We all will," Kellan stated.

—

*KELLAN*

I was in awe of her strength. She never ceased to amaze me. Damn if I didn't feel inferior and weak next to her. How many times was she going to have to save me? *I'm the man.* I was supposed to be saving her.

I knew I didn't have much of a chance against the gang of vampeens that attacked us, but had I been carrying a weapon, we would have had a fighting chance. That was the first thing I planned to do. If Lexi died by their hands, I'd rob every bank I had to in order to afford the weapons necessary to wipe him and his entire army out. I was tired of being pathetic; I was tired of losing. We weren't puppets. Our lives weren't toys to be played with, and I'd see to it that no one else had that power over us again.

She walked over and gently kissed my lips; her emotions grazed the surface of my mouth. I inhaled her scent, the smell of her surrounding me, squeezing my heart. She kissed my shoulder before squatting before me. She pushed her small, delicate rubber-gloved fingers between the tiny space between my leg and the metal cuff.

"Move them closer together," she said. Will lifted me at my waist and moved me a couple feet from Craig, whom Auggy had carried over. "When you free them, I want all of you out of here in case anything goes wrong. Get as far away as you can. No 'we can't leave Lexi' crap. Just go. Auggy, get Dr. H. to take care of them."

"You go it, sweetie." Damn. The gruff man sounded soft all of a sudden. That didn't bode well to me.

"What about you?" I pressed.

"I'll probably pass out for a while. If you don't—"

"Wait. Why don't we have someone solder these off?" Claire perked up.

“Because there are live wires running through those chains and the cuffs. That’s how they’ll go off.”

“Wouldn’t the heat melt the metal, but leave the wires intact so they could get out?” Her brows furrowed. She was trying hard.

“No. It’d melt the wire casing and probably set them both off,” Auggy answered.

“Oh.” Her tone was defeated. It was obvious her hope had deflated with it.

“I’ll be okay, Aunt Claire,” Lexi tried to assure her, but the woman didn’t hear it.

“Do you know how damn hard it’d be if I lost you, Alexa? Are you even thinking about that?” Her voice went up an octave, revealing her worry.

“I’m not planning on dying young, Aunt Claire. I’m not planning to let a little electricity send me to my grave. What I am planning is to give you all the opportunity to get away. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I know.” Her eyes watered as she studied Lexi.

“Enough of the dramatics. This isn’t the theater; it’s life. Now let’s either do this or leave them to rot.” Auggy’s words echoed through the confined cellar, a growl in his tone.

Lexi immediately sat down between Craig and me. Her body was dwarfed by our towering figures looming above her. I felt her hands shaking as she gripped the cuff. She was putting on a brave face, but I could tell she was scared shitless. I’d known that when she immediately closed off her thoughts the second we came into view.

“On the count of three, you two rip open the cuffs on his wrists and then his ankles. I’ll do the same here. You ready, Lex?” Auggy asked. She nodded, staring at the floor. Her entire body tensed with anticipation. “One, two... three!”

In a flash I was free and being whisked outside. My feet and hands were numb; no pain hitting me when Will slapped part of me into a tree, the bark scraping my skin. I lifted my head and saw the flash in the sky.

*“Oh, God, Lex. You have to come back to me. Concentrate, babe. Stay strong.”*

It was all I could do. I could only encourage her from afar. I wasn’t the one Sir Staten had cursed; I wasn’t the one who sassed vamps. I was her weak fiancé, and the reason she was enduring all of this right now.

—

## Chapter Four

I kept my eyes closed as the first shockwave ran through me. It was almost as if I was floating on a cloud for a brief moment in time, the white light blinding me before blue washed it away. Pain stung my body, my hands burning, aching to let go. I clenched my jaw, struggling to keep my teeth from chattering as my body trembled beneath the force of the bomb. I fought to push past the overwhelming tingling scorching through my limbs; I battled to pull the cuffs together. My skin was dripping with sweat, my vision a muddled mess of blue and white.

Digging deep, I grappled, fighting myself along the way, to bring the chains together. The second they touched, lightning crackled loudly, as if water had touched boiling oil. I doubled back, my body quivering uncontrollably. I was amazed to find no sign of the electricity racing through or around the chains. Had I not felt the currents and heard the telltale sounds of charges connecting, I would have doubted the existence of an actual e-bomb.

I shook my head, blinking several times in succession. I was here; I was alive but didn't quite feel right. My mind was present, racing, but my body was still prickling in the sky. Feeling hadn't fully returned to me; my nerves were loose wires fighting to be reconnected.

After what seemed like a lifetime, I was finally able to roll onto my knees to face the stairs. I knew I needed to get out. I needed to escape the constant low, buzzing noise. I needed to find Kellan and Craig, make sure they were okay. I closed my hands, leaning on my elbows on the concrete floor as I lifted my foot, attempting to place it flat on the ground to haul myself up, but it wouldn't cooperate. Was it

possible for a vamp to become paralyzed? No, I wouldn't be able to move my lower extremities at all if that was the case.

I collapsed onto my stomach. Yanking off the gloves carefully, I tossed them aside, determined to get out of the dungeon. My camp had left, but I didn't know if my grandfather's would return.

Gathering the little bit of strength I had left, I wiggled my midsection over the rough floor. After several minutes of attempting to reach the stairs, I stopped. I now knew why a worm moved slower than a turtle.

"Lexi?" I heard Al call.

"Down here!" I couldn't describe the relief that washed through me. I'd survived the physical demands of the job but couldn't seem to do anything beyond it.

Footsteps moved towards me at a rapid pace. I couldn't stop my heart from thumping excitedly in my chest at the sight of him coming towards me.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

Al didn't reply. He bent down to touch me but immediately yanked his hand back. I looked down and frowned. My body was aglow in blue. I didn't understand why it was happening. I wasn't having an extreme mood swing; I actually wasn't feeling anything.

"I'm so sorry, Lexi. I can't pick you up right now without being electrocuted." Lines creased his forehead. He began to search the room, but at the spark of electricity that lit up the space, he backed up. He continued looking around the room from where he was. "Wait. I can use the gloves."

“Don’t touch them! I touched the cuffs with them, and they were laced with something.” I sighed as Al frowned. I was weary, defeated. Normalcy was far from reach. Even as the tingling began to subside, a new, infinitely stranger sensation overtook me. My eyelids grew heavy. I... I was blacking out. “Oh, God, not...not—”

—

My eyes fluttered open, revealing a fluorescent light overhead.

“I was beginning to wonder if you were going to sleep all night.”

My head shot towards the male voice. I smiled. “Hey, stranger.”

“Stranger? Last time I checked, I was your fiancé, your lover, and I’m sure a few more things.”

“Partner in crime?”

“Nah. I leave that job for Mel.” He grinned, his emerald eyes sparkling as his dimple appeared on his left cheek.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, sitting up. It took me a moment to recognize the space as a doctor’s office. I scrunched my forehead as I studied the teal padding I’d been sleeping on.

“Me? How about you? According to their satellites, you took a million-volt shock.”

“I didn’t even know that was possible.” I wrung my hands together in my lap, thankful that all feeling had returned.

“It’s not. At least, it’s not supposed to be,” Dr. H said as he entered the room.

“They ran some tests on you while you were out,” Kellan announced.

“Oh.” I didn’t know how I felt about that.

“From what I’ve gathered, Staten changed your ion channels to that of electricity. His blood carried the equation to your cells and worked at an impeccable speed to rewire the membrane potential of your cells to be charged by your emotions. What has me somewhat perplexed, though, is no human being or vamp would ever be born this way. He had to have manipulated himself or had a partner administer it. Either way, it was done on purpose,” he said, his expression grim as he studied the manila folder in his hands.

“And in English, that means?” I prompted, grabbing Kellan’s hand for support.

“The most basic way I can explain it is he changed your ion channels to that of electricity; rewrote the membrane potentials of your cells to be charged by your emotions. The problem is you’re mostly human, which means your mood swings are strong. Essentially, in order to avoid these little episodes, you need to attend an anger management course and learn how to control your emotions. Basically, be more like a vampire and don’t have any.”

“But... I mean, there has to be a way to block this. Can’t you block stuff from certain cells in the body?”

“Of course... if you had the proper counter-formula. But we don’t. Quite frankly, I’ve never seen anything like this, and I really wouldn’t know how to fight it. You will just have to control your emotions for now.” He snapped the

folder shut and propped his forefinger against his chin casually. "I wonder... Of course, this is getting quite personal, but have you had intercourse since this change in your molecular makeup?"

I felt my eyes widen as I looked up at him. Was he really asking me this question? I fidgeted. Truthfully, I suppose it was a perfectly good question, considering that was something you did when you loved another person. At the height of the moment, the height of your emotions, your feelings for the other person were prominent.

"Um, no. We haven't." My voice was small, and I knew my cheeks were red.

"Please, do share with me once you have. I'd be interested in knowing how your body reacted to him in particular, as it seems your willpower is strongest around him. It's the only conclusion I have as to how you survived."

"You think I believed myself into survival?"

"No. I think you shut off the pain. Electrocuting a vamp would overwhelm its body with pain, which is both a mental and physical experience. Ultimately, it's the brain that controls the management of the pain. Most vamps don't have the mental strength to withstand the pain, and ultimately, that is what kills them."

"I thought you had to destroy a vamp's physical body in order to kill it?"

"If the brain is dead within the body, then no limb will move since it controls the body."

"But, technically they wouldn't be dead, only brain-dead."

“I could argue semantics with you all night, Alexa, but ultimately, I believe it was your willpower that subdued the pain and allowed you to survive, not what Staten infused you with.”

“Is that even possible?”

“The phrase ‘mind over matter’ exists for a reason. The mind is what acknowledges pain; the body only responds. It’s one’s willpower that determines whether or not they will withstand the pain. Look at women who give birth without drugs versus those who opt for the maximum dosage available. It’s a choice, Alexa. You made yours and survived.”

I watched as he opened the folder again, lifting a few papers.

“Do you think my willpower could keep me from lighting up like the Fourth of July?”

“Absolutely,” he replied, allowing the pages to drop back into place as he peered over the rim at me. “I believe you are capable of much more than you are even aware of. It will be interesting to watch what unfolds in your world over the next several years.”

I bit my lip, considering his words. “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Why not? I suppose it’s only fair, considering all I know about you.”

“What do you think of the feud between vamp kinds?”

“Hm. It’s been quite some time since I’ve been asked to speak about politics. Nonetheless, I believe it is a waste of time and energy, but it keeps my wallet full. I’ve cared for countless vamps who were injured by the opposite

party. To me, these hate crimes are doled out in fear. Vampires are of an historical era, an historical government. Despite their claims, they fear democracy, which is surely what would ensue should we all unite in peace.”

“Why is it that vampires let you medically tend to them?”

“Because they have no other choice. Dr. Zhan and myself are the only physicians in the Western Hemisphere with scientific knowledge and understanding of the vampeen and vampire body.”

“I suppose I don’t understand how they can make an exception for you, but turn around and lash out at another vampeen.”

“Why does a white man befriend a black man, but tell racist jokes? It’s because they acknowledge the friend as being above or outside the perimeter of the subject.”

“So, they see the difference between their friend and other black men?”

“Precisely. Or they respect the friend for another attribute despite his stereotype.”

“Hm.” I’d never considered that. It opened my eyes a little more to what I was dealing with, what we were dealing with.

The more I pondered the conundrum, the more truth it held. My grandfather was fighting every vampire as if they were the ones who had shunned his father. He was stereotyping them rather than offering them the chance to prove that they were different, that they deserved his respect and friendship.

“One last thing. Is it true that vampires gain strength with age?”

“No. They gain wisdom and tact. That is what gives them the edge. Now, if you will excuse me, I have another patient to check in on. Kellan, you have my phone number should anything new arise. Alexa, it was a pleasure. Take care.” He bent his head slightly before he turned towards the door.

“Um, thanks.” I slightly waved as he left.

Kellan leapt out of his chair, keeping hold of my hand in the process. He lifted me off the table, my feet landing without a tingle on the linoleum floor.

“Where are we?”

“Dr. H’s Charleston office.”

“I didn’t think he had an office.”

“Where else would he deliver a baby?”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense.” I glanced around the room. Framed watercolor pictures hung on beige walls. A small wash station was located in the corner with cabinets above and below the sink for storage. The examining bed was on the opposite diagonal side with two chairs caddy-cornered to it. “Where exactly would he deliver a baby in here?”

Kellan chuckled. “He does have more than one room.”

Kellan and I walked hand in hand down the hall, through the lobby, and out the door. The stars lit up the night sky as a crescent moon seemed to wink at me. Small offices and boutiques lined the lamp-lit, empty street, but nothing looked familiar.

“Where are we?”

“Between Mt. Pleasant and Charleston.”

“Oh. And how exactly did I get here? Last I remember your dad couldn’t touch me.”

“When you blacked out, you literally blacked out. Your light show shut down, and he was able to grab you. He carried you all the way back to the helicopter. We were all flown here. Craig was able to leave almost right away, but I took a bit longer.”

I looked at his green polo shirt. I knew what had been beneath it hours ago: proof that my grandfather and his gang abused him.

“I’m fine, babe. We all are, thanks to you.” I watched as his face grew serious; his eyes began to glisten.

“What’s wrong?”

He opened the passenger door of a black SUV. He hoisted me up and in, the smooth leather sliding along my jeans. I recognized his move for what it was, though; he was using the car as a distraction to ignore my question.

I waited for him to climb in on the driver’s side and shut the door. I linked my fingers through his, the green stone of my ring glistening in the moonlight, proof that Aunt Claire had been with me at some point. “Kellan, please tell me what’s wrong.”

“Just have a lot on my mind, that’s all.” He shrugged, throwing the key in the ignition and revving the engine. It was hard to take a step back when I knew something was wrong, but he’d made it clear he needed the space, so I didn’t push.

## Chapter Five

The drive home was silent. I didn't know what'd set Kellan off, but tension filled the air and kept me on edge. I was grateful to have him beside me, safe and sound, but feared what was next. I refused to allow myself to consider this being the end for him, but the idea had knotted my stomach back in the cellar. I wanted to squeeze him, to kiss him and show him that I loved him in every way.

We pulled into the garage and hopped out of the car. A flash jolted me, reminding me of what I'd walked into twelve hours ago. So much had happened in such a short span of time.

Sensing my hesitance, Kellan secured my hand and escorted me through the door. "The Bladangs sent a few of their men to scan the house. No bugs were left, and nothing was tampered with." His gaze landed on the back of the sectional. "Although it looks like we might need to replace a few things."

I felt myself blush. "Sorry."

"It's okay. We'll work through it." His eyes traveled up to the gaping hole in the ceiling. His brows etched inward just enough for me to notice. "Maybe we should stay at my place."

"Where are your parents?"

"Auggy assigned my dad to connect with Romanov."

"Who's Romanov?"

Kellan frowned. "The Cesar of vampires."

Something about that didn't sit well with me. My serum level elevated in the back of my throat, fear twisting thoughts on Al's safety.

"Where's Aunt Claire?"

"With my mom. They're studying with Will."

"Should I even ask what they're studying?"

He smirked. "What else is there?"

He pulled me into him as he rounded the corner towards the stairs. I still hadn't brought myself to move anything or touch my parents' bedroom. I guess a part of me hadn't let go of them yet, hadn't gathered the strength to face the truth.

Kellan lifted my thighs around his waist and sped up the stairs.

"How about a shower?"

"Are you trying to hint at something?" I teased. I'd smelled the burnt odor of my clothes. They'd stood up to the electrocution surprisingly well, but they would probably never smell like laundry detergent again.

"Maybe." He shrugged.

I could tell he'd showered already, especially since he wore clean clothes. His hair had grown out to the point where he had to tuck it behind his ears. Part of me thought he was trying to be more like Kai, but I didn't broach the subject.

"Point taken."

I took a long, hot shower. I stood under the sprayer, wishing for the video on my grandfather's phone of Kellan to be erased. I couldn't stop the flashes of him being

tortured. I winced every time I heard the crackle of electricity popping off him and echoing in my mind. And poor Mel. I'd have to call her in the morning. I knew I'd terrified her with my eruption. I hadn't told her about it and could only imagine what deranged ideas were running through her head. I knew Craig would tell her the truth, but it should have come from me long before this.

I'd really messed up. We all had. Nothing had happened since the whole bout with Jack, so we'd let our guards down. Terrorism, assassination, and murder never take a holiday. They'd ambushed us with ease. We made it easy for them; we made ourselves an accessible target. I regretted Kellan having to suffer in order to learn that lesson. Things would definitely have to change, especially since my best friend would be joining us in a new and vulnerable state.

The second I stepped into the bedroom, dressed in my best bum clothes — VS capri sweats and one of Kellan's tees — my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Why the hell did I not get a phone call?" she fussed.

"Hi to you, too, Gabi." I rolled my eyes, laughing silently.

"Seriously, Lex. I'm in Miami, not India. You know I'll be there in a couple hours."

"I wasn't about to interrupt your honeymoon."

"Yeah, well, it's not much of a honeymoon when you know your friends are being put through the ringer, or when they're putting you through the ringer." Her voice turned mellow.

“I know you and Jack didn’t come together under the best of circumstances, Gabi, but Rafi would have wanted you to be happy regardless. He wasn’t a selfish person.”

“Tell that to my conscience. I can’t stop the feelings I have for Jack, but I also can’t seem to forget that had he not been messing with us, the vamp hunter wouldn’t have gotten a shot at Rafi, either. Every time I think I’m going to get past that little detail, a certain set of Hawaiian vamps remind me that technically I’m now married to my ex’s murderer.”

“I’m going to give you a bit of your own advice here. You can’t change what is, Gab, but you can change what will be. Wallowing won’t change anything; beating yourself up doesn’t change anything. Making the most of an awkward, tragic start, looking at the positive of the situation rather than the negative, will get you much further.”

“I know. It feels like I’m cheating on Rafi somehow, though.” I heard the distress in her voice. I knew that anguish wouldn’t be there if others would stop offering their opinions.

“Could you walk away from Jack right now?” Silence filled the other end of the line. “If you can walk away, maybe you should. Give yourself some time to properly grieve and heal. If not, then maybe you ought to consider the fact that Rafi gave you the best gift he could on his deathbed: another chance at a happily-ever-after.”

“I’m supposed to be the adult here, remember?”

“Then start acting like one.” I laughed.

“Yeah, yeah.” She grew quiet.

“What is it?”

“I talked to Jack about Europe and Puerto Rico. He was hired by Cecelia Romanov, Lex. He was just a pawn in her game, or I guess I could say playing her game for her. Ralph was hired by Romanov, not Jack.”

I thought back over the past. There was a time in Spain where the car was bombed. Al had said it wasn't ninjas, which meant it was probably Cecilia's crew. While I couldn't fault Jack for taking the business deal, I could fault him for following through with it, knowing that he was messing with peoples' lives. “Thanks for telling me.”

“No problem. I'll see you in a couple hours. Imara was the one who told me what happened, so she already chartered a plane.”

“See you soon.” I pushed the “End” button on my phone and tossed it on the nightstand. “Where were we?” I pretended to ponder. “Oh, yeah. I believe you owe me a kiss, Mr. Bancroft.”

He struggled not to smile. “What for, Miss Jackson?”

“For saving your life, of course.”

His smile disappeared. “I owe you a lot more than that.”

I sat down on the bed beside him. “Kellan, I was joking. You know you don't owe me anything. I love you. I would do anything for you regardless of what was there for return.” He nodded once, but his forehead was still full of creases.

Abruptly, he grabbed my shirt and pulled me into him. His lips landed firmly on mine; our minds instantly connected.

Flashes of images appeared. A black bag was thrown over Kellan's head, cutting off his vision; something tightened around his throat immediately. He fought hard, exerting every bit of his vamp strength, but it was no use. When the bag was removed, he was in the cellar, surrounded by an army of vampeens.

I winced at the first slap of the whip, the edges studded with spikes. That was the cut on his shoulder. Craig was yelling beside him, but the words were muffled. All I could feel was the sting of the first hit, feel the blood oozing down him before it healed.

I held still, my lips offering first what my mind would convey. *"I'm so sorry you had to go through that."*

*"I'm sorry I wasn't better prepared. We need to buckle down."*

*"How's Craig?"*

*"Shaken, but okay."*

Kellan pulled me deeper into him, his arms sliding down me, gently easing me flush against him. I relaxed into him, allowing him to take the lead. My hands landed on his chest as his tongue swept across my lips. I wanted to dive deeper into him, to devour him. I'd never get enough of him.

*"Are you willing to try?"*

*"I'll love you regardless,"* he mentally replied.

*"Let's try."*

I squealed when I landed on my back, Kellan hovering above me. He broke the kiss and peered directly into my eyes. His emeralds reflected all the love I knew he possessed for me. I'd never find another man who'd love

me the way he did, who'd do all he'd done for me. He felt insecure, as if I were the hero of the relationship, but in reality, he saved me every day I was with him.

"Try not to kill me." He smirked.

"Way to kill the mood, Romeo." I pursed my lips.

His biceps bulged, his muscles flexing beneath the material as he looked at me, a gleam slowly appearing in his eyes. "I think I can fix that."

—

We lay side by side, our breathing just beginning to regulate. His arms were wrapped around me possessively as he watched me through hooded lashes.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" I felt the wrinkles on my forehead as I studied him closely.

"Quite the contrary. You made me feel very good." He growled, pouncing on me, knocking me onto my back as he playfully nipped my shoulder.

I laughed, shoving him off me. "Stop! We need to get ready for school."

"Ugh. Way to kill the mood, babe." He groaned, dramatically dropping onto his stomach, face down into the pillows beside me.

"Yeah, yeah." I leapt out of bed in search of clothes for school. "What time is it, anyway?"

He lifted his head, peering at the clock on my nightstand. "5:09 a.m."

"Hurry up. I want to go see Mel before school."

“You never told her about your year-round, on-command Christmas lights, did you?”

I shook my head ‘no’ as I walked into my closet.

“Lexi! Come down when you get dressed!” Aunt Claire called.

*“Oh, God. I hope she hasn’t been here long. I didn’t even hear her come in.”*

*“We were a bit preoccupied.”*

I yelped when Kellan slapped my rear. His arms snaked around my waist as he nuzzled my neck. “Sir Staten mixed in or not, you smell delicious.” He ran his tongue up the length of my neck, eliciting a moan from me.

“Kellan, put it back in your pants for now and stop monopolizing my niece,” Aunt Claire yelled.

“Yeah, stop monopolizing me, Mr. Bancroft.” I stuck my tongue out at him as I withdrew myself from his grip.

*“I plan to monopolize you again later, so pencil me in.”* He wiggled his brows suggestively.

My cheeks hurt from the big smile on my face. “Okay.”

“You have thirty seconds before I come up there, young lady!”

“Coming!”

I threw on a pair of light denim skinny jeans with a few decorative rips, a simple cami beneath an oversized grey sweater with a hint of silver, and my black ballet flats. I grabbed a hair scrunchie off my nightstand, throwing my hair up into a messy bun atop my head on my way down the stairs.

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## Chapter Six

“What’s going on?” I asked as I hit the bottom step. I halted the second I saw Auggy standing with Lawrence and Felipe. Heat hit my cheeks as I realized they’d heard everything Kellan and I had spoken aloud.

“Hello, Alexa,” Laurence stated.

“Hi.” My voice came out raspy.

“*Buenos dias, Lexi,*” Felipe said, a smile lifting the edges of his mouth. I nodded, acknowledging that I’d heard him.

“This must be important for all three of you to be here.” Kellan came behind me, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“Why don’t we all have a seat in the dining room?” Aunt Claire suggested. I heard her swallow hard. She was nervous, uneasy about something.

I blocked my thoughts, unsure of what I was walking into, or being led into. Kellan secured my hand as we headed into the dining area. I sat in the first chair and waited as the others sat on the opposite side with Aunt Claire at the head of the table between us.

“What’s going on?” I blurted the second everyone was situated.

“As you are aware, Dr. H. took multiple blood samples from you while you were unconscious. I’m sure you are also aware of what has infected your cells by this point.”

“Could you please cut to the chase, Laurence?” Serum rose in the back of my throat. I took a deep breath, trying

to control my reaction.

“Essentially what he did to you was only possible because you are a vampeen. You must have human cells remaining in order for them to be rewritten.”

“Why does that matter?”

“We believe Cesar is going to try to bait you so he can create a stronger vampeen army. If he gets a hold of your blood, Lexi, then the vampire race will face extinction,” Laurence announced.

The weight of his words slapped me in the face. Kellan squeezed my hand beneath the table. I bit my lower lip, trying to wrap my mind around the idea of a world without vampires. Six months ago, I didn’t know a world with them existed; now I couldn’t picture my life without them.

“How is all this possible? I still don’t even really understand how a body could be switched to produce electricity.” I struggled to control my upset. My heart beat loud in my chest; my anger thrashed about at the trouble my grandfather intended to cause.

“The human body is swarming with currents in a regular state of existence. The signal to the brain is actually an electric charge with information sent via the nervous system to and from the brain. So it is not such a foreign idea,” Laurence explained. He clasped his hands together, setting them atop the table in front of him. Pale green eyes watched me, a sense of compassion present in them.

“What do you have mind?”

“The only way to ensure your safety, and the safety of all vampires, is to stow you away,” Felipe said, his European accent slurring certain words.

“When and for how long?” I slid into a business mindset. This was a negotiation.

“Immediately, and for as long as it takes to capture Cesar,” Auggy’s rough voice bellowed in the room.

“I can’t. Mel changes tomorrow, and I promised her I’d be there the whole time.”

Auggy’s hands closed into fists on the table. “Do you really know what you’re risking here?” he pressed through gritted teeth.

My voice was small. “Yes.” I stared down at the ring on my left finger.

“What?” he demanded.

Kellan growled at my side. I tightened my hand around his.

“I’m risking my heart and my life because should the vampire I love die due to my carelessness, surely my heart will stop beating and you’ll have to bury me beside him.”

“What the hell does that do for me when you’re buried and powerful chaos ensues?” Auggy pounded a fist down on the table, cracking the wood.

“Augustine!” Aunt Claire cried.

“Stop, Claire. I love you, but this doesn’t involve you right now.”

“The hell it doesn’t! You’re talking to my niece, not some stranger. Lexi may be young, but she’s fully aware of the risks of this life. Hell, she just lost her parents a couple months ago, and you want to shove this down her throat?” Aunt Claire’s eyes were fiery as she glared at Auggy.

“This is official business, not a family affair. I’m a High Authority member, and the protection and balance of both vamp races is my priority, not tiptoeing around a teenager with too much power and responsibility,” he snarled.

Kellan’s chair flew backward into the wall as he stood, towering over all of us. His hands were fists at his side, a scowl prominent on his face. “She didn’t ask for this. In fact, you were the one who put her in this situation. So I think you need re-evaluate the risks before you go popping off at the mouth to her.” The veins in Kellan’s body were jumping, his muscles clenching beneath his clothes.

“Sit your ass down, Bancroft. The only reason you’re here is because she has you pussy-whipped.”

My jaw dropped at Auggy’s statement. In a flash, Kellan was over the table and on top of Auggy. The chair broke beneath the sharp punch Kellan delivered.

“Kellan!” I screamed.

“Augustine!” Aunt Claire’s voice came out as an angry shriek.

The men paid us no mind. My eyes were barely able to keep up with them the way they whirled about the room. Kellan slammed Auggy into the wall, cracking the drywall and causing the picture nearby to come crashing to the floor. Auggy tossed Kellan into the glass coffee table my mother had meticulously kept smudge-free. Kellan was back on Auggy before I could blink, throwing him across the room. He smacked against the ceiling, which sent him into the wall before he collapsed onto the floor.

“Take it back, you arrogant bastard,” Kellan ordered. The set of his face said he wouldn’t stop until Auggy did.

“Auggy, perhaps you were a bit harsh with your statement. Just retract it so we can leave the house in one piece.” Laurence’s lips were in a flat line. He was clearly irritated by the way the men were acting, going at each other like heathens. Felipe didn’t look any more amused than Laurence.

“Please, Auggy.” I couldn’t believe I was pleading with him.

“You heard them. If this continues, it will be because you solely refused to sacrifice an ounce of pride,” Aunt Claire declared. She crossed her arms over her chest, tapping her foot expectantly.

I looked around at my mother’s formal living room. They’d destroyed just about everything except the sofas. My mother would have had a fit at the sight of it now. Unexpectedly, tears welled. She wasn’t here. She would never be here again. My mother was gone. She wasn’t going to walk in and freak out about the destruction of her prized paintings or her imported accent tables. She wasn’t here to order new furniture online immediately for delivery in under a week. The room would stay exactly as it was now unless I did something about it, unless I changed it.

I felt a single tear trickle down my cheek. They’d destroyed a part of her that was still here, or had been. I was too upset to be angry. Without a word, I walked out the front door. I needed to get away; I needed fresh air. I needed to escape the reality of what I’d lost so quickly with my parents’ deaths.

I didn’t make it beyond my neighbor’s home before someone joined me. I was surprised to find Felipe keeping pace with me.

“You’ve been through a lot these last six months,” he stated. His hands were in his pockets as he casually strolled beside me. His black hair shone beneath the glow of a streetlight.

“We all go through things.” I shrugged.

“We know this is a lot to ask of you. We are not blind to what you’ve sacrificed.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m not sure you understand my position. I’m not asking for an exception; I’m asking for freedom, the same freedom you offer to every other vamp out there. What I’ve been through has no impact on that equality.”

“Not every vamp out there has your power, Alexa.”

“It’s a power I don’t want. Who the heck wants to fear electrocuting everyone they come in contact with? I even took a chunk out of my own house, for Christ’s sake.” At hearing the shrill in my own voice, I sighed. Focusing on the sidewalk, I struggled with the petty things I missed from my human life.

“That’s precisely why you should let us put you somewhere safe.”

“Where I can rot away X amount of years of my life waiting for someone to be caught who very well may never be?” I sighed, shaking my head in dismay.

“It’s not a flawless idea, but the best option we have at this point.”

I stopped strolling and turned to face him. “Felipe, you can’t really believe that.”

His eyes narrowed. He was assessing me. He began wandering forward again. “Perhaps.”

“Haven’t you ever wanted to just be normal? Have you ever watched a human and been envious of the simplicity of their life?” My composure was staggering.

“I believe we’ve all endured that phase.”

“That’s what I want. I want to go to prom, graduate high school with the rest of my class. I want to go to college, achieve all I dreamed of as a human. I want to go shopping with my best friend without having to look over my shoulder and worry about being kidnapped or assassinated. I want to get married, have children. Children who will never have to worry about the political drama I do, children who could safely exist and not be persecuted for what they can’t change.”

“Even humans can’t offer that to their children. Racism still exists, and the political uproar over gay and lesbian rights has captured headlines all over. Persecution and bullying exist in both worlds.”

“Okay. I admit some aspects of that is merely a fantasy, but the others aren’t. I’m sixteen, not twenty-six. I know I’m immortal, but I’m not a vampire. I’ll age until I’m twenty-five, which is too old to pass as a high school student down the road.”

“You’re still in denial.”

“What do you mean?” I looked up, surprised to find we’d made it to the entrance of my neighborhood already. I turned around and headed back towards my house.

“You’re whining about what can’t be instead of accepting what is. You need to accept the fact that your old life is gone, Alexa. Stop complaining and start changing. If you want our world to be without persecution, you must create that world. Gandhi said, ‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’ You control what will come to be. Perhaps

you can't control the cards you are dealt, but you can still win the game."

I was ashamed to admit that he was right. I was acting like a spoiled brat, crying about what I wanted and couldn't have rather than going out and getting what I could. It was time I put on my big-girl panties. I couldn't change who I was, what I was, but I could make the best of it. I couldn't change the loss of my human life, but I could re-prioritize and make the most of my new vamp life.

"What if we compromise?"

"I'm listening," he stated, cupping his hands primly behind his back.

"Put me through boot camp. Teach me how to defend myself against the toughest of enemies so that I can protect this power. I'll take some anger management classes to practice control of my emotions in between, and you can assign as many bodyguards as you want to shadow me until you think I'm ready. I'll also let you slap on one of those tracker things to keep tabs on me."

"The problem is that even the best soldier can't survive alone against an army."

The absurdity in me wanted to say Chuck Norris could, but I recognized the humor as a nervous tic. "They can if they're able to electrocute them."

"And when you kill only half before you faint?"

"I'll work on it. You can keep running tests. Dr. H and Dr. Zhan can dissect me as much as they want until we find a way to control that part of it. Trust me when I say it's not fun to wake up in a new place every time."

“I’ll speak with the others and follow up with you. Until then, I’ll see what security the Bladangs can offer until I screen my men. We’ve had an influx of turnovers lately.” He frowned at the last line. It was the first time the weight of his responsibility was visible. The High Authorities did a lot for vampeens and vampires, but I think most of the ones on the payroll cared more about the money than the impact of the position they served.

“I accept.” I offered him a smile.

“You truly are mature beyond your years. Far tamer than your counterpart was at your age.”

“Kellan?” My eyes shot to Felipe. My ears perked at his statement.

“Yes. He was quite the troublemaker. He had several episodes that nearly brought him to the concentration camp.”

My heart thundered in my chest. My lungs struggled to receive oxygen. I knew Kellan hadn’t handled his transformation well, and had rebelled. I didn’t know it was to that degree, though.

“What stopped you from locking him away?”

“Imara. She claimed he would redeem himself, but only outside the prison walls.”

“Imara?”

“According to Auggy, she’s seen the two of you coming for several decades.”

I was flabbergasted, left standing on the front porch as Felipe strode into the house. What was wrong with me, with us? Everyone had confirmed that we were the ones, yet I was still squabbling, fighting for a life I clearly wasn’t

meant to have. Kellan evidently had his own internal battles brewing as well. We needed to come together on this. Granted, I was sixteen, but I needed to grow up and accept what was.

Regardless of what side of the fence you're on, life isn't easy. We all have a purpose. Kellan's purpose and mine had been unmistakably defined across multiple generations and timelines. While it wasn't easy to accept all that had happened and all that was written to, it could be easier if I stopped rejecting it. I wanted things. I wanted a different world for my children. I told Felipe I wanted freedom, and the only way to get it was to secure it myself.

I was finally beginning to understand why Sir Staten changed my cells. It wasn't to curse me; it was to empower me. He himself lived on a rickety houseboat, stowed away in the middle of the ocean where no one would find him, where his blood was safe, because he knew what would happen, what was about to happen now. He was forcing me to accept what I was, what I was meant to do and be.

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## Chapter Seven

I walked into the house and found Aunt Claire cleaning what was left of the formal living room. My skin lit up at the sight before me, a blue glow flooding my veins. I closed my eyes, inhaling deep to try to calm myself. It did me no good to get angry. The items were already damaged beyond repair; my mother was already buried and not rising to fix it.

I turned towards the dining area, where whispers carried over towards me. The three leaders looked at me. It was obvious they'd been discussing me. The moment I gave them my attention, though, they switched to speaking mentally.

"Where's Kellan?" I asked anyone who was willing to answer.

"I'm sorry, honey. He took off." Aunt Claire headed towards the kitchen to dump a dustpan full of glass into the trash can.

"What?" Shock ran through me. I couldn't believe he would just up and leave without a note, without a goodbye of any sort, especially considering what we'd just been through.

"He and Auggy butted heads pretty bad, and the damn buffoon wouldn't give in. I've never seen either one of them so pissed off. Kellan damn near choked the life out of Auggy before he ran off."

"What? Kellan? Not that he's not strong, but I just... well, Auggy is so military and comes off super tough. I guess I underestimated Kellan maybe." I sucked my lower lip between my teeth. Guilt rose. How could I doubt him?

It seemed like Kellan was always being shafted around my friends. Between the Bladangs and now the High Authorities, I could understand why he was so upset.

“Alexa,” Felipe called.

I headed back to the dining area. “Yes?”

“We’ve decided to accept your offer, on one condition.” He cocked his head slightly, as if trying to debate what my response would be.

“What’s the condition?”

“Your friends join you in boot camp,” he stated.

Laurence sat primly between Auggy and Felipe. His features were unreadable, much different from the challenging glower on Auggy’s face. A cut on the top of his head, visible through his military crew cut, was just beginning to heal. Kellan’s handprint still marred his neck, the discoloration of his skin indicating the strength Kellan had exerted. Felipe sat on the other end of the table. He seemed almost quizzical in his expression, yet confident. He’d determined that I would accept.

“Just who exactly are considered my friends?”

“Kellan, Melanie, Craig, Gabriella, Jack, Kai, Kaleb, Claire, Beth, Alejandro, Will, and whoever else you associate with on a regular basis,” Felipe replied.

“Guess that means you gotta go through it, too, Auggy.” I smirked. Too bad he wasn’t in a joking mood. I wanted to state the obvious, that Kellan had gotten beyond his defenses pretty well based off the damage, but knew not to push him. I couldn’t diminish the pride that soared inside me, though.

“I run the damn boot camp. I don’t participate,” he barked. “And after that little stunt your boy pulled, you’ll all be suffering by the end of day one.”

“I haven’t agreed to your terms, though.”

He stood, an intimidating glare in his eyes over my lack of acceptance. His chair tipped backward at his abrupt abandonment. “You coming or staying, Claire?” he asked, never looking away from me.

“If I’m going to have to make nice to an angry ogre all day for something I didn’t do, then I’m staying.” She lifted her chin defiantly, which only seemed to anger him more.

“Suit yourself.” He stomped out the door, ignorant to grace in that moment.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why the Bladangs? From what I’ve seen, they fight really well.”

“They rely too much on their daggers and other technology that may not be readily available.”

I was surprised by Laurence’s answer. Throughout Europe and Puerto Rico, while they had their daggers, the vampires seemed to be very strong at hand-to-hand combat.

“I can’t guarantee that their schedule will permit attendance,” I replied, ever so properly. “Also, you already assigned Al to another project.”

“What project would that be?” Laurence’s eyes narrowed slightly. It would have been missed by a human, but my vamp eyes noticed the ounce of tension crinkling the corners of his eyes more tightly.

“To get in contact with Romanov.” Didn’t these people communicate?

Both men promptly stood up. “We must be going now,” Laurence stated, adjusting his button-up shirt.

“Yes. It was a pleasure, Alexa. Here’s your new Blackberry. We’ll be in contact with a start date.”

I hesitantly took the phone, only then realizing mine must have been fried in the cellar. I shoved the device in my pocket. “I didn’t agree. I don’t think the terms are fair. My friends shouldn’t be punished because of their association with me.”

Felipe met me eye for eye. “I believe the American term is ‘guilty by association.’”

“It’s ‘innocent until proven guilty’ for me.”

“We’ll be in touch, Alexa,” Laurence said. They hadn’t conceded but hadn’t forced me, either. I knew it was the news of Romanov that was distracting them.

The moment they shut the front door, I turned towards Aunt Claire, dumbfounded. I focused on her the moment I saw tears rimming her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

She tried to laugh it off. “Oh, it’s nothing. Just that, while we have our daily tiffs, this was the first time that we’ve actually fought and gone our separate ways.”

“I know it’s been awhile since you’ve been in a relationship, but that sort of thing is bound to happen at some point.” I put my arm around her, pulling her into my side. With her heels on, she was a good four inches taller than my petite frame, but fit perfectly beside me nonetheless.

“Thanks, honey. I’m sure it’ll blow over. At the very least he’ll come back for the sex.”

“Oh, God! T.M.I.!” I leapt away from her.

She chuckled. “Oh, please, honey. From the sounds of what I walked into, it’d be the same for Kellan.”

Heat burned my cheeks. There was nothing worse than being caught by your parent. “Uh, speaking of, I’m going to call and check on him. Mel turns at midnight tonight, so I plan to make her final human day a good one.”

“Okay. I’ll stop by her place later this evening.”

“You can come with if you want.”

“Oh, no. I’ll be fine here. I need to finish cleaning this room anyway.” She gestured to the formal living room.

A moment of silence passed between us. I knew we were both thinking about her, but neither one of us was brave enough to speak it aloud.

“Um, Aunt Claire, I know you’ve always liked this house, so I wanted to ask you if you wanted to have it.”

Her head popped up, her gaze aimed directly at me. “What?”

I looked around. “I have a lot of good memories here, but I can’t help but feel uneasy being here sometimes. You try to keep the bad memories at bay, but it doesn’t always work, especially with everything of hers still around.”

“What if we did a complete makeover? We could turn this place into the dream home you and Kellan want.”

I shook my head. “It wouldn’t be the same; plus, you can’t erase the things that haunt me. Every time I’d open the master bedroom door, regardless of the way it looked, I’d always remember that day...” My throat began to constrict as serum rose. “The day I found her.” My voice

was barely above a whisper. I closed my eyes, concentrating on blocking out the flashes threatening my current thoughts.

“If that’s the case, honey, then I don’t want to live here, either. I want you to feel welcome wherever I live, and clearly you’re uncomfortable.”

“I feel bad selling the house, though. Mom loved this house. She was so excited the day we moved in. I remember her eyes lighting up as she gave me a tour and told me everything that she had planned.”

“Okay. So maybe we keep it in the family, but rent it out until we’re ready to come back. No use letting it sit here uncared-for in the meantime, especially since that wait could be infinite.”

“That sounds good.” I turned to head towards the stairs but stopped short. “I know you haven’t been working lately, but I’d feel most comfortable buying a new house with you. Would you mind helping me?”

“Of course not, honey. I’d love to! I’ve been thinking about dusting off my license here anyway, so this is perfect timing. The only stipulation is that you’ll have to pay cash because of your age. No bank or mortgage company will approve a loan for anyone under the age of eighteen with unverifiable income.”

“That’s fine. I don’t want to spend a lot. I was thinking a condo would probably be best since I don’t know how often I’ll be home to mow the yard.”

“I think that’s smart.” She smiled approvingly. “You’re growing up so fast.” Her voice softened. “I knew this day would come, but I never imagined it’d be me walking you through it all. And in truth, half the time I don’t feel like I do enough for you. If you ever need anything, honey, you

know you can call me day or night, regardless of where I am, right?"

I nodded. "I know. I just don't like to bother you when there isn't anything you could do to change it."

"I'll always try, though."

"You would've made a good mother, Aunt Claire, but I'm not a typical child. My life, even for a vampire, is very irregular. I think you're doing the best you can... when I let you."

"Sharon always said the same thing about you. She'd call me and tell me what new things you were doing regularly, but she'd always say that there was something irregular about you. You were so independent from an early age, and the things you'd say blew her away. She said about the only thing you let her do for you was cook, which is why she made sure to do it as often as she could."

I felt the tug on my heart as warmth spread through my chest. "Thanks, Aunt Claire."

She nodded. "I'll start pulling some listings this afternoon. I'll print them out and bring them to you at Mel's later."

"Thanks." I hugged her. I'd forgotten what it felt like to be a kid; I'd forgotten how good it felt to be taken care of. She gave me tiny glimpses of that from time to time, which I was grateful for.

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## Chapter Eight

Anxiety coursed through me as I knocked on Mel's front door. Kellan had agreed to meet me here after he went hunting with his dad. He said he needed to take the edge off. I tried not to think about how he'd go about it. It was no secret that Kellan didn't pull away, that he drained his victims. I knew I was a co-conspirator by turning a blind eye to it, but you can't change people; you can only hope to inspire them to change.

I fidgeted with my hands as I stood waiting. Mel hadn't answered her phone, but a quick call to Craig told me she was here with him.

"Hey, love," Craig greeted me as he opened the front door.

"Hey." I gave him a small smile. "Is she still pissed at me?"

"I'll dollop on the fifth there." He stepped back, allowing me to enter.

Mel sat in her pajamas, her knees tucked into her chest, on the corn-blue microfiber sofa in her living room. "I take it we're not going to school today," I stated.

"My dad said I didn't have to," she replied, but she didn't look at me. She stared blankly ahead towards the stairs that led up to her and Kyle's room.

"Does Kyle know what's going on?"

"No. He's at my aunt's house." Mel had never sounded so robotic.

"Is your dad home?"

“No. He’s coming later.” She turned her head away from my approach, staring into the dining room.

“Well, my girdle isn’t tight enough to squiddle in here with you, mates. I’ll just be bouncin’ bompits down the street.” Craig immediately walked out the door.

“What the heck are bompits?” I scrunched my forehead, shaking my head at his vocabulary.

Mel faced me, grimacing. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“How do you explain what you don’t understand?”

“The same way you did before, with examples. Do you know how shitty it feels to find out what’s going on with your best friend from your boyfriend?” She was hurt and disappointed. There was no greater guilt than to disappoint your best friend.

“Do you want to know the whole of it?”

“Of course I do, Lexi! I don’t throw out the title ‘best friend’ loosely. I guess your definition is just a tad different than mine, though. Last I checked, best friends didn’t keep massive secrets from each other about being able to light up half of Charleston!” She leapt up, her hands fisting as she moved them all around her. She paced the moderate living room space, her features twisting as she stared at the carpet.

“It’s no excuse, but I have a lot on my plate that I haven’t quite balanced yet. It’s not easy being a proclaimed savior of sorts to vamps while fighting off assassination attempts, rogue ninjas, dealing with being poisoned, sort of, and trying to maintain all things human and normal. I really don’t know how your mom pulled it off so well.”

She stopped mid-step and faced me. Her mouth lifted slightly in the corners. “She was really good.”

“I’ll give her that one for sure.”

“Listen, Lex. I’m not asking for anything that I haven’t willingly given you. I even told you every grueling detail of my first time for crying out loud. I don’t want to force you to tell me things. I want you to feel like you can tell me anything. I want you to want to tell me everything, not out of obligation, but because it’s great to share it with someone, no matter how stressful or embarrassing.”

“I get it. Because you’re not in this world yet, though, I don’t know how much is too much for you.”

“Nothing is too much when it comes to you, Lex. Remember when you showed up at Barnes & Noble looking completely different after only a week? I think I handled that pretty well after the initial shock.”

“You did, and you’re right. I’ve underestimated you. I’m sorry.”

“Wow! I finally dragged the apology out of you.” She smirked, sarcasm in her tone despite the truth of her words.

I smiled. “Do you have time to hear everything?”

“Eek! Of course I do.” She ran over to the sofa and bounced into place beside me, a big grin on her face. Her blue eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as she waited with anticipation. “Start dishing!”

I laughed. I hated not having a best friend. You always need at least one person who you can share everything with who doesn’t live with you. And as hesitant as I was before to openly share every aspect of my journey with Mel,

I found it freeing to do so. There was no more weight on my shoulders, no more watching what I said, what I did, around her. She took everything in stride. And at the end of it all, she didn't look at me with judgment in her eyes — she looked at me in amazement; a new respect blossomed between us then.

“So, you know what I did my last day as a human, now how do you want to spend yours?”

“I want Mexican food!”

“We are so sisters at heart.” I beamed, remembering the Mexican dish Kellan brought me the day of my transformation.

“Ooh! Do you think I'll finally grow some boobs tonight?” She looked so hopeful.

“Um, I'm really not sure. I know my mom said that the transformation is really your body getting rid of anything that could slow you down. It removes all the toxins, balances all of your hormones, and melts away and expels any excess fat until you reach your ideal BMI. It's about health, though, not beauty really. It's funny because humans could be exactly like us, minus the whole blood thing, if they did everything right for their bodies with no cheats, or at least that's what Dr. H. said.”

“I guess I could see that. I mean look at Olympic athletes. They're crazy fast and ultra fit.” She pursed her lips, thinking about the subject. “But what about the senses?”

“He said there are vitamins and herbs they could take that would naturally enhance them.” I shrugged. “It doesn't really matter. No human alive will ever do that from birth 'til death to test the theory, and even if they did, it wouldn't impact us.”

“True.”

“Now, what else do you want to do today?”

“Oh, Lex! I’m so excited, but nervous. I mean, how did you deal with it all? On one hand, I can’t wait to finally be a part of the group, but on the other, I see what you’re going through and am scared shitless.” She gnawed at her lip, her hands fiddling in her lap as she peered at me expectantly.

“I’m not really dealing with it. I’d like to think I am, I tell myself I am, but really I’m just existing right now, just rolling with the punches, so to speak. Honestly, after my talk with Felipe, I’m really considering dropping out of high school and just getting my GED.”

“You know my dad gave me the same option?”

“What? When?” My eyes widened as I watched her. Her cheeks took on a pinkish color.

“Last night. He said he remembered his transformation and how hard it was to balance everything. When he got the invite to join the vamp army, he quit school. It took him a couple years before he had time to get his GED, but he said he didn’t regret it. He said this world is different.”

“Well, I definitely agree with that last part. The thing that kills me is that it would be easier to drop out and get my GED, but what would I be sacrificing memory-wise to do it? We wouldn’t have any goofy prom pictures to look back on, no graduation caps to frame as an homage to the Cullen house.” I chuckled.

She laughed, her face lighting up. “From what you, Craig, and my dad have told me, memories become merely a pinpoint on your timeline. After so many years, like

photos, they fade. Just because you live forever doesn't mean you can remember forever. If we were humans, it'd be different. I'd have a hissy fit if you tried to drop out and get your GED, because when we're on our deathbeds, high school will have been sixty years ago, long enough to miss it, but short enough to recall it all."

"This is why you're my best friend."

Mel was goofy at times, but brilliant at others. She had a good grasp on an open perspective. I was overly analytical with a narrow viewpoint at times, and while she considered the details of things, she didn't let it muck up the realistic picture. She didn't nitpick; she didn't peel away every layer in hopes of finding something great at the bottom. She looked at situations for what they were. She was rational about everything, despite being dramatic at times, which was along the lines of being irrational.

"I've never asked. What does your dad eat or drink?"

"Blood." She cringed. "No offense," she quickly added.

"None taken. Drinking blood is nothing like drinking a Frappuccino, but you do what you have to."

"Craig eats food, though most of it is nearly raw and absolutely disgusting. He knows how I feel about it, though, and doesn't eat around me."

"We should probably go grocery shopping, then. I'm guessing Kyle isn't eating massive medium-rare steaks with runny eggs on a regular basis."

"Heck, no. I can't even force a pink hamburger from the grill down his throat. Everything has to be brown and burnt for it to touch his lips ever since his science teacher made his class watch a video on E-coli."

“We so need to document this in case he eats food when he turns.”

“I know, right?” She stood up, nearly bouncing in place. “Okay. So let’s go pick out my outfit for the day. I have to look fabulous on my last human day. Then we can go grab some Mexican food.”

“You do realize it’s only eight in the morning, right?”

“Okay, so we grab breakfast at Perkins, then do a little mall shopping, grab Mexican for lunch, and finish off the afternoon by going grocery shopping. Afterward we can come back here, put the stuff away, and watch vampire movies the rest of the evening with whoever wants to join us because I’m amused by the idea of becoming something like what’s on the big screen.”

“Breathe much?” I chuckled. She made a show of taking a big, deep breath and letting it out. “Oh, stop. Let’s go get you dressed.”

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## Chapter Nine

Who knew dressing a person for their last human day could be so grueling? Mel changed at least a hundred times before deciding on gray-washed skinny jeans and a violet oversized sweater that fell off one shoulder; it looked great against her lightly tanned skin and beautiful blonde hair. She paired the ensemble with bright blue ballet flats, threw on a long thin necklace with a decent-sized bird charm on it and chose a pair of pearl earrings, then grabbed a massive purse with a geometric pattern of gray, teal, and pale purple triangles. She looked nineties hip.

“Alright, I’m ready,” she announced.

We were just about to walk out the door when someone knocked. I couldn’t hear anything beyond the door, so I motioned for Mel to stay put. I stood on my tiptoes and peered through the peephole, but saw no one. I gripped the door handle and slowly turned the knob. Abruptly the door flew open. My instincts kicked in and I had the vamp in a headlock in a split second.

“Hell-the-freak-oh! It’s me, Lex!” Gabi yelled.

I immediately let her go. “Sorry.” I felt myself flush.

“Someone’s a little edgy today.” Her brows were near her hairline, as if to emphasize her words with an expression.

“I have a right to be after what happened.”

“True. So what are we doing today?” Gabi did a little dance in place.

“Wait, how did you even know where to go?” I asked, as we walked out the door together.

“I stopped by your place and talked to your aunt.”

“Oh.” That made sense.

“I love how we totally didn’t plan it, but we’re all in matching outfits,” Mel gushed.

I looked at Gabi, dressed in black skinny jeans and an oversized fuchsia and grey striped sweater. Stripes didn’t usually work for plus-size women, but it worked on her. She wore gold ballet flats and a gold necklace with a heart pendant.

Gabi bypassed my car and walked down to the black Corvette parked along the street. The passenger window rolled down, and I saw Jack tilt himself and wave in our direction. I was still a bit uneasy about him, but my friend truly did seem to be in love. She radiated at the sight of him. I waved back but slid into my car so as not to eavesdrop on their heavy flirtation.

“She seems happy.” Mel sounded surprised.

“Yeah.”

“Who would have thought? I mean if I lost Craig because of some a-hole playing games with lives, I can’t say I would turn around and marry him.”

“She’s having a hard time accepting it, but you can’t change your heart. We don’t have a choice in who we love, unfortunately.”

“I guess you’re right.” She nodded, sliding into the back seat.

The next couple hours were filled with lots of laughter and many trips down memory lane. We particularly fell into a fit of laughter when the guys not so discreetly came into the Mexican restaurant shortly after us. We’d suspected

they were following us but wanted to see how long they could keep it up. In the end we all filed in together at the grocery store.

“Okay, we need lots of steak and eggs,” I stated, grabbing the cart and heading that way.

We passed multiple aisles of goodness along the way, which resulted in a few detours.

“Chocolate!” Mel yelled. “I definitely need some of every variety.” She proceeded to toss one of every candy bar into the cart, along with a bag of Hershey kisses.

“You’re going to get sick from all that candy.” I scrunched my nose. Chocolate didn’t hold the same appeal it once did for me.

“Yes, Mother,” Mel droned.

“She’s right, love. Your bumper will be a brute Salisbury after all that.”

“I don’t care. It’s my last day and I want to gorge myself.” Mel stuck her chin out defiantly and walked ahead of us.

“Oh! Lex, you have to, have to please, please, please make your Christmas treats again! I’ve been describing them to Jack and he’s dying to try them. Plus, I can’t bake worth a darn and have been craving them.” Gabi stuck out her bottom lip to properly plead her case.

I chuckled. “Were they that good?”

“If they’re anything like Gabi says, I will pay you to bake them regularly,” Jack said.

“They were a chockle of delimptious heaven.” Craig shook his head in agreement.

I was taken aback by their sudden enthusiasm. I knew I had no treats left over that night, but I didn't think anything of it.

"They were amazing, babe. I could go for a batch myself." Kellan came behind me, pressing his front to my rear, and put his hands on the outside of mine on the cart rail. He turned the buggy down the aisle to the baking supplies. "Grab whatever you need and I'll pay for it."

"Really, guys?" I thought back over the recipes I'd invented.

"Yes, really. I want some of everything. Those cupcakes were heaven on earth, so you have to make those again, and the cookies, too. Oh! I want you to try to make a cake. I'm thinking it could be layered, but you can do what you want there." Gabi's eyes lit up as she grabbed two of the largest bags of flour available, twenty pounds, before tossing another two into the cart right behind them.

"Um, that's a lot of flour."

"I want a lot of those baked treats," she said. The guys nodded their heads emphatically next to her.

"You know they go bad quickly with the you-know-what in them."

"We'll figure it out." She began loading the buggy with granulated and powdered sugar. "You know, you should think about opening your own bake shop. Do you know how many of us would buy these suckers from you? I know there would be a heavy price for overnight shipping, but truthfully, they're worth it. We can't eat the regular ones, and damn if I don't miss them like crazy."

"I never really thought about it. Christmas was the only time I did it, and that was really just to keep a family

tradition going.”

An older woman raised her brows at our overflowing cart of baking ingredients. “You know, kids, sugar isn’t good for your teeth,” she stated in passing.

We looked around at each other. The joke was definitely on her. I bit my lip to hold back my laughter.

Mel came stomping down the aisle towards us. “There you are. I’ve been worried sick that I lost you.” She looked at the cart and then back at me. “My chocolate better not be damaged. The last thing I want is a Hershey crumble.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I burst into laughter. Between the elderly woman and Mel, I couldn’t hold back anymore.

“Ugh. You can be so immature sometimes.” She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. She grabbed Craig’s arm and dragged him with her towards the meat section.

The rest of the shopping trip was uneventful. The cashier’s eyes widened at the sight of all the flour, sugar, vanilla extract, and other ingredients needed for baking. Between the steaks, the supplies, and Mel’s chocolate, the total added up to just over five hundred dollars. My jaw about hit the floor twice; first when the total appeared on the screen, and second when Jack pushed his way through the crowd and swiped a black credit card through the machine like it was no big deal. He didn’t even bat an eyelash.

I knew I had money in the bank, but I hadn’t touched it for anything other than bills and gas. I didn’t know if that was good money management, sheer frugality, or just plain stinginess. I knew that I didn’t have my parents to rely on anymore for it, so I couldn’t be irresponsible with what I had, especially since I didn’t know when I would get paid

again. Regardless of the number in the bank, when you know you'll live forever, you can never have enough.

*"Don't be naïve, babe."*

I cocked my head to the side as I turned towards him. *"I'd rather be safe than sorry."*

*"Doesn't mean you have to be a hoarder of pennies."*

The irritated look on his face said this was a sore subject. I immediately closed my thoughts off to him, unsure of what exactly had set him off. He knew my feelings about money and saving, yet he acted as though it was a fresh, impulsive idea.

I sighed, walking away from him to Mel. It was her last day as a human. It was her day, and I knew I should be focusing on that.

"Now we take this stuff home, somehow squeeze it into the freezer in your garage, and do what?" I prompted.

"First, I want Starbucks on the way home. Then you guys can unload—" She looked at Jack, Craig, and Kellan pointedly. "And we can get the popcorn and movies ready. I already have the ones I want to watch."

"Sounds good. You know, I think I'm going to try to invent a special Frappuccino for us after tonight." I linked my arm through hers and we skipped to the car.

"I don't know quite what to think about that one yet." She bit the inside of her cheek as she considered the idea. "Not that it's a bad one. I'm sure I'll want it, but just the idea of it now, when my stomach is still human, kinda gives me the heebie-jeebies."

I chuckled. "I get it. I still remember all of that."

I could tell she was jumpy by the way her grip tightened. Luckily, Craig changed the subject.

“What doppel of an outfit have you picked for black bugs to see tonight?”

“If by ‘outfit’ you mean outfit, then I haven’t picked one yet. That’s part of my plan for tonight.”

“Oh! I can’t wait to rip through that closet of yours. I seriously wish I was two hundred pounds lighter to squeeze myself into them.” Gabi shooed Craig out of the way to sit beside Mel in the back seat of his car, which was nearly identical to Kellan’s black BMW.

I tossed Kellan my keys. “Do you mind?”

“What if I do?” He pursed his lips; he loved watching me squirm.

“Please.” I pushed my lower lip out a bit.

“What if I want to be selfish and ravish you on the ride home?”

I sucked my lower lip between my teeth, passing my eyes towards Craig’s car. Gabi and Mel sat in the back seat, talking animatedly over fashion, I was sure. Craig was already behind the wheel, prepared to be the chauffeur. Jack had given Gabi a quick kiss before heading to his car.

“Give me a sec.”

“Babe.” He reached out and snagged me at my waist. “I was just kidding. Go with the girls and have fun. I’ll see you back at Mel’s.”

I turned in his arms to face him; our bodies pressed together. The way his eyes glittered lightly reminded me of green glass, freshly blown and cooling within a tub of

water. My lips lifted at the corners as I gazed at him. "Are you sure?"

He nodded but pulled me closer to him. He leaned down and captured my lips. The second he touched me, the millisecond that his tongue swept out to taste me, all of his barriers came crashing down. "*Of course, you'll have to make it up to me later.*"

*"What do you have in mind?"*

He didn't reply, merely ran the tip of his fingers down the pulse point on my neck, sending a chill down my spine and all the heat in my body to my center. I groaned, both excited and angry at his torture. He knew what he was doing. The way he angled my head to deepen the kiss as his fingers teased my upper body, he was winding me up to ensure I knew what I would be missing while with the girls.

*"Since when did you become the devil?"* I chided.

*"Since you became irresistible,"* he countered.

"Uh-hum!" Gabi interrupted. "If I wanted to watch a porno, I have a collection at home."

I jerked away from Kellan, my eyes widening with shock. "Gabi!"

"What?" She shrugged. "I'm way beyond the minimum age to watch those things."

Mel was blushing and giggling beside her. "Come on, Lex, before she says something else my innocent mind can't handle."

"Innocent, my big behind. You can't tell me you've been with Craig for all these months without doing anything," Gabi said.

I turned back to Kellan. “I, uh, better go run interference in there.” I threw my thumb over my shoulder towards the car.

“Alright, babe. Have fun, stay out of trouble, and I’ll see you later.” He gave me a quick peck on the lips.

I smiled up at him. “You be safe, too. Turn on all the equipment in my car right away.”

“Yes, Mom.” He smirked, winking as he walked away.

I shook my head, racing over to Craig’s car. I forced Mel to scoot over so I could sit in the back with them.

“Seriously, Gab, not that it’s any of your business, but we haven’t done anything. We can’t.” Mel’s shoulders sank down as her eyes glued themselves to the floor of the car.

I’d already talked to Mel about the issue. Craig had been with a vampire. Originally, I’d believed that the whole pick and choose forever was only a female issue, but it turned out male vampeens were faced with the same dilemma. Since he’d been with a vampire, he was predisposed to them. He couldn’t hop around with any other species.

Mel was fifty-fifty. There was a chance they could connect and things would work out perfectly, but there was also the risk that his body would reject her. She’d been with a human before, so there was a chance that her genetics were pre-wired based off that, or it could be that the transformation gave her a clean slate. I knew she regretted being with Ben, but when you’re young, you live in the moment. Repercussions aren’t considered. The idea that you may not be with the same person years from then isn’t conceivable.

“Well. I feel like a speck of dirt on the floor. Sorry, chica.” Gabi placed a soft hand on Mel’s back and rubbed gentle circles. “Take it from me when I say everything happens for a reason. We don’t quite understand it at first, but everything works out the way it’s supposed to. If you’re meant to be, then things will work.”

Craig reached between the console of the car and linked his hand with Mel’s. He didn’t say anything, but was silently offering her all the comfort and strength he could. That one move told me just how much Mel meant to him; he was a male who wasn’t getting laid yet was still completely devoted to his girl. That alone spoke volumes. It was said that if a man really cared, he’d wait. He’d continue to be with you, even if there was a chance he’d never experience that part of you, because he loved you enough, because his connection to you was deep enough, strong enough without the physical union mixed in.

—

## Chapter Ten

When we arrived back at Mel's house, her dad was waiting. Craig and Jack put away the shopping bags from the mall and what groceries were hers while we made the popcorn.

"Mind if I use the kitchen, Mr. Hartford?" I asked.

"Of course not, Lexi. I know things were different when she was around, but you don't have to walk on eggshells with me. *Mi casa es su casa.*"

It wasn't lost on me that he didn't say her name, or that he got a faraway look in his eyes when he said *she* either. I knew he felt a loss; after all, she was the mother of his children, and, from what Mel had told me, the love of his life.

"Thanks." He nodded before walking away.

I stuffed a bag of popcorn into the microwave and started it. I opened a cupboard and pulled out a small pan. I set it on the stove and poured a cup of sugar in the bottom, followed by half a cup of water. Turning the stove on low, I grabbed a wooden spoon and began to stir the ingredients patiently for a minute before allowing the mixture to sit and start bubbling on its own.

"Gabi, will you please pour all these packets into a cup or bowl for me?" I struggled to remove ten condiment packets of blood from my pocket for her.

"Sure."

"Um, I'll be in the living room sipping my human drink and setting up the movie." Mel gagged at the sight of the blood dribbling into a bowl. At the restaurant, I'd discreetly

mixed it into my salsa and poured it on my tacos like hot sauce.

Gabi and I chuckled together as she left the room, disgusted. I knew I would have reacted the same in her shoes, but as a vamp, I saw blood as my life source.

Gabi had all the packets emptied into the bowl in no time. I turned the stove off the simmering sugar. Carefully, I emptied the blood into the pot. I grabbed some cream from the fridge and dropped a splash of it into the sauce. I immediately began mixing the ingredients together, turning the concoction into a red-orange caramel sauce.

I pulled out a sheet tray and arranged half the popcorn on it. Dipping the spoon into the glaze, I drizzled the bloody caramel over the popcorn. I followed with a sprinkle of coarse sea salt.

“Oh, God, these look heavenly,” Gabi cooed. “Can I have one yet?”

“It might taste better if you let them cool first; it gives the caramel a thicker texture.”

“I can’t wait.” She grabbed two pieces and shoveled them into her mouth. “Oh. My. God,” she mumbled around a mouth full of food. She grabbed two more pieces and ate them with gusto. “Um, you know I’m not sharing, right?” She grabbed the tray and turned towards the back door.

“Gabi!” I laughed.

“Okay, maybe I’ll give a couple to Jack.”

“Knock, knock!” Aunt Claire called as she entered the house.

I peeked my head around the corner to see her walking in the front door. “Hey. We’re about to watch

movies and eat popcorn. Do you want to stay?"

"How kind of you to ask the old woman who transformed nearly twenty years ago to join you, but I think I'll hang out with the adult in the room. Hello, Mr. Hartford." Claire smiled. She lifted her eyes to meet his with genuine welcome.

"Hello, Ms. Maxwell. Why don't we go somewhere else and chat?"

"Oh, God, Steven. When did we get so uptight and formal?" She guffawed.

"Sometime after high school I suppose, though when I'm not sure. Seems the numbers just creep up on you."

"I can certainly attest to that one." Aunt Claire placed a hand on his upper arm and followed him to the office.

I walked into the living room, the surprise and confusion on my face evident, I was sure. "When did they meet exactly, and how long have they known each other?"

"Since elementary school, my dear Lexi," Aunt Claire replied before she closed the office door.

“Well, that was a stunner.” Mel furrowed her brows, a wistful smile on her face.

“I’ve gotten more shockers in the last six months than I did all fifteen years of my life before then.”

“You can say that again.” She nodded her head in agreement, taking a sip of her Frappuccino.

“Hey, guys.” Kellan waved as he entered.

“Hey, K. Welcome to my preformation party,” Mel greeted.

“Preformation?” I cocked a brow.

“Egh. I’m still working on the perfect title.” She turned back to Kellan. “Oh! Vamptastic! Welcome to my vamptastic party!”

I placed my hand on her shoulder. She curved her head towards me. Her expression became unsure as she faced me. I shook my head, frowning. She shrugged.

“Hey, mate.” Kellan and Craig exchanged a fancy handshake.

“Show-offs.” Gabi rolled her eyes.

“Hey, Kellan.” Jack half-waved his hand from the love seat, his other hand fighting for the last few pieces of popcorn on the tray.

“Hey,” Kellan said as he made his way towards me. He planted a quick kiss on my lips.

“Lex, how much do you love me?” Gabi feigned childlike innocence.

“Not enough to make more popcorn. Plus, I used the last of my packets.”

“I was serious about the bakery thing. Hell, I’d even sign on as a silent partner if it meant I got to be your permanent taste tester.” She tossed the last piece of popcorn into her mouth as a punctuation to her offer.

“You definitely have a knack for it. I can’t say I’ve come across any other vamp offering it either.” Jack slid his arm around Gabi.

“You haven’t even dipped your piddles in the gluten hops yet, mate.” Craig pointed at me as he spoke to Jack.

“Sugarplum. Now I’m super curious, Lex. I mean, you have a room full of vamps all ready to claw each other up for your stuff. It must be good.”

I felt myself blush.

“I volunteer for Lex to make you a bloody cake for your special day, Mel. Of course, if you want to make it past your first day as a vamp, you’re going to have to share.” Gabi beamed.

Mel shrugged. “I’m game. But don’t you dare make it until I have a pair of fangs.”

Kellan burst into laughter. I faced him. I knew he was remembering just after my transformation when I’d asked about my own fangs. “You’re so wrong for that.” I shook my head negatively, but my lips betrayed me by lifting into a smile.

“What’s the daffle over, Ellen?”

“Don’t you dare!” I pointed my index finger at him, giving him the evil eye.

“I guess we’re not going to watch any movies,” Mel sighed, clicking the television off with the remote.

I looked around. Jack and Gabi were making sweet faces at each other; Kellan and Craig had started a blast-to-the-past conversation, which left me and Mel twiddling our thumbs on the couch. "Guess not. Is there anything else you want to do as a human?"

"Jump off a bridge."

"Seriously?" I threw my head back to study her.

"Those MTV challenges make it look fun. I know doing it as a vamp won't be the same because there's no risk for me then."

"Other than decapitation by a rock."

"Please, like I'd be dumb enough to jump into a rock pit."

I glanced at the clock. It was a little after six. "If we go now, we'll make it back in time."

Her eyes widened, excitement glittering in her sapphire eyes. "You're serious? I mean, Bible, you'll take me now?"

I checked on the others, confirming they were still deep into each other. "Let's go." I leapt up, grabbing her hand and pulling her along.

At the door, I realized Kellan had my keys. I dropped Mel's hand and raced back to him. "Mel wants Ye Ole Fashioned Ice Cream. We'll be back." I kissed his cheek and grabbed the keys from his pockets.

"Be careful," he tossed my way.

"Always." I smiled devilishly.

Craig blew Mel a kiss from the couch. She pretended to catch it before tossing one back. I chuckled softly. At

times, I swore they were more in love than Kellan and me.

Mel and I ran to the car, laughing like the schoolgirls we still were. Once inside, I turned on all the security features before pulling out and speeding off.

"I can't believe they went for the ice cream bit. Seriously, their vamp hearing is lousy," Mel stated.

"They were just focused."

"Yeah, well, you see how easy it is to miss the obvious."

"Hold that thought." I punched in the phone number for the only vamp I knew who would help me with this mission of insanity.

"Hey, Leka."

"Hey, Kai. I have you on speakerphone in the car. I have a big favor to ask you."

He hesitated. "Details."

"Will you help me and Mel bungee jump off the Cooper River Bridge for one last human hoorah?"

Mel was biting her lower lip, leaning into where my phone was docked on the dashboard. Her hands were clasped together as she anxiously awaited his response.

"Who else is with you?" he asked.

"No one."

"I'm in. I'm at the condo downtown, so I can be there in fifteen. Drive towards Mount Pleasant and park on that side of the bridge. I'll meet you there."

"Yay!" Mel exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air.

Kai hung up. For a brief second I panicked, worried I'd made an irrational decision bringing Mel out like this, but the moment I saw her utter elation, I pushed past it. We would be safe. Kai would take care of us. Worst-case scenario, I'd go diving in the Cooper River after Mel.

—

## Chapter Eleven

It took longer than I expected to cross the bridge and find parking on the Mt. Pleasant end. The roads were busy, despite the height of rush hour being over.

“O.M.G. I can’t believe we’re actually going to do this,” Mel said as she got out of the car.

Kai ambled towards us as we closed the car doors. Ropes and harnesses were encircling his buff bicep. He had a military appearance, serious features, and an air of confident deception. His hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, his civilian clothes dark yet alluring, like him in the moment.

I ran my hands along my curves. “Are we going to get in trouble for this?” I warily studied the trail of cars crossing the bridge.

“How could we?” He locked eyes with me, reminding me of the control we had over the situation.

A shiver ran down my spine. There was something in the depths of his eyes that shook me, a cold, hard desire so basic and savage my heart skipped a beat. He thought this was his moment, a moment to get close to me again without Kellan. I swallowed hard.

He cocked his head, frowning. “I’m not Jacob.”

I felt my mental block firmly in place, so he must have read me another way. I needed a distraction, something to pull me out of him in this moment. “Has everyone read that series?” I chuckled softly.

Kai pursed his lips, recognizing my initiative. I turned to Mel.

“Craig hasn’t. I’ve been trying to get him to, but he keeps saying he’ll never sell his soul for a pufferbull story, whatever that means.” She looked back at the water. Her body was stiff. She was afraid, yet eager to push her human self one last time. She shook her head slightly, pulling herself back to the moment. “So, are we gonna do this?” She tucked her hands in her pockets, looking expectantly between Kai and me.

“After you, ladies.” Kai indicated for us to walk ahead of him.

It took us thirty minutes at a safe, human pace to reach a few yards from the center of the bridge. We were stationed on the opposite side of the crosswalk to avoid causing a scene or unwanted attention. The sun was sinking below the horizon, the cover of night helping us.

Five minutes later, we were harnessed in, the cords secured to the bridge. Kai yanked on them a few times to ensure they were properly anchored. I tried not to get upset when he avoided eye contact. The way he jerked the cords through their hooks, I could tell he was bothered by what had happened at my car. I didn’t push anything, though. This was Mel’s time. I was here for her.

“How are we doing this? ‘Cause I refuse to go swimming in that muck below.” Mel tugged on her harness.

“I’ll pull you back up. Once you reach the bridge, you’ll have to climb a bit to make sure I don’t knock you around,” Kai replied.

“Sounds like a plan.”

I caught Kai’s attention. I studied him for a moment. He was a muted matte showing nothing, giving away no thoughts or emotions. I sucked my bottom lip between my

teeth, turning my focus back to Mel. She looked at me, then the water.

“Go with me the first time, Lex?”

I smiled. She appeared childlike, her anxiety curbing her enthusiasm. I grabbed her hand. “Let’s go.”

Kai helped Mel climb up to the jumping-off point. “You’ll have to wrap your arms around her,” he advised.

Mel was lost in the large drop below us. “I’ve got her.”

He nodded. “Be careful, Leka.” The gentle concern in his voice was endearing.

“Always.” I positioned Mel and wrapped my arms around her. “On the count of three. One... Two... Three!” I bent at my knees and jumped, projecting us up and outward.

Mel screamed as the cool night air rushed over us. I knew the skyline would be a blur to her human eyes, but she laughed and squealed vivaciously over every swing of the vine.

“Oh, my gosh! This is the best thing I’ve ever done! So freakin’ awesome!” Her ponytail hung towards the water as we swung from side to side, in and out of the bridge’s shadow.

I peered up at the bridge above us. Kai stood leaning against the rails, watching us carefully. A few curious humans dotted the bridge’s threshold. Camera phones clicked shots of the crazy teen girls jumping off the largest cable bridge in the U.S. I wasn’t too concerned, though. Despite the bridge being well lit, the lights weren’t bright enough to illuminate the water below, where we were skimming a few feet above it.

Kai began to hoist us up. I noticed he was grunting and straining, ensuring he put on a good show for the humans who lingered. Once we reached the railing, I gripped a bar and helped Mel grab on. Kai reached down and pulled her up and over the barrier.

“O.M.G. That was amazing, Kai. I want to go again.” She was bouncing in place, unable to contain her adrenaline.

Continuing the human charade, Kai bent down and grabbed my upper arms to help me up and over the bars. He set me down, his eyes penetrating mine, trying to push beyond the walls I’d erected between us. I couldn’t let down my guard, though, my carefully constructed fortress that made sure I didn’t hurt Kellan again.

“Uh, guys?” Mel cut in.

I shook my head and turned towards her. I forced a smile on my face. “That was great, right?”

“More exhilarating than sugaring plums. I want to go again.”

I checked around us. “Do you mind setting her up again, Kai? I don’t think I can pass as strong enough to lift her.”

He didn’t respond verbally but immediately acted on my request. He lifted her to the top of the railing. He stayed behind her, his hands ready to nab her should she become unsteady.

“Oh, my gosh. O.M.G. I can’t believe I’m doing this again!” she shrieked. I’d never seen my friend so happy. She bent at her knees and propelled herself off the bridge, yelling with delight the entire way.

I rested next to Kai along the metal bars, observing the scene below.

“You haven’t called or stopped by,” he stated.

“Sorry.”

He glanced at me sideways before facing the water again. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”

He studied my ring. “I take it things are going good?”

“Um, yeah.” My heart fluttered in my chest as I gazed down at the stone.

Abruptly I was yanked into him, Kai’s mouth descending on mine before I could stop him. His lips were soft, covering mine like a silk sheet, but there was power behind his touch. He caressed my cheek, sliding his hand down and around to cup my head. Warmth spread over me, and my body began to tingle with awareness. I was always aware of Kai, but I fought that awareness. I didn’t want to be sensitive to him. I didn’t want to have those feelings for him, but if I was honest with myself, I already did.

*“Maybe I’ll never be the love of your life, but you’ll always be the love of mine.”*

I froze, quickly coming to my senses. I immediately fought to extricate myself from his tight grip. Our breathing was harsh, erratic. The way he looked at me, the way he wore his heart on his sleeve when it came to me, nearly broke me. I hated the pain I was causing him, but I also loathed him for putting me in a position to hurt Kellan again. He’d seen the ring on my finger yet acted anyway.

I narrowed my eyes at him, my face pinching. I was shocked to feel tears prickling my eyes. “You can’t do that,

Kai. You just can't do that to me," I pleaded.

His gaze traveled the well-lit bridge before landing on me. He closed the gap, pressing my head against his chest. He bent near my ear. "You can't do that right now, Leka. Your tears are bloody." His hushed tone calmed me, despite its delivery.

He lifted my face towards him, his thumbs sliding beneath my eyes. "I will never apologize for how I feel about you. With or without a ring, my feelings will never change."

"Why? That's what I don't understand, Kai. There are millions of women on the planet, plenty of vamps, too. Why not go after one of them?"

"Because none of them—" He stopped at the sound of Mel's frantic voice.

"Um, guys, there's a boat heading straight for me. Guys? Holy sugarplums! Lex!"

The bungee cord bounced against the railing. I was at the handrail, pulling her up at the speed of light. I forgot all human façades and focused on rescuing my best friend.

"Hurry, Leka. Your grandfather is on that boat," Kai warned.

"How do you know that?" I fumbled with the cords, wishing they weren't so pliable.

Kai took over once Mel was close to the bridge. He bypassed the rails, pulling her to safety immediately. "We have to go now," he ordered.

Mel's expression was anything but happy now. Concern etched her brows; fear widened her eyes. "We're in danger, aren't we?"

Kai helped me with the last cable attaching us to the bridge. “No time to explain.” His eyes led me to footsteps in the distance behind us.

I looked to see a group of army joggers, their uniforms claiming they were, anyway. I knew better. If Kai was rushing, they were a vamp threat.

“Kai—”

“I’ve got her. Forget the human crap. Run.” He heaved Mel onto his back and took off at full speed.

I followed suit, my heart racing. Serum flooded my mouth, reality shaking me to the core. For me to be in danger was one thing, but for Mel to be... My body hummed, the telltale sign that I was being electrically charged. *Crap. Not now. Please not now.*

At my car, Kai shoved Mel in the back seat and climbed in the driver’s seat. Every security feature was activated by the time I closed the passenger door. He sped off towards Mt. Pleasant, away from danger, but likewise, away from Mel’s house, where she was set to transform in roughly three hours.

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## Chapter Twelve

Kai pressed a button on the side of his watch, a simple silver square design with a black leather wristband. Suddenly, the front plate illuminated a dial pad. He spoke a phone number aloud. I watched in awe as the advanced technology punched the numbers in for him. A moment later, Kalel came in loud and clear over the speakerphone function of the watch.

“What’s wrong?” Kalel’s voice was calm, yet held a sharpness in the clip of his words.

“We’re being tracked and chased on the Mt. Pleasant side of the Cooper River Bridge. We need an airborne diversion.”

“Who’s we?” he countered.

“Mel and Leka.”

I heard a rush of air escape Kalel’s lungs. “I can send our guys, but it’ll take about twenty minutes since the pad is at the lake house.”

Kai shook his head, swerving in and out of lanes, barely avoiding pedestrians along the sidewalks in front of the plazas. “Call in the army.”

“I’m accessing your satellite location from Bet-batch. I’ll send it to Auggy now.”

The watch returned to its former façade as an ordinary accessory that millions owned. Kai ground his teeth, repeatedly checking the rearview mirror. A yelp from the back seat reminded me that Mel was still there; her heartbeat was erratic to the point of nearly being a solid blip on a monitor.

“Holy sugarplum fairies. Lex, are we going to die? I mean, I haven’t even really lived yet. I’m way too young to die. I at least need to live another decade to see the progression of fashion as a vamp with the cash to indulge in it.” She was rambling, trying to talk through her nerves.

“It’s okay, Mel. We’ll be fine. The car will protect us, and we’ll protect you,” I assured her.

“What’s with the air stuff?”

I looked back at her. She’d pulled her knees to her chest. Her arms were firmly wrapped around her legs; her hands were encircling her ankles and her fingertips white beneath her grip. She leaned her head on the tops of her knees; her eyes were darting all around.

“The air stuff is a helicopter that they’ll send up in the air. It’ll trail over my car and take out any targets that we can’t see,” I explained.

“Even with all these people around?”

I sighed, trying to think of a way to explain it. “I once saw a show. They taped missing children posters on the walls and pillars in a busy mall then had the same children posted walk around. Not one person recognized the children or even paid any attention. Humans are oblivious. They’re so caught up in their own world that they miss what’s right in front of them. Vamps move fast. If a human can’t even recognize a flower bush they pass every day on their way to work, what’s the likelihood that they would notice a vamp being hit with a tiny dart from the air? It’s rare.

“Plus, the vamp army works above and below. Even if a human saw what happened, the vampers on foot would clean it up before the local police could get wind of it.”

She seemed to accept that. She took a deep breath. “I trust you, Lex.”

“Thanks.”

“But if you ever electrocute me, I’m hosing you down.”

I laughed. She was definitely feeling more at ease. “Deal.”

As I turned to face the front again, I heard the blades of a helicopter slicing through the air off in the distance. Backup was on its way.

“Have you seen anything?” I asked Kai.

He was in mission mode, focused on the task at hand. His lips were slightly pursed, his nostrils flaring each time he breathed. His eyes were like swords, cutting through the terrain in front of us, seeking out our escape route, seeking out the enemy we were trying to outrun while calculating the options and risks in his mind.

“Black SUV two cars behind has stayed on our trail,” he stated, never diverting his focus.

“Why do the bad guys always drive a black car?” I mused.

Mel laughed. “The ultimate prank would be to spray-paint their cars bubblegum pink. That’d probably be worse than taking out all their men.”

“Ooh. We should so do that one day!”

“I say we start with Jack’s car. It’s only fair since he was somewhat responsible for what happened to Rafi.”

My serum rose higher at her reminder of Rafi. It felt like I’d lost so many people, that I was forgetting them

slowly but surely. It didn't sit well with me but was better than wallowing in self-pity over it.

"Sounds like a plan." My voice lacked the enthusiasm I'm sure she was hoping for.

I knew Gabi struggled with the situation; I didn't know anyone who wouldn't. It would take some time before we all accepted things for what they were. Kai and Kalel hadn't even allowed Jack into their house yet, and Gabi owned a third of it. The circumstances were awkward at best, but you can't change who you love, unfortunately, and Gabi and Jack had an undeniable connection.

I heard the high-pitched whistle flying through the air straight towards us, pulling me quickly back to reality. A chill ran down my spine as the car went black, all electronics ceasing to work in that split second. It was as if we'd driven into a dark tunnel and turned everything but the engine off. The car stuttered to an abrupt halt. An eerie silence filled the car.

"Kai!" Kalel's voice echoed through Kai's watch.

"Yes," he replied, hesitance in his tone.

"Don't touch anything. Don't attempt to open the car. Don't move a muscle."

Mel gasped, holding her breath subsequently. A tiny whimper escaped her right as the first splinter was heard.

Like a rock rippling a pond, something was causing the glass of the windows, windshields, and sunroof to crack and spider web outward. The crackle of tempered glass rattled me to the core. I'd tucked my hands beneath my thighs, afraid to touch anything.

"Talk to me. What's going on?" Kai demanded.

“Ah!” Mel yelled when the car rumbled, a vibration shaking the outside.

“They hit you with something new. The entire car is coated in some sort of black tar. Problem is it went on wet, seeped into every crevice, and hardened within seconds, so there’s no penetrable corner. It looks more like glue or sealant when it dries, though. They’re trying to see how they can get you out, but so far nothing short of a jackhammer seems to be a workable option.”

“Uh, guys.” I bit my lip, feeling their eyes turning in my direction. “We may have another more serious problem. If they coated the car, then we’re not breathing clean oxygen — we’re breathing carbon dioxide.”

The tension was palpable, the silence working me.

Suddenly, Mel’s hysteria broke through. “O.M.G. I’m gonna die. We’re all going to die. What the hell? I live sixteen years, am a model citizen in every way, and yet I’m still going to be punished by death.”

“Mel.” My tone was strong, willing her to listen to me. “I know you’re scared. We all are, but I promise you, they’ll get us out of here.”

“I want out, and I want answers,” she declared.

“Where the hell was our air support?” Kai barked.

“Apparently they were distracted by some army men on foot and missed the SUV,” Kalel replied. “Hold on.” Kalel’s voice was muffled as he spoke to someone in the distance. “Alright. Listen to me, Kai. I need you to see if there is a way to get all of you into the front seat with you. They’re going to try a chainsaw first, but if that doesn’t work, then they’ll be forced to use a jackhammer in the back of the car to avoid any fire hazards under the hood.

The slope of the back of the car will probably have it caving in before they get to you. The moment you see light, tell me. I'll have you and Leka break through from the inside out at that point."

I opened the dash compartment I'd shoved my phone into earlier. I couldn't even worry about the missed calls from Kellan, Gabi, and Craig. I immediately turned my phone and lit up the area around me. In the dark, it was a bright light, but still meager at showing the details of what we were up against. I lifted it up to the passenger window. Serum flooded my mouth; spider veins covered the glass. I didn't know how it hadn't caved in on me yet.

"Just focus on getting Mel up here," Kai said.

I nodded. I slid to face the back of the car, nearly yelping at the sight before me. My panoramic sunroof had thin strips of a hardened substance dripping down and along its edges, the width of it just wide enough to jail us all in. Each of us had bars of black imprisoning us to our spots, but Mel was in the worst position of them all with bars on one side of her, a small window on the other side of her, and the risk of the back windshield caving in on her from behind at any second.

Kai had repositioned himself to take in the scene with me. Our eyes met, the same concern I was experiencing reflected back at me in his brown eyes. He pressed a button on the side of his watch. "None of us can move."

Mel's heart tripled in speed as Kai's words echoed through the cramped space.

"We have no option but to proceed from the back. The engine was running when the substance seeped in. We're lucky nothing has exploded yet." I heard the solemn and dread mixed in Kalel's voice.

“Drill on the passenger side,” I said. “I’m the only one on this side of the car. Mel’s in the back behind Kai on the driver’s side. Try to drill between the passenger door and back seat.”

“No,” Kai drove out.

“Yes.” My voice held not an ounce of doubt. “Listen, we’re running out of time and air. Mel is about to transform in I don’t know how much time now, and we have to get her home to do that. I promised her she’d get out of here safely. I’ll survive just about anything, but she won’t. Kalel, tell them to stop wasting time and drill on the passenger side.”

Shadows danced across Kai’s face from my phone. His features were taut; he clenched his jaw. I heard the tiny grinding noise from his teeth rubbing together beneath the pressure of his jaw. Anger and desperation showed in his eyes.

I shook my head at him. “I’m not backing down.”

A minute passed in silence before I heard the motor of a tool outside my door.

Vibrations rattled the car. I closed my eyes. I leaned my left side into the back of the passenger seat, my back against any potential shatters.

Kai grabbed my hand, threading his fingers through mine. “You’re always the brave one.” His voice washed over me, calming me. He lifted our entwined hands and gently kissed my fingers. “You don’t always have to be.”

“Yes, I do.” My voice was barely a whisper, an admission I didn’t enjoy.

“Leka, at some point, you’re going to have to ask for help. I’ll be waiting and ready when that day comes, but

please don't let your pride kill you in the meantime. I would miss you." The plea in his voice crashed through my carefully reconstructed walls.

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## Chapter Thirteen

I swallowed hard. Why was it every time I thought Kellan and I were solid, something or someone interfered? I didn't love Kai the way I loved Kellan, but he was still able to manipulate the feelings I did have for him at the perfect time.

Glass shattered down on me. Kai immediately tried to pull me into him, but the hard black goop stopped me. Mel screamed in the back seat; her breathing became labored as sobs wracked her. I couldn't reach her to touch her, to soothe her.

"Kai, let go of me, please. I need you to try to calm Mel down. You can reach her; I can't."

He hesitated but finally released me. I winced, sitting back onto a seat of glass. The shards bit into my skin but didn't slice me, thankfully.

I heard Kai swish in his seat. Mel shrieked. "It's okay, Mel. It's just me, Kai. It'll just be a little longer before they get us out of here."

"I can't do this. I can't handle this shit. Lex, I don't know how you do it. I... I want my dad, I want Craig, I want clean oxygen. I..." A new wave of tears choked her.

I sighed. I couldn't believe I was about to do this. I dialed his number. My phone didn't connect right away, struggling to reach beyond the cover of my car to a satellite. Anxiously, I waited for him to answer; I knew he was who she needed.

"About time you bellas chimed," Craig answered.

“Craig, I need you to calm Mel down. Don’t ask me to explain right now; don’t get Kellan on the phone. Just take care of her.”

“Always, love.” All the humor had drained from him.

“Kai, please hold my phone to Mel’s ear.” He took my phone, the light of the screen swirling around in the car until it reached its final destination. Mel’s cries slowed as Craig’s voice soothed her.

“Don’t beat yourself up over it.” Kai’s voice rang through my thoughts.

“Sort of hard when I brought her out here.”

The car began to vibrate, commotion rocking my side of the vehicle.

A light went off in my head. “Kai! Do you have your dagger?”

I felt the smooth handle as he placed it in my palm. I immediately turned around in my seat, glass pricking my skin, ripping at my jeans as I faced the broken window behind me. I pressed the gold blade to the hard, black film. It sizzled, liquefying beneath the blade.

“Oh, my gosh. It’s working!” I dragged the knife slowly along the top of the window, aiming to cut a hole large enough for us to escape.

The tools cut off and the vibration stopped as I continued cutting our way out. Voices broke through for the first time.

“They’re coming out. Have the doctor on standby for the human,” a deep, gruff male voice ordered.

The moment the blade connected with my starting point, I punched the piece I'd sliced out and away. A swarm of men in black uniforms rushed me.

"Don't touch me!" I yelled, jerking the dagger up towards the sky so as not to hit anyone accidentally. I knew the damage it could cause.

"Back up!" the same male commanded.

I sought the brusque voice calling the shots. His black uniform had the name "Drexel" engraved on it. The black ops-style ensemble hugged his thick frame tightly. His tan skin, shaved head, and the sharp angles of his face gave him a harsh beauty. The moment we made eye contact, he nodded his head once, indicating they would give me my space. I climbed out of the car, glass scattering about in the car and on the concrete road beneath me. I immediately turned and passed the gold dagger back to Kai so he could slice his way out.

Drexel was at my side the exact second the blade left my grip. "We need to get this glass off you. Allan, dust all the glass off the passenger seat so the others don't sustain any further injury. Johnson, I want this area swept again for humans. The road block is a mile out in each direction, but check for those on foot slipping past it at the shopping center before the starting block." He finally turned back to me, leading me towards an SUV with the trunk wide open, a vamp army medic ready to remove the glass from my back. "You okay, Lexi?" I shouldn't have been surprised that he knew my name. It still threw me for a loop, stopping me in my tracks. "I was previously informed of the names of my entrapment victims. You smell like a vampeen — that's how I knew you were Lexi."

I nodded my head. "Yes, I'm alright. Please make sure my friend Mel gets out okay."

“Done. Sergio will take care of you from here, but I’ll be back to check on you.”

The next ten minutes were a blur as the male EMT removed all the glass slivers from my pants and the few that were caught in my sweater and digging into my back. Kai cut Mel out of the car with his dagger since only a few people could use it. The paramedics immediately checked her. Once she was given the all-clear, Drexel saw to it that their minds were washed of what had happened.

“You’re all set,” Sergio announced. I watched the soft-spoken vamp clean the trunk. He was short for a male at about five feet, seven inches. His Hispanic heritage gave him a solid tan, dark brown hair, and full rose-colored lips. His body was solid. I could see him being a human army medic before he was changed.

“Thanks.” I gave him a small smile as he walked away to discard the bowl of glass and bloodied strips.

“How are you?” Kai asked. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“I’m good. How’s Mel?”

“Traumatized.”

I frowned, my eyes gazing at the empty road. They’d blocked off traffic a mile away on each end, giving us the chance to get out without causing a commotion. Knowing Auggy, they probably obstructed air traffic overhead, too, so the news crews couldn’t get wind of our incident.

I shuddered when warm, strong arms encased me. I breathed in the scent of him, the only vamp I could actually smell. I pressed my face into his chest as I wrapped myself around him. Soft lips pressed to my head. Tears stung my eyes. Why did he continue to rattle me? Why did life

continue to beat me down? Why did my best friend have to be involved? My mind was yielding to the overflow of questions that I would probably never have an answer to.

He stood there holding me until I'd pulled myself together; he was my silent strength. I leaned back, staring up at him. I busied my teeth with my lower lip. This was such a hard thing for me.

"I'm ready to ask for help." I watched his eyes focus on mine, his full attention on me. "Will you train me to fight hard with and without weapons?"

He nodded. "Whatever you need."

"I need to be better. I've become too weak. I'm too easy of a target now, and my friends are, too. It's not fair to ask them to step up. It's my job to."

"Don't do this for them, Leka. Do this for yourself."

"I am. Believe me, I am."

His eyes crinkled in the corners, a small smile lifting his lips. "I own a warehouse downtown beside the old Navy docks. I'll text you the address. When you're ready or have time, I'll meet you there."

"Thanks." He leaned in, but I quickly turned giving him my cheek. "Kai." I sighed his name. "We can't — I can't —"

"You keep telling me that, but your body reacts to me every time I'm near. I see you fighting it, but one day, you'll give in. I'll be ready when the time comes."

I studied the ground off in the distance, unable to face the potential truth in his words. "I, uh, should go check on Mel." I broke from his grip, determined not to think about him.

Mel ran to me, throwing herself into me the moment I was within range. “Holy crap, Lex. How do you do this? How do you stay calm when your life is always on the line?”

I hugged her tight. “I’ve gotten used to it. You can’t stop living because someone threatens you.”

She yanked herself back. “Lex, these people aren’t just threatening, they’re trying. There’s a big difference!” Her concern was difficult to ignore.

“I’m not saying it’s something to ignore. I’m saying that I’m not going to drop everything; I refuse to give them that kind of control over me.”

She looked pensive as she fidgeted in front of me. “You’re so much stronger than I remember. When did you grow up?”

I chuckled. “I think it happened back in October when I became this.” I gestured toward myself.

“I don’t know if I have that strength, Lex. I don’t know if I can do what you do.” She shook her head, her eyes watering.

“No one’s asking you to, Mel. I won’t think any less of you if you walk away.”

“So, that’s my choice? Give up our friendship and live a normal, mediocre vampire life without you, or stick by my sister’s side and live life on the edge under constant threat of assassination?” Her brows drew together in anger; she fisted her hands at her sides.

I sighed. “I wish it was easier, that it was black and white instead of gray. Based off what I’ve experienced so far, though, no one who’s around me is safe.”

“Lex, I’m not selfish enough to toss our friendship away. I chose you over my own mother, for crying out loud. You need to stop being such a masochist. Fight for what you want, yes, but don’t keep putting yourself down and willingly sacrificing anything and anyone to do it.”

Where was all this doubt creeping in from? Why was I constantly trying to fight this thing alone when so many were willing to step in and help? They weren’t making uneducated offers, yet I was blocking them every chance I got. I was so wrapped up in trying to control situations I would never have control of, and in the process was ruining my relationships.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I want you in my life. I want us to be looking back a hundred years from now with our great-grandchildren, laughing at all the attempts these *pendejos* made on our lives. I want us to laugh when they try and try, but get nowhere close to destroying what we have. You’re the Ethel to my Lucy, and I couldn’t survive all the mishaps without you.”

She smiled, extending her arms out to welcome another hug. “You should consider dyeing your hair red. How fitting would that be?”

“I don’t know how that would look on me.”

“Red is for anger; red is for blood. Red is for power. It’s a killer color, and a killer’s color.”

“I’m going to ignore the accusation in your reference.” I closed the gap between us. “This was one hell of a final human day.”

“Darn tootin’ fig newton.”

“You know, the more you hang out with Craig, the more you sound like him. Where did that line come from?”

She shrugged as she broke away. I heard my phone go off somewhere close, the ring shrilling from beneath a compress. She dug in her pocket and handed the device to me. Kellan's name and picture appeared on the screen. The moment between Kai and me on the bridge had stolen my focus. How could I let that happen? What was I supposed to tell Kellan? How was I going to tell Kellan?

I answered on the final ring. "Hello?"

"Are you alright?" His trepidation caused guilt to drown me.

"Yeah. How are you?" I kept my voice soft.

"Better now that I've heard your voice." He sighed.

I hesitated but knew he deserved the truth as soon as possible. "Kellan, I need to tell you something."

"I already know about Kai."

I shook my head, flabbergasted. "What? How?"

"You were on a busy bridge with cars full of people with camera phones. The picture was captured from multiple angles and uploaded to the Internet with many taglines."

My body trembled. Breathing became a chore as I fought to shake off my shame. He was so calm; too calm. He was too good to me. I deserved to be yelled at, punished, something.

"You don't deserve that, Kellan." My voice was low.

"I know." His tone was cold as ice. He took a deep breath, exhaling hard. "I'm tired of that — " he grunted rather than give Kai a curse name " — putting the moves on you. I saw in the pictures that you pushed him off you.

At first I thought it was just you pulling back, but I saw the shock in your eyes. I was also watching when you gave him your cheek just a bit ago.”

My heart sprinted. I frantically looked around, searching for him. Drexel’s voice boomed over the noise of vamps working to cover and tow my car from the scene unobserved. Others were using a jackhammer to remove and then refinish the road where the black substance had connected with it and made it unsafe for cars to drive over its hardened texture. Army personnel were being debriefed on handling anyone caught between here and the borders a mile out. A vamp helicopter was hovering overhead, watching from the sky for what others might miss on foot. From an outsider’s point of view, it probably looked like a national disaster recovery zone. Amidst the commotion, though, I didn’t spot him.

Finally, he stepped out from behind one of the SUVs. I shoved my phone in my pocket and ran full speed into him. I leapt into his arms, my legs wrapping around his waist as I draped my arms around his neck. He squeezed me tightly to him.

“How? Where?” I stumbled to connect the dots.

“Let’s just say Kalel and I have an understanding. He called. I ran out of the house before anyone could ask where I was going.”

I stared into his emerald eyes, fire blazing in their depths. “How fast did you drive?”

“I may have run a few cars off the road before I hopped a ride with the helicopter.”

“You never cease to amaze me.”

“Hm. And you never cease to get yourself into a new pot of trouble.” His lips curled up. He kissed the inside of my elbows on either side of his head. “You need to slow down, Lexi. Your grandfather’s not an amateur.”

I looked back at my car. It was draped in black; its white finish would never be revealed again. “I asked Kai to train me with and without weapons.”

Kellan tensed. “If he lays another finger on you, I won’t hesitate to decapitate him.”

I swallowed my serum. I heard the sincerity of his threat; he was playing for keeps with me. While part of me was flattered, the other part was scared to death for Kai. I was learning new things about Kellan every day. He wasn’t the casual submissive vamp I thought he was; he truly was a force to be reckoned with.

I swung my gaze to his lips. “I don’t think Kai will try anything, but you can tag along if you’re worried.”

“Look at me, Lexi.” I lifted my eyes. “I’m not your babysitter; I’m your protector. Kai is the least of my worries, but he’s still on my radar, for obvious reasons. Just don’t fall for his tricks. While I think he cares about you, I also think he has hidden agendas no one knows about.” The ferocity of his tone twisted my stomach. He was serious; he sounded close to lethal.

“I’ll be careful.”

“Good.” He captured my lips in hungry rage. He was rough, his mouth connecting to mine with a purpose, yet he cared enough to soothe my lips with his tongue after he had his way with them. “Sometimes I feel like I have an ice block around my heart, and you’re the only one who can melt it.”

I pressed my lips to his once again, savoring the taste of him. “You’re not a cold person, Kellan; you’re a soldier. Sometimes you have to be cold in order to survive. It’s about perseverance, nothing more.”

“Uh, Lex?” Her voice carried over me.

I immediately dropped my legs to the ground and spun around to face Mel. She was wringing her hands, shifting from foot to foot. I immediately knew we were cutting it close. “What time is it?”

“10:56 p.m.”

“Crap.” I walked past her, seeking the man I knew was in charge. “Drexel!”

I gasped, stopping short when he appeared in front of me. “I need the helicopter to drop us as close to Mel’s house as possible. She’s dropping at midnight.”

“Let’s go.” He brushed past me, already issuing orders into a Bluetooth headset. I followed his bodybuilder frame through the mess and crowd of army members falling over to do his bidding.

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## Chapter Fourteen

It was 11:34 p.m. when they dropped us over Mel's house. We climbed down the rope ladder that descended into her backyard. Neighbors came out, curious as to what the commotion was. I was sure we'd have to do a bit of cleaning up, but we didn't have time to focus on that right now.

The ones we'd left behind were waiting for us. Craig nearly took me out, his eyes shooting darts in my direction. He was more than pissed off.

Mel pressed a shaking hand against his chest. "Leave her alone. She saved me."

"Yeah, well, your hide wouldn't have needed a hero if it weren't for the — "

"Don't make this personal." Kellan was in his face in a split second. How had things gone south so quick? A simple last-minute human fun date was now dividing best friends.

"Both of you cut it out. We need to focus on my daughter right now, not some petty blame game." Mr. Hartford cut between the two vamps and grabbed his daughter's arm. "Let's go, honey."

Aunt Claire shook her head. "Let's get inside, guys. We don't need any more attention being drawn to this house that what already is."

The guys scowled at each other before breaking apart. Craig stomped inside after Mel. Kellan took my hand, murmuring as we followed the rest of them.

"What happened out there, Lex?" Gabi asked the second I closed the back sliding glass door.

“I’m sorry, Gab, but now isn’t the time. I promise to tell you, but I need to help Mel get through the next twenty minutes first. I owe her that much at least.”

“Sure thing. Anything I can do to help, *chica?*” She leaned into Jack, his chocolate-colored arms wrapped protectively around her lightly tanned ones. There was such a stark contrast between the two of them, yet somehow they seemed right. His muscles flexed, even as his lips gently connected with Gabi’s dark brown locks. He didn’t interfere, but I knew had anyone crossed Gabi, he would have done what Kellan and Craig did. It hit me in that moment, the truth behind his feelings for her. They weren’t fabricated; they weren’t an illusion. He was as in love with Gabi as Kellan was with me and Craig was with Mel.

I smiled at Jack, my heart warming as a bit of the anger I held towards him dissipated under the new realization. “I’ll let you know.”

His dark eyes softened. He knew where my mind was. “Let us both know.”

I nodded.

Mel was supposed to be my focus today, not assassins, not love, not a love triangle. Only Mel. Yet I couldn’t even do that for my best friend. In my effort to find balance, in my drive for normality, somehow I was dropping the ball on everything.

I glanced at the clock. It was already fifteen minutes till midnight. I needed to clear the air with Mel before the clock struck twelve.

Aunt Claire, Steven, and Craig created a protective circle around her. I approached with caution. Craig immediately lashed out.

“Keep that snot raisin buffoon away from her!”

“Craig!” Mel snapped at him. “Stop yelling at her. This wasn’t her fault.”

“Yeah? Who delivered your arse to the rompen stumpers?” he snarled.

I swallowed hard, fighting to keep my emotions in check. This was the worst time for me to get worked up and create a light show. My heart thundered in my constricting chest. Rage began to course through my veins. I was angry at him for being so arrogant and ignorant. I was angry at myself for allowing any of this to take place.

“Mel, can I talk to you alone?” I clenched my jaw, struggling to focus on her and to do right by her.

“Come down to the basement. That’s where I’m changing, anyway.”

I followed her to the door beside the staircase. Opening the door, she immediately switched on the light and led me down.

I broke into a smile as we reached the bottom of the stairs. “Is that what you’re going to change in?”

Her face lit up. “Yup. My dad built it and me and Craig painted and upholstered it. I ordered the material from China. The padding is just regular stuffing from pillows.”

“Wow. You don’t do things halfway, do you?”

She chuckled. “Do you like it?”

I studied the coffin. It was painted hot pink and sealed with a thick, clear gloss. The inside was covered in a custom Hello Kitty vampire print. Hello Kitty was draped in a red and black cape, and fangs with droplets of blood on

them protruded from her lips. Between each Kitty was all things vampire, from a silver cross lying in the center of a pink flower to a pound of garlic covered in a purple netting with a pink ribbon gathering the load around the top, to wooden stakes with bloodied tips and red bows decorating the top handle of the stake; it was every cliché dropped onto a cute, silky fabric lining the inside of the ultimate teenage vamp's sleep chamber.

“Are you kidding? It's amazing! I'm totally jealous that I don't have an ounce of your creative flair.”

“Yes, you do. You draw really, really well, and you have a good voice on you, from what I heard in the shower one time a few years ago.”

I felt myself blush. “I know things got out of hand today and shook you a bit. While my life isn't all roses and Hello Kitty like before, it's also not government ops and life threats twenty-four/seven, either. In the vamp world, there's a struggle for power going on. It's not quite a democracy with one leader, but not exactly a liberal authority, either, and I'm, we're — Kellan and me are — caught in the middle of it. That doesn't automatically mean that you will be, too, but I can't make any promises.

“That's probably not what you wanted to hear, but the truth of it all is this. I know I complain a lot about missing my simple human life, but in all honestly, Mel, I couldn't picture living any other way right now. I finally have a purpose. I don't just exist anymore; I'm creating the change that I never would have had the strength to launch as a human. Not because I was weak, but because I allowed myself to be weak.

“Humans so often diminish themselves. We beat ourselves up along with the world; we tear our self-confidence apart before we even step out into society for

them to take a swing at it, too. I never amounted to anything as a human because I didn't have the guts to. I didn't have the quick wit you have or the courage to embrace who I was like you. You were everything that I wanted to be, but didn't have the courage to be. That all changed when I changed.

"Everything that I've endured as a vamp has helped make me into the human I always should have been, the human you are. Given that, I can only imagine the powerhouse vampeen you're going to be. Don't let threats scare you, Mel. Don't let the bad guys kill your confidence. You were a strong human, and I'll be damned if you don't become a strong vamp. I expect nothing less than greatness from you. Only now, we can be great together if you still want to be."

Her eyes glistened beneath the single hanging light bulb in the basement. "You know, there was a time when I was jealous of what you'd become. You come off like Superwoman, and I felt like a measly ant, trying get your attention sometimes." She breathed, shaking her head. "I didn't know that's how you saw me, Lex. This whole time I was fighting to be a stronger human so I didn't have to lose you, and meanwhile, you were struggling to become more like me. Life has a funny way of working things out, but know this, Lex. I don't care if I'm a human, an ant, a dog, or a full-fledged vampeen, I want to be in your life. I want to help you keep doing these amazing things.

"Every time I hear a new story from Craig or my dad about something you did, I'm so proud; I light up inside. Maybe I was amazing to you as a human, but you're extraordinary to me as a vamp, Lex. I'm a little intimidated by your reputation, but as your best friend, I couldn't be more proud of you. I've seen the change. I've learned to expect greatness from you. With or without me by your

side, Lex, I have no doubt that you'll do what you're meant to. I know you'll succeed regardless of who comes at you. But you can be damn sure that I'll be beside you, beating down every vamp who threatens you and your cause. Sweet sugarplums on high, I can't believe I'm about to say this, but I can't wait to be your sidekick."

We broke into laughter that quickly faded back to the serious moment it was. Intensity crackled behind her sapphire eyes as they met mine. "I'll be there, Lex, and I'll try to be every ounce of the great vamp you think I'll be."

Blood stung my eyes. "I'm proud of you. Maybe I haven't been as available as a best friend should be over the last six months, but if you need anything, I'll always be here. Just call me, and I'll come."

Tears trickled down her cheeks. "Thanks." She blinked repeatedly, trying to stop her waterworks. Her gaze traveled to the decked-out coffin. She took a deep breath, blowing hard on as she exhaled. "Well, I guess it's time." She shook her body out. "I think I'm more nervous now than I was in the car earlier."

"I was exactly the same way, but it's really not that bad. You don't feel anything. Kellan described it best. It's like you're going under anesthesia. Your body grows heavy and starts to numb; your eyelids will feel like they have weights attached and you can't fight to keep them open. I know it sounds bad, but you drift off painlessly. Then you wake up feeling like you just took a quick cat nap."

She nibbled her lower lip. "Promise you won't leave?"

"They couldn't pry me away from your coffin." I smiled.

A commotion at the top of the stairs drew our attention. Mr. Hartford appeared first, his hands in

constant motion as he struggled to work through his anxiety. "It's time, honey." He pulled Mel into his arms. "Now, don't worry about a thing. We're going to be here the whole time."

"I know. Thanks, Daddy." She kissed his cheek and hugged him tight.

"Come here, my love bug." Craig stretched out his arms. He immediately pressed his lips to hers the second she was within his grasp. His hands cupped her face while her hands clutched tightly to his shirt. He washed her face with kisses before one final peck of his lips to hers. "We'll be here, waitin' for your superifitic entrance into the vamp world."

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

He sighed hard. "I love you, too."

"One minute, sweetie," Aunt Claire announced.

Craig lifted her into his arms and settled her into the coffin.

"I so want one of those," Gabi chuckled. "Have a good sleep, Mel."

I was surprised when Kellan ambled past me and kissed my best friend's forehead. "We'll be here."

Tears rimmed her eyes again. "Thanks, K. Thanks, everyone."

I watched as she shook her head, her fingers fumbling for the perfect spot. I knew she was feeling drowsy already.

Steven kissed his daughter's cheek. "I love you, honey. You're going to be perfect."

She barely nodded her head, though her eyes were wide with fear. My chest tightened. I wished I could climb in with her, soothe away every frightening thought. But there were some things you just couldn't change. There were some things people were meant to endure, and I had to trust that God knew what he was doing in allowing them to go through it.

"Someone get the light," Steven called.

"I've got it," Jack stated.

A second later, we were all in the cover of darkness, as was Mel. I watched as Craig closed the lid of the coffin. I was officially losing my human best friend, and gaining a strong vampire sister.

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## Chapter Fifteen

We all stood around, exchanging glances as if we didn't know what to do next. I knew this was our time to iron out all our issues before she woke up.

"I'm sorry about what happened tonight, guys. Trust me when I say I didn't plan it. None of it was planned, which was why we were so caught off-guard." I told them all the details of what had happened on the bridge and after, including my kiss with Kai. There would be no more secrets. I wasn't going to lie to the people who trusted me; their trust was all I had at times.

"My curdles are pumpin, but this wasn't you, love. I know that, but I love her. Drowning in your cud with those butt puddlers doesn't sit well, though. I see what my mate goes through. I see how hard it is for him; he's constantly freckled with fear. I don't know if I my pitter could survive that." He sighed, shoving his hands in his pockets. "You've got it at every angle, Lex, and I don't want her to jelly through it, too."

"I get it, Craig. You have every right to worry, but in the end, it's her choice. The same as it's mine. Kellan tried to stop me, but he couldn't. You can try to hold Mel back, but ultimately, you'll only lose her if you try to trap her in a glass jar with no air. Give her some freedom, give her confidence in herself and your relationship, and she'll always come home to you."

"As much as it angers me to say this, she's right, Craig. I despise the idea of my daughter being a target, but I also couldn't stand to lose her because I tried to control her." Mr. Hartford faced me. "I'm trusting you, Lexi, and you, too, Kellan. I'm trusting you both with my daughter's

life because I know her loyalty to you is impenetrable, but if anything happens to her, you're going to have a whole new enemy to look out for. And there's no officer in the vamp army that will be able to hold me back." His lean muscles flexed as he rolled through the emotions, the idea of losing his daughter.

I couldn't imagine the fear of your child's life being on the line. How did parents let their children venture out into gangs, into a life of drugs or violence? Every time my phone rang, I would be shaking, fretting that someone had found their body and needed me to identify it.

I swallowed hard, meeting his gaze. "You have my word, Mr. Hartford. I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe. I can't guarantee her immunity, but I'd take a bullet for her without thinking twice. I know the bond between parent and child outranks everyone else's, but the bond between siblings isn't far behind. I love her like a sister. I don't want to imagine a world without her either."

He nodded. "I appreciate that."

"Damn, Lex. And I thought I had it rough. When I see Kai, I'm going to rip him to shreds! I can't believe he's so insensitive and blatantly disrespectful. First to Jack and now to Kellan. Err! He is so in for it when I get a hold of him," Gabi growled, crossing her arms over her chest, tapping her foot against the concrete floor.

"Thanks, but I think he got the message. At least, I hope so."

"Lex, this isn't about love notes and pitters, this is about pissing on my mate's berry. You're his girl, and no sapple in a hula skirt should be pressing his puffer to you, bottle sticks." Craig scowled as he covered his chest with his arms, pushing it outward.

“He’s right, Lexi. I’d slit his throat if he came at my woman like that.” Jack pulled Gabi to his side, wrapping his arm around her waist possessively. Gabi had told me Jack was on the verge of doing it over what Kai had done to her in the past, but he knew that without Kai changing her, Gabi wouldn’t be here.

I knew they were right. I knew Kellan had every right to duke it out with Kai, but I had the irrational need to protect Kai. Perhaps I was putting some of the blame on myself. I kept running through my interactions with him, trying to pinpoint when I had given him the wrong impression. When did I tip him off to my feelings for him? It all went back to the house, to the first time I messed up. Kai was clinging to a momentary slip in the past because he knew it was a slip of truth. That left me caught in the middle of a quickly gathering war.

Gabi narrowed her eyes at me. “Oh, no. Don’t tell me you feel sorry for him, Lex.”

“I don’t feel sorry for him. I do feel bad, though. I know he’s messed up with a lot of women in the past, but I can see the desperation. I know he’s finally ready to find someone and settle down into a permanent partnership, and I think he’ll be good to whoever he does find.”

“You.” I turned as Kellan’s voice echoed through the space. “You think he’d be good to you.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“You didn’t have to say it. You thought it.” Kellan copied the others, throwing his arms over his chest, protecting his heart. His words had bite to them. He believed them, and that hurt.

“Yes, I thought it. I think he would be good to me, but if I wanted him, then I would have already gone to him. I

could have left you a long time ago, Kellan, but I didn't. Because while I care about him, my heart will always belong to you, and all the money, weapons, and power won't change that. But if you don't believe me, if you think I'd be happy with someone else, then take back your ring because clearly we have a trust issue at that point." My eyes stung. I ripped the ring off my finger and threw it in his direction. I was out of the basement and upstairs in Mel's room in the blink of an eye.

I closed her door, sinking to the floor with my back against it. God, I was such a mess. Maybe I wasn't ready for commitment. I was young, but... A stinging pain hit my chest. My lungs struggled to expand as tears cascaded down my cheeks. My skin was glowing a soft blue, but quickly ebbed because of the sadness curbing my anger. Who was I kidding? I would marry Kellan today if we were legally able to. I loved him that much. I wasn't perfect, but I loved him enough to try to be.

I stared through the red haze of my tears at Mel's room. It was the epitome of femininity, with a Paris fashion feel. Wide, bold soft pink and gray vertical stripes covered the walls all the way around her room. Pencil sketches of clothing designs hung in intricately carved black frames around the space. A crystal chandelier hung in the center of her room, reflecting the glamour back into it. Her bed was a twisted gold metal frame; her sheets and comforter were a crisp white with layers of frilly ruffles. Her dresser and desk were antique white with antiqued mirrored panels and crystal knobs. Above her desk was a plush twill-covered board with crisscrossing pink ribbons that held magazine cutouts of outfits Mel loved, along with photos and inspirational quotes.

One photo in particular caught my eye. It was taken the first year we met. My chubby face had a big smile on it

as I leaned into my friend's embrace. I had on jean capris with a long shirt to cover my chunkiness; meanwhile, Mel had on white shorts with a tank top that showed her midriff on the side with her arm draping over me. The picture made it obvious that we were opposites. I was fat; she was thin. She was blonde and blue-eyed; I had dark hair and brown eyes. And while her eyes glittered with happiness, my smile, though wide, didn't quite reach my eyes.

None of that ever mattered to her, though. She was determined to make our friendship work. She stood up for me on the playground and in PE when others taunted me. She introduced me to everyone she spoke to, always making sure I was included. In truth, she fought to give me happiness any way she could. She was always fighting to give me the life I wanted to have, full of popularity and glamour at the time, even when I'd given up on it for myself.

A single tear splashed her desk. I rapidly wiped it away, not wanting to mess anything up. Mel's closet was a complete pigsty, but her bedroom was usually spotless. It was reflective of her. She put on a great façade, gave the illusion to everyone that she had a great life, but behind closed doors, her life was anything but. Her mom ruled with an iron fist. I was the only friend allowed over, and for a social butterfly like Mel, that was difficult. We understood now why that was, but it didn't change things then.

I jumped at a knock on the door. I'd been so wrapped up in my thoughts I didn't hear anyone coming. I swiped at the few stray tears on my face. "Come in."

"I think the stress is getting to us," Kellan stated as he closed the door behind him. I watched as he moved towards me.

*"Maybe."* I shrugged my shoulders, avoiding eye contact.

He grabbed my hand, sliding the ring back into place. *"I trust you, but I'm a jealous bastard. That ring says you're mine and to keep away. That ring says that it's my job to protect you regardless of the circumstances. That ring says that forever wouldn't be worth living without you. Kai will never respect our relationship, but I have to wonder if he isn't pursuing you because you don't smile enough. Maybe he thinks I don't make you happy."*

*"But you do make me happy, Kel."*

*"Not lately. I find you laughing with others more than me."*

*"Not because you don't make me happy."*

*"Maybe. Or maybe I'm insecure about Kai because I know I'm slacking in some departments and he could steal you away."*

*"You could try to kill me right now, but you would still own my heart."* I frowned, realizing in that moment how difficult it must be to leave an abusive relationship when you love the person.

He cupped my face, his thumbs caressing my cheeks. *"It's not going to get easier, which means we have to become stronger."*

*"I'll always be willing to fight for us, with or without a prophecy."*

He shook his head once. He stared down at me, but it was obvious his mind was elsewhere; he'd blocked me out, though, leaving me wondering what dark alley his mind was wandering down. Slowly, he closed the gap between

us, capturing my lips. His mouth opened, his tongue swiping along mine.

Everything came crashing through as we connected. Every emotional scar was revealed in his mind, every insecurity was laid out there. His feelings were raw, the visions flashes of vulnerability. I melted into him, my heart reaching out to him. I understood the depth of his love, which unveiled the depth of his fear in losing me. When you loved someone more than life, how did you deal with the constant risk to their survival? When you loved someone more than breath itself, how did you handle a moment when someone else stole their breath away? Kellan acted on instinct, the vampire way, but out of love, a human weakness. I was his weakness, his only downfall, and perhaps would be the reason for his predicted fall.

*“If I died protecting you, it would be an honorable death. I would never regret dying so you could live another day.”*

*“I don’t even want to think about that. Let’s just focus on staying together, fighting together.”*

*“Deal.”* He gently pulled away.

I inhaled his breath, the sweet essence of his life. It was the oxygen that pumped the blood through his veins, for his heart was barely viable.

He kissed my forehead. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something, but I don’t want to upset you.”

“Sure.” I nodded, waiting with bated breath.

“Your parents had a beautiful home, but there are ghosts around every corner. How do you feel about getting our own place?”

My lips lifted in the corners. He knew me so well. “I already talked to Aunt Claire. She should have some listings printed off for us to review right now.”

“Then let’s go. The least I can do is buy you the home of your dreams, Miss Jackson.” He grinned, his dimple winking at me. His emerald eyes sparkled. How easily I could get lost in him again.

Aunt Claire, Gabi, and Jack were piled into the living room. They each looked like they wanted to say something, but held back.

“What?” I cocked my head and eyed them suspiciously.

“Nothing.” Gabi shook her head, averting her eyes. Not a typical response for her.

“What’s going on, guys?”

Gabi caved. “Kalel called me.”

“And?” I lifted a brow in her directions. She fidgeted. “Gabi.”

“I’m not a tattletale, okay? I would just say to grill your man a little harder.” She narrowed her eyes at Kellan.

Kellan tensed beside me.

Aunt Claire had been silent until now. “You hurt her, and I’ll use every ounce of leverage I have with the High Authority.”

“It’s nothing like that.” Kellan’s tone was venomous.

I took a step back at his attitude. Was this really the same man I had been with upstairs? “What am I missing?”

Kellan's face was hard as a rock. His hands were fisted at his sides, and he was glaring in Gabi’s direction. “My

business is *my* business,” he stated through clenched teeth.

“Yeah, well, when it affects my friend, then it’s no longer *just your business*,” she growled, throwing her fingers up to create mock quotation marks.

He took a step towards her. “You don’t get to decide that.” Ice was cooler than his tone.

Jack was in front of Gabi, his chest puffed out and a snarl on his face in half a second. “Back up off the lady. You created the problem for yourself by keeping secrets. She hasn’t betrayed you, only hinted at your own betrayal.” In his anger, his island accent curled each word, emphasizing his demand.

Hints of the Jack I remembered from Puerto Rico came through. His eyes were dancing with amusement despite the set of his jaw. He enjoyed watching others sit in fire. It was unnerving. The entire scene made me nauseous.

“Betrayal?” I gulped.

“Ask him about his nighttime activities while you’re snoozing away, Lex,” Gabi said from behind her husband. She peeked around his hard physique to glower at Kellan.

My eyes ping-ponged between the two of them; one was my friend, the other my fiancé. It wasn’t easy to decide who to believe when trust was the foundation of both.

“I’ve got the papers to show you, Lexi. Why don’t we leave these two to work things out without you being pulled into the middle?”

I bit the inside of my mouth. Why was peace so hard to find? Probably because it wasn’t found; it was created. But how does one create peace when both parties have guns aimed at each other based off their own half-cocked ideas or partially verified agendas that will never align?

“Come on, sweetie.” Aunt Claire grabbed my hand and led me into Mr. Hartford’s office. She closed the door behind us. “This is a soundproof room, and also where Gabi happened to take the call. From what I heard, Kellan has been an active night owl, but I don’t believe he’s cheating on you. I think he’s up to something, but sleeping around isn’t it. What I believe isn’t important, though. It’s about what you believe, and I didn’t think you needed to decide out there. They were trying to get you to decide between two relationships, not the real issue at hand.”

I strolled over to a chair situated in front of the elegant desk. It was a nice office, but then again, Mel’s mother had enjoyed nice things.

“Why don’t we focus on houses instead of...whatever that was or is?” I folded my hands in my lap.

She nodded and came around to the desk without another word about it. She sank into the white leather executive chair and retrieved her briefcase from the floor. “I have an array of options for you. If you want my professional opinion — ” She opened the manila folder and set it on the desk between us. She met my gaze. “Do you want my professional opinion?”

“Of course.” I leaned into the desk, glancing at the page lined with multiple listings and pricing for a specific zip code.

“I think a condo would be the best option for you, preferably one in the middle of downtown with a bit of height to it. It takes away the break-in danger, or at least lowers the risk if you’re on an upper level. They have several buildings with excellent security features, but I’m interested in one in particular because it’s guarded by an ex-army vamp. You also wouldn’t have to worry about a lawn being overgrown in the time that you’re traveling. It’s

also much more manageable, in the way of keeping it clean, than a home.”

“That sounds...perfect.” I sighed in elation.

A sense of calm washed over me for the first time that day. It was like this was exactly what I was supposed to do. It would be hard walking away from all the good memories I’d had with my parents in their home, but living, moving on so I could live, would be easier without their deaths, particularly my mother’s, dampening every corner.

“The one I scouted for you in downtown is on the sixteenth floor. It’s a three-bedroom, two-bathroom condo with a bonus room or office next to the master bedroom. It’s a split plan with the master and bonus room on one side and the other bedrooms and second bathroom on the other side. It has an open floor plan with a fully upgraded kitchen and a beautiful island with plenty of storage space and counter space in case you decide to pursue a pastry career.”

I studied the photos on the printer paper in front of me. My stomach knotted the moment I saw it. This was the exact condo Jack had shown us all in his vision of my future. The condo was beautiful. It boasted gorgeous hardwood floors in the main living area and plush Berber carpet in the bedrooms and the bonus room, high ceilings and neutral textured walls. It had a wonderful view of downtown with an outdoor balcony; unfortunately, it was the beautiful balcony that the vampires would intrude into my home from, though. Without further reflection on the awful memory, I merely accepted the fact that this was my new home.

“There’s a twenty-four-hour concierge service, a rooftop pool with a lounging deck, and finally a twenty-four-hour gym. I already told you about the security. There’s

also a garage with key-card access only that connects to the building. Both the garage entrance and the front entrance take you through the lobby. What do you think?"

I ran my hands over my jeans along my thighs. "Go ahead and put in an offer for whatever you feel the place is worth."

"Don't feel like you have to rush, sweetie. Why don't I make an appointment for us to go see it with Kellan, and you can make your decision then?"

I nodded. "Sure. Just let me know when."

"Of course." She straightened the printouts on the property before paper-clipping the pages together. She passed them to me, putting the remainder of the properties back in the manila folder. "Keep this so you can show Kellan later."

"Thanks, Aunt Claire." I folded the papers and stuffed them into a back pocket of my jeans.

She smiled. "Anytime. You know I'll always be here for you, Lexi."

"I know." I beamed.

She sighed, having returned everything to her briefcase. "Now, let's go check on everyone. Hopefully Jack prevented World War Three from erupting in the living room. Steven would hate for the furniture to be destroyed."

"I don't know how he can live here with her touch everywhere," I pondered aloud.

"To each their own." She shrugged. "I know he loved her, but I think it's more about offering a better transition for Mel and Kyle." I nodded. She placed an arm around my shoulders. "Let's go referee."

“Ay. I hope things were smoothed over by now.” My chest tightened in anticipation.

—

## Chapter Sixteen

Everyone was in a corner when we returned to the living room. Gabi and Jack sat side by side on the sofa, Kellan was leaning against the wall next to the entertainment center, his arms crossed, and Kalel was sitting in the love seat, quietly observing the scene. He was impeccably dressed in a pair of black slacks and a pale blue button-up shirt that looked great against his bronze skin and dark hair.

“Hey, Kalel,” I greeted.

“Hey, Leka. Glad you got out in one piece.” He hugged me and kissed my cheek.

“What brings you here? I figured you’d still be cleaning up the mess from earlier.”

“Gabi called about your bakery plans, so I brought over the contract for the blood.”

My eyes cut to Gabi. She blushed, sinking deeper into the protection of Jack. “I’ll pay?” she offered sheepishly. When I didn’t immediately relent, she huffed. “Do you know how hard it is to crave sweets all the time and never be able to indulge? You are the first and only vamp I’ve come across who was brilliant enough and is talented enough to combine blood with desserts so I could give in to every single one of my cravings over the last two hundred years.” I pursed my lips, watching her closely. She laced her fingers, holding her hands in front of her chest as she silently mouthed, “Please, please, please, please, please?”

I sighed. I understood the cravings aspect. I still remembered what a Starbucks Frappuccino tasted like. When you grew up relying on food for comfort, it was

painful at times to not be able to anymore. I was forced to face everything head on. "I'm going to start small. If I like it, I'll keep going. I'm not making any promises, though."

"Yay!" she cried. She was up out of her seat and squeezing me in the blink of an eye.

I chuckled before backing away to give her a stern look. "Now, do you care to explain how in the middle of an argument with Kellan you thought to call him for business?"

"Because it was for business. Kalel here is who Kel's been sneaking around with at night." Gabi cut her eyes at Kalel.

"What we're doing is none of your business, Gabi." Kalel frowned.

"Then why did you even mention it?" she snapped.

"I said I couldn't do anything Saturday night because Kellan and I had plans."

"You also indicated that it wasn't the first time you had rendezvoused with Kellan at night." She cupped her hands on her hips, leaning into her words.

"Gabriella, this conversation is over," Kalel commanded. His eyes flared; his full lips tightened into a straight line. I'd never seen him this angry before.

"Fine. Whatever. But if you're doing anything even remotely illegal or anything involving women, your asses will be bacon the moment I find out." She plopped back down on the love seat with Jack.

Jack had been observing the interaction silently from where he was. He squinted his eyes, cocking his head, and he glanced back and forth between Kellan and Kalel. He

closed his eyes for a minute; the room fell silent as he drew into himself. His eyes shot open and met Kalel's. "Be careful."

The lone warning sent chills down my spine. Serum rose in the back of my throat. Fear danced through my veins. Curiosity boggled my mind as my heart began to race, the unknown causing its flight.

I chewed on my lip, creasing my brow as I fought to control my reaction. Slowly my veins began to illuminate. *Crap*. This wasn't the time to get worked up. I looked to Kellan. His face softened the moment he saw me.

"I'm not cheating."

"I know that, Kellan." My frustration surfaced. I was angry that danger had to party so closely to us all the time. "I also know that Jack wouldn't issue a warning unless there was something to be cautious about. *Don't* get hurt."

His eyes traced the blue lines running beneath my skin. "Calm down, babe. We're taking every necessary precaution. You have nothing to worry about."

"Honey, why don't you move away from the electronics, just in case," Aunt Claire suggested in the calmest voice possible.

I stepped closer to the front door, away from everyone. I took a few deep breaths, waiting for the expansion of my lungs to squash my angst. A few moments later, I was back to normal.

Every face in the room held concern as they watched me from afar. I gave them a small smile, trying to brush off the issue.

“Are you okay?” Kellan asked, closing the gap between us. He enveloped me in his arms, kissing my head.

“Yeah.” My voice was barely above a whisper.

“Are you sure, sweetie?” Aunt Claire’s forehead creased as she studied me.

I shook my head. “I’m sure, thanks.”

“Um, why don’t we focus on that blood contract you brought, Kalel,” Gabi interjected, breaking the unspoken tension: their belief that I wasn’t okay.

“If you’re starting small, I won’t worry about a contract. I’ll just sell to you by the case at a discounted rate since I know you’ll be a repeat customer. If business grows, then we’ll set up a fixed-rate contract based on the units of blood per month auto-shipped.”

“Sounds good. By chance did you bring any blood with you?”

“I have some in my trunk. Kellan, why don’t you come with me to grab it?”

Kellan kissed my cheek. “I’ll be right back.”

I didn’t have to be out there to know they were talking about what did happen and what would happen Saturday night. It didn’t sit well with me, but I trusted the men enough not to press the issue. Kalel had been around long enough to know, and Kellan was smart enough to judge for himself.

“Aunt Claire, Gabi, want to be my kitchen assistants?” I smiled.

“Only if it means you’re going to be cooking more sweets right now.” Gabi hopped up from the couch, her

face lit up.

Aunt Claire grinned. “Thank God I don’t have to worry about my figure.”

“Jack, how good are you with graphic designs?”

“What do you need?”

“How did I know you were the man for the job?” I chuckled. “Actually, I know. It was that massive wall of equipment in Puerto Rico. I still don’t know how you managed to get any service up there.”

“In most cases I say never assume; however, you were correct this time.” He stood up and followed us into the kitchen.

“I want to fully embrace the cliché here. They say the most obvious things are usually right in front of us. So I was thinking my company title could be ‘Bloody Bakes.’ I want a fashionable and cute female cartoon vampire eating a cupcake or some sort of dessert that’s oozing blood to be my trademark.” I looked at the women. “What do you think?”

“I love it!” Aunt Claire rubbed her palms together.

“It’s bloody awesome,” Gabi exclaimed in a fake British accent.

“Can you create something like that, Jack?” I faced him, waiting excitedly for his response. It was already coming together in my mind.

“But, of course, mademoiselle.” His Caribbean accent had the words flowing gracefully from his mouth like a Parisian gentleman.

The guys returned, a large box in Kael’s arms.

“What do you have in mind, Lex?” Gabi asked. She pulled out all the baking pans she could find.

“A little of everything. I need to take my mind off some things, and I figured this would be the perfect time to test recipes.”

“I fully support this taste testing. Are you going to make the cake?” She set the final pan on the counter and faced me in anticipation.

Aunt Claire placed the mixing bowls on the counter and focused on me again.

“No pressure.” I rubbed my palms along my hips. “I’ll try,” I said, turning back to the fridge to remove the eggs we’d just purchased.

“Where do you want the blood, Leka?” Kalel asked.

“On the table is fine, thanks.” I watched as he carefully set the item down on the modern dark wood table. “How much comes in a case?” I checked as I set the eggs on the counter beside the orange KitchenAid mixer.

“Sixteen pints.”

“Awesome. Is there a larger unit than the packets I can purchase it in?”

“Of course.” He faced me. “I cater to all my clients’ needs.” He winked, sending a warm tingle through me at his innuendo. Kellan cleared his throat, drawing the heat to my cheeks.

I shook my head, trying to focus on business instead. “What sizes are available?”

Kalel chuckled, recognizing my move to push past his flirtation. “The bottles at the lake house are twelve ounces.

We also offer a twenty-four-ounce and forty-eight-ounce container.”

“Are any of them reseal-able?”

“The forty-eight-ounce one is.”

“That’s what I want from here on out.”

“They come six to a case and keep for up to thirty days in the refrigerator.”

“Out of curiosity, what blood type tastes best? I haven’t quite figured that out for myself yet.”

“Everyone prefers something different.” He shrugged. “The sweetest, and one I’d recommend for you, is B-positive.”

“How was that determined?” I smiled, intrigue amusing my mind.

“It’s the blood type mosquitoes are most attracted to.”

“Have humans figured this out yet?” I knew my eyes sparkled with amusement, remembering several friends being eaten alive every summer.

“Not that I’m aware of. They like anyone with a B blood type, even AB, but B-positive is their favorite. In summer, it’s how you can pick out the best treat.” He wagged his brows.

“Kalel!”

He laughed. “It’s a fact, Leka.”

“Do I even want to know how you get this blood?”

“We pay humans for it, just like the plasma centers. We also have a charity set up that’s connected with a specific blood center throughout the world.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I don't know if I want to do business with that kind of underhanded play."

"Relax, Leka. We are the first to donate blood in large quantities to the hospital in a natural disaster."

"And any other time?"

He pursed his lips, gauging me. He sighed. "Not on a regular basis, but in a pinch, yes. Believe it or not, Leka, we want to save human lives when we can. They're our life source, and we need as many as possible. At the last worldwide count, there were two hundred thirteen thousand eighty-six vamps on Earth compared to seven-point-one billion humans. It's not much in comparison, but at one feeding till death a week by the reported seventy-two percent of vamps who feed off humans, we could knock out the world population in about five years since children and infants contain fewer pints, and, let's face it, some vamps like to gorge themselves.

"That's not exactly a promising outlook for our kind. See, humans have figured out how to create food in a lab from nothing food-related. It's an imitation product that fills their stomachs and sustains them nonetheless. What they can't create from scratch, they increase in quantity through hormone shots and steroid injections. Unfortunately for us, Leka, we're reliant on them, but they don't rely on us, and that will always be our weakness." He crossed his arms over his chest, his muscles stretching the fabric of his shirt to the max.

"You realize how delicate that situation is, then?" My voice was barely above a whisper.

He placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, waiting until I met his gaze. "Tell me." His voice was a low but sharp command.

“From a tactile standpoint, it would take only one vamp exposing us for your elaborate scheme to collapse and all vamp kind to suffer.”

“Why do you think the powerful battle between vampires and vampeens has been ongoing for centuries? The war between vamp kinds goes deeper than a bruised ego. Vampeens believe humans can be reasoned with. They are pushing for us to go public, and have promised to do so if they ever come out victorious.”

I swallowed the serum that flooded my mouth. I turned to face Aunt Claire. By her red-stained cheeks, I didn't even have to ask. “You think they'd accept us and not try to harness us as weapons or negotiate our cooperation in exchange for our food?”

“There are reasonable leaders who still exist.”

“And yet corruption still runs the government.” I frowned. I was stunned by this new admission.

“Do you know how difficult it is to be forced to get a new identity every couple years? Do you know how hard it is to pack up your life and move at least once a decade, cutting off everyone you formed a bond with? Things would be easier if I didn't have to hide.”

I cocked my head, trying to evaluate her openness on the topic. From the set of her jaw and lines creasing her brow, I gathered she was set in her position. “Is that what you really think?”

“Yes, it is.” She lifted her chin, as if to challenge anyone who wanted to argue the point.

“I'm sorry, Aunt Claire, but that's one lesson Kellan taught me a while back. Our worlds are better off separate. Inevitably, I could only picture loads of blood shed for

innocent humans and tons of deception to force the hands of vamps. Before you know it, the humans will be harnessing weapons of mass destruction against us instead of themselves in an effort to control us. How..." I shook my head. "How do you possibly see this ending well for any of us?"

"This isn't the place or time to debate politics," Kellan interrupted. My head shot towards him. His firm stare said I was doing more damage than good. I nodded.

As much as I hated to admit it, this slightly skewed my view of Aunt Claire. I didn't understand her perspective. I would love to live an open life, without having to hide and cover my tracks everywhere I went, but that was the way it had to be and there wasn't anything anyone could do about it. I'd learned the hard way that I had to focus on what I could control, what I could change.

"Um, Lex?" I turned to Gabi. "Why don't we get back to baking?"

I looked around, caught up in the mental slosh, riled by how easily things shifted, stealing my focus and turning the mood upside down in the room. "Uh, sure."

"I'm going to check on things in the basement," Aunt Claire said, quickly escaping.

Guilt instantly chided me. I shouldn't have blamed her for feeling the way she did. It was a matter of opinion, nothing concrete. Where freedom was given, there would always be liberty, and where liberty lived, so did difference. That's what made this world so amazing: Diversity living in universality. Too bad it was the petty things that forged division and discomfort like I just had. I would have to apologize when she came back. I didn't want her to feel like an outcast over something that she was passionate about.

Kellan came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. He kissed my neck, drawing me deeper into his chest. "Don't be too hard on yourself." He kissed my ear. "Bake some goodies. I suddenly have a hankering for some cupcakes."

*"Hankering?"* I giggled.

*"Yes."* He kissed my head. "I'm going to the office to talk to Kalel for a bit, but I'll be back to taste some stuff."

I smiled as I nodded my head. He flipped me in his arms and captured my lips unannounced. His kiss was full of promise for later. With one final press of his lips to mine, he pulled away and disappeared into the office with Kalel.

"Lexi." I looked up the moment he called my name. Jack stood there, a black netbook open in his left hand as he considered me from the threshold of the dining room and kitchen. "There is nothing to fear but fear itself."

I laughed, the unease leaving my body. It wasn't a brilliant statement, given the topic, and yet, despite that, it tickled my fancy. "Thank you, O great philosopher Jack."

"Somehow I knew that would cut through your tension." He casually tapped his right temple with his pointer finger. "I'm going to work on the prototype for your trademark."

"Thanks, Jack." He left Gabi and me to get to work. "You ready to bake?"

"I've been ready."

I grabbed a bag of flour and some measuring cups from a drawer on my way to the stand-up mixer. "The more time I spend with him, the less he feels like a bad omen."

“I’m going to ignore the negative ending and thank you for being open to him, period. Kai has been less than amicable and Kalel is only tolerable.” She sighed. “What’s a girl to do when her heart belongs to a man everyone seems to despise?”

“We don’t despise him, Gab, but he does have to prove himself after the wild goose chase he sent us on and the danger he put us in. Perhaps it was inadvertent, but we wouldn’t have been in harm’s way had it not have been for Jack’s shenanigans.”

“I know. Trust me, I know. And if I didn’t, Kai has been all too willing to shove that little fact in my face every time I talk to him. Jack isn’t even allowed on Bladang property and I own one-third of all of it.”

I measured three cups of flour into the mixer and turned it on ‘Low.’ “They were close to Rafi. You all lived together for several decades. Vampires aren’t as immune to human emotions as they’d like to think. The guys actually cared about Rafi and, I think, looked at him like another brother. That’s hard to ignore when you’re staring into the eyes of his killer, inadvertent or not.”

“It’s not like Jack shot Rafi. Trust me, no amount of love could erase that from my memory. And talk about caring, I was practically married to Rafi. The guilt is there, Lex. I know I shouldn’t be with Jack, but I can’t seem to pull myself away from him.”

“I’m not judging you, Gabi. I’m not telling you what you’re doing is wrong. The heart is a funny organ. It bypasses all logic and connects us directly to our soul. Sometimes it’s a blissful union; other times it defies all reason. Don’t fight it. Everyone will come around eventually, and even if they don’t, as long as you’re happy, then no one can fault you.”

“You really need to start hanging out with people your own age.” She grinned.

“So I’ve been told.”

“Thanks, Lex. Sometimes I feel like you and Imara are the only ones I have left.” I noticed the beginning of tears welling in her eyes.

“I’ll always be here, Gab.” I hugged her.

Her arms immediately wrapped around me, pulling me firmly to her. “You don’t know how much that means to me, Lex.” She sniffled.

“You deserve to be happy, Gabi. Don’t let anyone else’s opinion of your life rob you of that.” I released her, leaning back. I smiled. “Let’s bake some yummy treats.”

She wiped her eyes. “Yes! Please. I could use some yummy goodness to cheer me up.”

Over the next couple hours we whipped together an army of desserts. I baked two thick layers of chocolate cake and pressed them together with a solid layer of thick, raspberry blood jam and covered it in a raspberry blood glaze. I used a pastry bag to pipe dollops of bloodied whip cream decoratively around the edges of the round cake and a flower in the center. We created two batches of cupcakes, one vanilla and one chocolate, with a bloody pudding filling and topped with a blood-red icing. The final dessert of the day was shortbread cookies half dipped into a blood and white chocolate glaze.

Everyone had gathered in the kitchen at the finishing of the baked goods, even Craig and Mr. Hartford. “The cake is for when Mel gets up. Leave one of each kind of cupcake and a cookie for Mel, too. Everything else is up for grabs,” I stated.

I quickly set down the final tray of cookies and backed away from the table as hands flew for the desserts.

“These are heavenly,” Aunt Claire said as she stuffed half a cupcake into her mouth. Her eyes widened, finding mine as she moaned around the dessert.

“I’m sorry about earlier.”

She swallowed and squared off with me. “It’s okay, sweetie. I knew we weren’t going to agree on everything going in. We’re both headstrong. As long as we never let it permanently divide us, I don’t mind a debate from time to time.”

“I think I can handle that.”

“Good, now if you’ll excuse me.” She headed back to the table. “Someone needs to move their butt over so I can get some more. Craig, you’re not the cookie monster. Stop shoveling them in like a garbage disposal.”

“Mmmm. These are delightful, Lexi,” Jack said.

“Thanks.”

He frowned. “You don’t eat your own desserts?”

“I’ve never been a big sweets person. I’d rather have a hearty meal any day.” I shrugged.

“More for me that way,” Kellan called from across the table around a mouth full of chocolate cupcake.

I giggled at his icing mustache. “Sexy.”

“I understand my wife’s obsession with them. They are addictive for those who enjoy the sweeter things in life.” Jack grabbed another cupcake.

“I had forgotten how good your pastries were, Leka.” Kalel pushed Steven’s hand out of the way so he could snatch up another cookie. He’d hung around at the smell of the food baking.

I felt myself blush. “Okay, guys. I get it. I know you want me to do the bakery thing. I agreed to start off small.”

“Good. I’ll donate one case of blood a month if you’ll drop some of your stuff off every once in a while,” Kalel offered, licking a finger as if to prove a point.

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“You do have a unique niche, Lexi,” Mr. Hartford stated. “I’ve never come across anything like this, even at the annual conventions that are catered by the vamp companies.”

“Hopefully that will translate well for business.”

“Be positive, babe. You’re going to do great.” Kellan came around the table, grabbing another cupcake on his way.

“Thank God I made a lot.” I was in awe of how quickly the pastries were disappearing from the trays.

“Told you forty-eight cupcakes was just enough,” Gabi said.

“I want someone to invent a mechanical dipper for me. Hand-dipping ten dozen cookies isn’t exactly my idea of fun.” I pretended to pout.

“Oh, please, you loved it.” She rolled her eyes.

“Okay, so I did like it,” I conceded. I tried to find a negative point, a potential downfall to my new business idea, but couldn’t thus far.

A faint brush of two hard materials together caught my attention. Gabi spoke, but I tuned everyone out as I cocked my head and searched around the table. No one had stopped, meaning I was the only one who had caught it. There. I heard it. Another heartbeat. My heart took off. *Mel!* I flew to the basement.

—

## Chapter Seventeen

I didn't know what I was running into, who I was going to run into. The stairs were a blur — everything was a blur until I came face to face with him.

"Damn it, Jones. I told you not to shoot yourself yet," Cesar bit out in a rushed whisper.

"Too late. He already gave you away." My eyes were focused on my best friend's coffin, hoisted in the arms of two vampeens dressed in business suits. "How exactly were you planning to escape with that?"

Cesar smiled wide. "I wasn't. I'm planning to escape with you."

"Over my dead body," Kellan growled. He came around in front of me, officially blocking Cesar from me. Kalel stepped up next to Kellan, followed by Aunt Claire.

"Don't even think about taking another step towards her, *Daddy*." His title was full of spite on Aunt Claire's lips.

Another heartbeat began to echo in the dark space, followed by another. I pressed my back to Kellan's, searching the room, but no one else was in there, which meant it was their hearts that'd begun beating again slowly.

"How did you do it?"

"A window will never separate me from my target," my grandfather stated. He stood tall, his arms folded behind his back; his arrogance was palpable.

"Your hearts. You stopped them from beating, at least temporarily." That also explained why I didn't hear

anything at my house.

He chuckled. “We all have our secret weapons, Alexa.”

“I suggest you leave at once,” Mr. Hartford said. He stepped forward, officially joining the front line.

Cesar laughed boisterously. “Or what? You don’t think I have your home surrounded? See, it’s much easier for a vampeen to slip in amongst the thread of human heartbeats in a residential area. My men are out there. Likewise, I’ve instructed them to bomb this home if I don’t walk out in —” He lifted his left hand, sliding back the cuff of his shirt to reveal his watch. “Oh, my. It seems I have less than three minutes to meet my men with Alexa. So, what do you say, granddaughter?”

Serum flooded my mouth. The room felt claustrophobic under the mounting tension from every angle.

*“Don’t!”* Kellan’s single cry hit me hard. I closed my eyes to the pain, the emotional cry in his sharp command.

We both knew there was only one way for this to end, though. I had to go. If I didn’t go, they all died. Even if I refused, we had about two minutes to fight off these men, grab Mel, and get out. Then we would be attacked from who knew how many angles by who knew how many vampeens outside. We were likely outnumbered.

“You’re bluffing,” Kalel snarled.

“Perhaps.”

I screamed when my grandfather had Kalel at gunpoint faster than the speed of light. “Stop!” My veins lit up in a flash, illuminating the space.

I heard Gabi gasp behind me. I knew Jack would be in front of her, ever her protector, by now.

“Don’t, Leka.” Kalel breathed heavily as he glared into my grandfather’s eyes. Cesar had the barrel of the gun pressed to Kalel’s head at an angle.

My heart beat erratically. Sweat began to dot my brow as I gazed helplessly at them. “I’ll go. Put the gun away.”

He immediately tucked the weapon into the waist of his pants. “I knew you would see things my way.” He smiled sweetly. My stomach churned with disgust. I couldn’t believe I was related to him. “Let’s go.”

The men dropped the casket. Kellan and Craig caught it before it could hit the concrete floor. Mr. Hartford was right behind them. They quickly set Mel carefully on the ground.

I met Kellan’s gaze. His nostrils flared, and his muscles bunched beneath the fabric of his clothes. “*I will get you back. I swear.*”

“*I know.*” I felt peace descend upon me. I believed in Kellan. I believed in my friends as much as they believed in me. I was going to be alright. Slowly my flesh returned to its normal hue, no longer a blue map of my bloodline. Cesar roughly gripped my upper arm and jerked me towards the stairs. We ascended in a hurry, his two men behind us to prevent any attack efforts. “*I love you.*” Cesar pushed me outside into the cool morning air. The sun was just beginning to peek its head over the horizon, meaning it was about 6 a.m.

—

## KELLAN

*Damn it! I can’t believe I lost her again!* This was war. Cesar wanted to play hardball; I was going to play even harder.

“Claire, call Auggy and have him get a team of vampeen soldiers out here. I need vampeens to infiltrate Cesar’s camp. Kalel, call Kai and get him to send a team of weapons experts. I want freaking black op-ready vamps to swarm his place once the vampeens get us in. Jack, I need your computer skills. Lexi should have her cell phone on her — see if you can hack into the tracker inside. It’s set up through the vamp army.”

“No problem.” Jack raced upstairs to get his computer. Kalel and Claire followed him, phones already placed to their ears.

“Gabi, you stay here with Steven and Craig. Guard Mel. I don’t think he’ll come back since he got what he wanted, but you never know.”

“We’ve got it covered,” Steven assured me. The heat in his eyes said he was ready to battle anyone who came at his daughter again.

“Fudgin’ fish sticks!” Craig roared. “My girl is safe, yours isn’t, mate. Stop piddlin’ and let’s crack some donkeys.” He met my gaze; determination blazed from his stance. He was going with me; I wasn’t going to be able to talk him out of it.

“I’ll call for army backup,” Steven said.

“I’ll call Art to send a few of the Bladangs’ vamp guard over to sweep the area and hang out,” Gabi added. “We’ll be covered here, Kellan. Just go get her back. Your best shot at doing that is in transit, not on his territory.”

I nodded. She was right. We had to act fast.

“Where are we going?” I tried to stall, allowing him to drag me to the car. My lack of cooperation was nothing against his strength, though.

“You won’t slow me down,” he stated confidently.

The two men behind us separated and raced around towards the back of the house as we approached a black town car. The windows were nearly as dark as the paint. The back door opened before Cesar could reach for the handle. He shoved me inside ahead of him.

My body was rammed into a hard surface. I looked up, only to find an angry vampeen sneering down at me. His blond hair was shaved in a crew cut, reminiscent of the military, reminiscent of Auggy. His muscles rivaled a professional bodybuilder. Every vein stood out, every muscle clearly defined beneath his skin.

I gulped as I sat down beside him. Facing forward, I couldn’t see anything. A window separated us from the drive; clearly it had been spray-painted black, for even I, as a vamp, couldn’t see through it. This wasn’t good. They were blinding me.

I shoved my hand in my pocket and removed the battery from my phone. The battery had my tracking device on it.

No sooner had I done it that he looked at me pointedly. “Phone.”

“But — ”

“Phone! You think I’m stupid? You think I don’t know your hand is in your pocket dialing them already so they can trace the call and find you?”

I swallowed hard, fidgeting to replace the back of the phone so he wouldn't be onto me. I'd just snapped it in place when the large guy beside me yanked my hand out of my pocket. I held tightly to the Blackberry. The buff male easily snatched it from my grip, though. He promptly passed it to Cesar, who tossed it out the car before he shut the back door.

"Go," he instructed the driver. I felt the car jerk into motion.

My gut tightened. I prayed that the tracker worked. I studied my grandfather on one side of me and the bodyguard on the other side of me. They were the opposite of each other in girth, yet I knew my grandfather probably outranked him in physical threat. The size of a vampire was an illusion. Whether they were fat or thin, short or tall, they were typically equally matched in strength and speed, grace and agility.

I focused on breathing steadily as the car traveled. No one spoke. My grandfather and his sidekick didn't even flinch. I was beginning to wonder if they'd turned into statues the way they sat forward without moving. I was the only one fidgeting in the back seat.

My mind began to wander the longer we sat there. I couldn't even begin to fathom where they were taking me. He'd somehow dragged Kellan and Craig to another state and had begun torturing them in the time it took me and Mel to grab a bite to eat after school.

"What do you plan to do with me?"

His lips lifted in the corners; his eyes sparkled with mischief and amusement. "You'll find out soon enough."

"Why are you so dedicated to your father, but not to your own children?"

He spun on me. I immediately pressed into my neighbor's solid arm to create a space between us as my chest constricted. The solid mask of anger on his face sent a chill down my spine. "You can either sit in silence, or I can make you silent." His eyes grew dark as he spoke.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I situated myself to face forward before I opened them again. I didn't know what I expected. Perhaps I was still hopeful to establish some sort of connection with him; maybe I thought I'd be able to appeal to him on some level. All I knew was the longer I sat there, the tighter my chest seemed to grow and the smaller my hope seemed to get.

A male voice came in over a speaker. "Boss, we have company."

My grandfather pressed something and the window dropped, revealing we were on a long stretch of highway surrounded by trees.

—

### *KELLAN*

"Sam, Ash, Johnson, and Ridge, I want you four in the trees now," I ordered into the handheld radio. These were the men Kai had deployed from our area to meet up with us.

"We're on it," Johnson answered.

"Kalel, I need you to get closer. Auggy's men are coming by air, so it's up to us on the ground." The vamp immediately sped up. We'd rushed to his vehicle the moment we thought the coast was clear.

My phone rang. The caller I.D. revealed it was Jack. "What do you have for me?"

“There’s roadwork about ten miles ahead on the highway. If you’re going to do something, now is the time.”

“Got it. Just stay behind us and cover our rear.”

“Will do.”

I shoved my phone in my pocket. “You ready for this?” I asked Kalel.

The glare in his eyes said he was if the snarl on his face didn’t. “I’ve been ready,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Claire, where’s air support?” I called into the radio.

“A couple miles back. Make your move now, and they’ll be there in time to back you up.”

“Thanks.” I looked to the forest. “Johnson, Ash, Sam, Ridge, if any of you have a clear shot, take it!” I shoved the radio into one of the console’s cubbies.

I reached into the back seat of the SUV and grabbed the M16. I quickly had it locked and loaded.

“Aim for the car, not the windows. They’re likely to be bulletproof anyway. Plus, we don’t know where Leka is in the car. Stay away from the trunk, too,” Kalel advised.

“I’m one step ahead of you. I’m going to aim for their tires. How close can you get me?”

“Safely? A couple hundred yards.”

“Let’s hope all the training pays off, then.”

Kalel sped up. He studied his phone briefly, watching the tracker moving up ahead of us on the map on his screen. “We’re closing in quickly.” We both scanned the horizon ahead. The only car in sight was a black Lincoln town car. “That’s got to be our mark.”

I slid the passenger seat as far back as it'd go. Kalel lowered the window for me. I braced myself as I aimed the M16 through the opening at the car up ahead. In the distance I heard several aircraft getting closer.

I fired the first round, but the bullets began bouncing. "There's too much distance and unpredictability. The farther away we are, the more uncontrollable my shots are going to be. With our men in the perimeter, I don't want to chance it." I tossed the gun into the back and reached for the Walther P99 in the glove compartment. "I'll need you to get as close as possible."

"Be careful. We're not fully protected with the window down."

"Noted."

Fear drove me. I didn't know what the bastard had done to her or what he planned to do if we didn't get Lexi while we had the chance. She'd gone with Cesar, counting on me to save her before he did anything to her. It was the first time she'd put her full faith in me, and I'd be damned if I let her down.

We both watched as a mechanical shooter with a circle of bullets dropped down from behind the bumper. Kalel quickly switched lanes, creeping up on the left side of the town car, just in time to avoid the shots fired. I checked behind us to find that Jack had followed us, probably picking up on the threat. I had to give the vamp props. He'd been more help than anyone. After finding Lexi's cell phone outside, I panicked, but he'd assured us the tracker would be on the battery since it'd need a power source. He immediately cracked into the army's database and tracked her to I-26 heading west.

Kalel had called Kai, who located a few of his men in the area while Claire got Auggy on the phone and delivered the news. He promptly ordered air support.

“You need to take your shot. We’re getting closer to the construction zone,” Kalel warned. He sped up, closing the gap between us and the Lincoln.

—

### *LEXI*

“I knew we should have driven the Lamborghini,” Cesar huffed. “Did Oswald install the specs I requested on this car yet?”

“No, sir. You told him to do the Rover first, remember, sir?” the driver replied.

“Just drive!” my grandfather yelled.

I was giddy inside. I was elated to know they were near, yet fear knotted my stomach as to how they were going to get to me.

“Ross, open the back window so Greg can open fire on them.”

The bulky vamp beside me pulled out a gun from his back. He slid through the window; using the car as a shield, he aimed over the roof of the car and fired shots. My heart jumped at every round.

A minute later he returned to his seat and mumbled something in a foreign language. My grandfather barked something in return, but I couldn’t understand. The driver tossed a gun back at Greg. He caught the weapon and moved back to his shooting perch. Each gunshot that flew through the air twisted my gut tighter. I was waiting for a

crash, waiting for any sound that indicated he'd connected with something or someone.

My eyes shot open at the sound of bullets being returned; pride surged, knowing they were fighting for me. I jumped as a pellet hit the roof of the car, bouncing off the metal frame.

My grandfather began screaming in the foreign language again. The driver's voice escalated in return, though it didn't hold the same growl Cesar's did.

I screamed as bullets began pounding the roof from overhead. I bent my head, wrapping my arms around it, though I knew that wouldn't do much to protect me from any rogue shots that made it through the car's armor.

"You!" My grandfather yanked me by my hair. "Out!"

"Out?" I squeaked.

He tossed open his door, immediately pulling me in front of him. I grabbed the door, trying to stabilize myself. He pushed me forward, trying to expel me from the car. My heart pounded in my chest. Serum inundated my mouth to the point where I choked, forced to spit it out on cement that was merely a blur.

I saw Kellan in the black SUV. One eye was on me, the other watching the car for any sudden moves. He said something to Kalel, but between the gust of the wind, given our speed, and my pulse pounding in my ear, I couldn't hear. Looking up, I saw two fighter jets in the air hovering above us. That was who had shot at the car.

"I said out!" I felt three shoes splinter into my back, sending me flying onto the pavement.

Pain shot through me; my skin burned as I slid along the road, the cement slicing through my clothes. It happened so fast. I felt the sting of hitting the highway, felt the blood already slicking my body at the same time two sets of brakes squealed. I felt a burst of wind as Kalel barely avoided hitting me, followed by Jack.

Common sense had me rolling onto the grass between the road and the woods running parallel to it. I groaned. Every move jostled me, sent a new ache through my battered limbs. I closed my eyes as I came to my knees. Before I could fully extend my arms to push up, he was there.

“Don’t move,” he ordered. Kellan gently rolled me onto my back. He ripped his shirt off over his head, mindless about exposing himself. He began dabbing at my cuts.

I smiled up at him perched over me. “Is this my Jacob moment?”

His emerald eyes glittered in the sun, his muscles gleaming under its bright rays. “At least I know you’re thinking straight.”

Kalel broke into my line of vision. “Auggy has a copter landing on the highway in two minutes to take her back to base.”

Craig came into my peripheral vision. I was shocked to see him here instead of with Mel.

“Dollop of a doozy swack you took there, love.” Craig frowned, assessing me with the rest of them.

Jack approached, a leather bag in hand. He bent down on one knee beside me. Jerking the bag open, he poured alcohol on some gauze and pressed it to my skin.

I winced, scrunching my face at the pain. "I'm a vampeen, but I'm still vulnerable to the sting of that crap," I grumbled.

Jack acknowledged my whine with a jut of his chin, as if to challenge me to fight him off.

"Glad to know you're okay," Kalel chuckled.

"Of course I'm okay. It wasn't fun, but I survived." I knew I would be sore for a couple hours at least. Thankfully I'd fed recently, so I'd heal well.

Kellan caressed my cheek. "Don't scare me like that again."

"You? Me." I ground my teeth as Jack moved onto a new scrape, the burn of the alcohol in a new area jolting me. I immediately flinched at the pain as I jerked away from him. He loyally followed, never losing contact with my skin. "Must you be such a good medic?"

"Just let him work." Kellan scowled as he looked me up and down, studying every rip of my clothing and visible piece of skin. He faced Kalel. "We're going after him. Maybe not today, but we will get him."

"You have my word." Kalel dipped his head once.

It was logical for Kellan to want to avenge the harm my grandfather had done to me, but if he did it anytime soon, it would be a reactive attack, which often meant it would be a sloppy retaliation that would put his life in greater danger. I would have to talk to Kalel about it later.

Wind whipped at us as a helicopter approached the ground.

"I'll meet you at headquarters," Kalel said. "Be safe, Leka." He gently squeezed my thigh before standing and

returning to the SUV.

“I’m going back to the house to check on the others.” Jack passed a newly doused piece of gauze to Kellan. “You staying with them or coming with me?” he asked Craig.

“Don’t quetter with the lion, Lex. Damn snarl just might nip your brain.” He kissed my forehead and rose up. “Take care of you both, mate.” He shook Kellan’s hand.

“Thanks. Be safe.”

“See you later, Lexi. Stay safe,” Jack said. He and Craig headed back towards his Corvette, which was parked up the road.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him coming towards us. I’d seen his large build in the last twenty-four hours, much to my chagrin.

“I’ll be escorting you back to headquarters in the air,” Drexel announced as he reached us.

I sat up, wincing. My body ached. I was already beginning to heal, but my back hurt the most where they’d kicked me. It was no doubt bruised.

“I’ll carry you.” Kellan slid his arms around me.

“I’m fine, babe. Really.”

He didn’t listen. He secured his grip under my arms and lifted me into a standing position. He was just about to bend down and pull me up into his arms when Drexel cut in.

“It’s my head if you’re further injured,” he stated the moment I opened my mouth to speak. His tone held authority and reason. I couldn’t argue.

The flight back to headquarters was quiet, and somehow peaceful. Kellan stroked my skin in a soothing motion the entire trip. No one spoke, yet there wasn't any lingering tension in the silence.

—

## Chapter Eighteen

We landed on the rooftop of the Vamp Army Headquarters. Security was waiting for us and immediately ushered us inside the building and down twenty flights of stairs before accessing an elevator with a hand pad. The elevator took us down the rest of the way and dropped us off directly into the back office area.

“Hello, Lexi,” Dr. H greeted me, inspecting me as I got closer.

“I’m fine, Doc. Thanks,” I said as I bypassed him.

“Lexi, get checked out. That’s an order. Kellan, come with me and tell me what the hell happened out there.” Auggy was in full-swing power mode, issuing orders right and left as he led a still shirtless Kellan to a conference room. Auggy entered, followed by Kellan, but Auggy came back around him to the door. He looked pointedly at me. “Jackson, to the doctor, now,” he barked before shutting the door.

I huffed. “I’m fine, geesh.”

“Let’s just do a quick checkup for formality’s sake,” Dr. H suggested.

“Oh, alright,” I sighed.

He led me down a back hall to the in-house medical ward. It only consisted of a few rooms and a small operating room with basic surgical equipment in the event of an emergency. It was consistent with the theme of the rest of the space, though with its lack of color and style.

Lifting his hand, he motioned for me to enter one of the rooms. I went in. Dr. H stepped inside, along with

Drexel, before closing the door.

“Have a seat.” He pointed to the exam table. “I can tell the damage is entirely in your upper body by the way you’re moving.”

I frowned. “I didn’t think it was obvious.”

“I’m a doctor. I was trained to pick up on these things.” He bent down to study the scraped skin visible through my ripped jeans. The way I’d hit the pavement and skidded, I lost a bit of fabric and shredded a lot more. My jeans were ruined. “You’re healing okay from what I can see so far, but given the number of injuries you’ve sustained over the last week, it wouldn’t hurt to increase your blood intake over the next couple of days.”

He grabbed a legal pad and a pen from a cabinet above the sink in the corner. He immediately began to scribble notes before returning his focus to me. “I can see bits of a shirt beneath your sweater, so please remove it so I may check your upper body.”

Every move hurt as I removed the tattered oversized sweater.

Drexel’s breath hitched. My eyes shot in his direction. He clenched his jaw; his eyes traveled from my back to meet my gaze. “That had to hurt,” he stated.

I shrugged my shoulders, trying to pretend it wasn’t that bad and that moving my shoulders just now hadn’t sent pain shooting down my back. It felt like a stampede of elephants had danced on my back.

“Brave girl.” Drexel’s lips curled up.

I smiled. Something about the buff soldier comforted me. He was tough on the outside, but his heart was

tangible.

“Do you want something for the pain?” Dr. H asked. He lifted the back of my tank top to inspect my skin directly.

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Alexa, I can clearly see three footprints on your back. The bruises are already purple and black. That was a tough blow, to bruise you to this degree.” Why was he so persistent?

“I’ll be fine, really. I’ll go drink some blood and be healed in no time.”

Dr. H frowned. “Do try to take better care of yourself, Lexi. While I appreciate the business, I’d rather not have an influx of visits from the same patient in a short amount of time.”

“Duly noted.” I yanked down my tank, flinching in my haste. “Am I free to go?”

“Yes. Call me if you need anything,” he advised, as always.

“Sure.” I leapt off the table, tossed my sweater in the trash, and immediately headed for the door.

Drexel opened the door for me, waiting as I passed him.

Back in the main sector of the army back office, I focused on my target: the conference room Kellan was in. Drexel stepped in front of my path.

“Don’t even think about it,” I blared.

“Tell him I tried.” He winked, allowing me to pass.

I barged into the room.

Four men faced me immediately: Kellan, Auggy, Kalel, and a new face I wasn't familiar with. They were all huddled together at the end of the conference table; their heads had been down in discussion. I narrowed my eyes. "I don't know what you all are up to, but I have a key piece of information that might help."

Auggy sat back in his chair arrogantly. "I'm listening."

"Don't be such a ninny."

"A what?" He shot up, his hands in fists at his side.

"Fine. Don't be such a prude. I did something that actually might be useful, if you would listen."

"What did you do, Leka?" Kalel was wary.

"I conveniently slipped my cell phone battery into the seat cushions of the car." They all stared at me, as if I ought to have more for them. "You can go track him now."

"I don't take orders, I give them." Auggy sat down in his chair. "Fargo, access Jackson A's tracking device labeled CB32."

I opened and closed my mouth several times in succession. "You have more of them on me, don't you?"

Before he could reply, Felipe, Laurence, and Al barged in. No one looked happy. Al eyed me, then Kellan. When Auggy abruptly stood, he dropped his eyes.

"I'll be back." Auggy stomped out of the room on unusually heavy feet.

"Guess the mission with your dad didn't go well." I sighed. I didn't want this to divide the High Authorities. Their unity was key in our society, as leaders of the vamp army.

Kellan and Kalel openly stared at me, their faces slowly turning into a deep frown.

“We should have cut them off. Created a blockade, forced them to stop the car so this wouldn’t have happened,” Kalel stated.

“It would have gotten worse. They would have used her as leverage with a gun to her head. Who’s to say they wouldn’t have shot her and taken off when we gave them a clearing?” Kellan replied.

“You both know I’m not deaf, right?” I threw my hand on my hip, wincing at the quick action.

“They wouldn’t have gotten a clearing. We had backup from all sides.” Kalel ignored my question.

“This is Cesar we’re talking about. The man has tricks up every sleeve. He can stop his own heart from beating, for crying out loud.”

“Perhaps.” Kalel created a steeple with his hands in front of him. He sighed. “Perhaps you’re right. He probably would have used Leka for leverage and created a clearing for himself. He knows her value.”

“As much as I hate to say it, it looks like we’ll have to face him on his grounds.”

“You know the odds of that are slim to none. We’d be walking into a trap.”

“Or perhaps we could set a trap.”

The way these two were going back and forth, it was as if they were connected in some way. I hadn’t seen this sort of banter from them before. It was a new bond that left me a little uneasy, particularly considering what they were bonded over.

“Too many angles to cover. We’d have to go in the old-fashioned way with guns blazing, prepared to face anyone and anything.”

“How many men you think we would need?”

“To be safe, depending on the size of his compound and the guards we’ve seen entering and exiting over the course of lying low for a week, probably at least a hundred.”

“Do we have those numbers to allot to something like this?”

Kalel’s brows drew together. “I’m not a fan of a massive manslaughter, nor do I enjoy putting my men directly in harm’s way. I would only allow my best to go, and only at their choosing. In the end, though, I think we’d have enough vampires with a motive to kill Cesar to join us.”

“We need at least half to be vampeens. We need them to go in first. A guard hears a heart and they don’t look twice. If they don’t hear a heart beating with the footsteps, they’re dead.”

“Not necessarily.” I finally decided to jump in. They both looked up at me expectantly. “If the vampires held a needle, the same kind Cesar used to actually stop his heart, then they could probably get by.”

“You forget about smell because you don’t have it. Vampires and vampeens smell distinctly different.” Kalel pursed his lips.

“How does anyone sneak up on you, then? If you can smell them for miles out, then how do the assassins get close without being detected?” I countered.

“Good one, babe.” Kellan beamed. “It’s black market stuff, but I’m sure you or the army could get your hands on some hunting spray, good for masking odor,” he said, facing Kalel again.

“On average it lasts a couple hours. We’d have to go straight to the manufacturer and bargain. We’ll need a lot of them if we’re going to scope out the place first.”

“Where’s Augustine?” Fargo asked, peeking his head into the conference room.

“With the High Authorities,” Kalel stated, immediately turning back to Kellan. “Auggy said they have a science and technology center that’s been working to invent a uniform that would mask the scent of a vamp.”

Kellan thought about it for a minute. “If they can pull it off, that’d be perfect. What compounds are they lacing in the fibers of the fabric?”

Kalel smiled. “Not sure, but the fact that you thought of it so quickly makes me a little proud.”

Kellan punched Kalel’s arm playfully. “Please. Half the shit you talk about I already know.”

“I guess I shouldn’t go after your girl anytime soon. You might know my plays before I can make them.”

Kellan smirked, a devilish glint in his emerald eyes. “You go after her, and I’ll have your entire empire collapsing before you can even kiss her.”

The men stared at each other for a minute. Kalel abruptly burst into laughter. “I’ll pass the message along to my brother.”

Auggy barged back into the room, papers in hand. “Good job, Lexi. The tracking device is still working

unnoticed. Here's the info." He passed a sheet to each of the guys. "Kalel, I'll send some of my vampeens to your downtown office in a few hours. Kellan, Fargo will give you a key to our weapons room on-site. Take what you need now. The rest I'll have delivered."

"Wait. What do you mean, 'now'?" I stepped up to the table. All three men looked at me, but quickly went back to discussing their strategy as if I wasn't even there. "Hello?" I raised my voice.

"Lexi, Drexel is your new personal bodyguard. He goes everywhere with you. Don't even think about slipping away from him. He's well-trained; over twenty years in the vamp army and seven as an enforcer before that. He was a marine for over ten years as a human; afterward he worked for the CIA for three years and then went private for another five before he was bit. He's good at what he does, and he can smell a rat a mile away, so don't pull anything. Coincidentally, he was a prisoner of war for two years and is immune to electric shocks. Are we clear?" Auggy had a single brow raised in my direction, and his lips were mashed into a straight line.

I swallowed, looking to Kellan for backup. The moment I saw the curl of his lips, I knew I wouldn't get it.

"It's for your own good, babe."

"He's right, Leka. You need protection. You're too willing to accept a bargain with the devil to save your friends. Drexel won't let you make that mistake."

I huffed. "Thanks," I bit out, heading for the door. I was glad that Kellan had stepped up, stepped in, and found a place he thrived in. I just wished it wasn't one that involved violence. And the fact that I had a twenty-four/seven babysitter now wasn't exactly thrilling.

Drexel was waiting right outside the door. "Come on," I sighed.

Felipe intersected my stomp towards freedom. "It seems you're already in need of a new phone. Do I need to invest in stock with Blackberry?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, Felipe."

He chuckled. "Good. Here is your new phone. All your contacts have been imported in from our servers. Yes, we always back up whatever information you put into the phone to our servers. So no, what do they call them? Sexts?"

I laughed. "Aren't you cute? I wouldn't dream of it. I'm not into the whole voyeurism thing."

“Very well. Drexel will be reporting to us regularly. If we don’t get an update, then we will send in the troops.”

I leaned close. “And what if I want private time with Kellan?” I whispered. I partly wanted to make him as uncomfortable as I was with a shadow.

“Then you will do it with a voyeur,” he smirked, not even batting a lash.

I pursed my lips. “You’re no fun.”

“Life isn’t all fun and games, Alexa. On the contrary, though, I have enjoyed a bit of both in my time.” He turned to walk away but stopped. “Do try not to get yourself in trouble again. You’re costing us quite a bit in resources.”

“I never asked you to help.”

He looked directly at me. “When there is a nuclear bomb on the loose and up for grabs by the dirtiest vamps in our midst, then it is our job to protect it at all costs. The last thing we need is it falling into the wrong hands.” He fled to a side office, leaving me standing there. I knew he was implying that I was the nuclear bomb; I knew they were trying to prevent a disaster, but they shouldn’t do it by making me feel dependent.

“Let’s go get you a shower and a fresh set of clothes. Afterward, we can return to your friend’s house for her unveiling tonight.” Drexel’s voice cut through my thoughts.

I stared up at him. Kindness and understanding met me. I found myself nodding and allowing him to steer me towards an exit.

## Chapter Nineteen

Part of the arrangement with Drexel was riding in an army-issued vehicle complete with many of the security features that were in my now-destroyed Mercedes. Drexel was quiet the entire drive to my house. Not to my surprise, he didn't need directions to my home, either.

"Stay in the car and allow me to check things out first. If I'm not back in under a minute, then leave." He waited until I nodded before he got out of the car.

My pulse kicked up speed as I impatiently waited for his return. He had one thing right. I wanted to shower and change as soon as possible. I hated being a grungy mess. I wasn't afraid of getting dirty, but I felt uncomfortable staying dirty. I could never last as an agent anywhere remote.

Forty-eight seconds later, Drexel returned. "Come along."

He escorted me through the front door. I raced beyond him and went right upstairs to my room. He easily followed behind me.

"I'll wait here," he said, peeking through my bedroom window.

I watched him for a moment, waiting to see if my body reacted to him being outside the room I'd be naked and vulnerable in. When nothing flared, I went to the closet for some clothes. I grabbed a pair of dark-wash skinny jeans and my black army-issued combat boots; I wasn't taking any chances this time. I tucked a fresh bra, undies, and black socks into my jeans between the folds. I'd always felt self-conscious about others seeing my undergarments. I

snagged Kellan's black T-shirt, ironically with the U.S. Army's logo on the left side, and headed for the bathroom. "I won't be long."

"Take your time," he said, not even bothering to see that I went into the bathroom.

I stood under the showerhead, allowing the hot water to trickle down my body, begging for it to ease my stiff muscles and aching back. Showers had always relaxed me, but I couldn't relax today. My mind was lost on a million topics of concern; my body was pinned beneath a thousand worries, frantic for release and retribution. I didn't know how and I didn't know when, but my grandfather would have his day.

I stepped out of the shower, quickly dried off, and got dressed. Kellan's shirt was big on me, so I tucked the front of it into the front of my jeans. It was my compromise. I wanted comfort but needed to be dressed for anything. I threw my hair into a tight knot at the top of my head.

My ring reflected a glimmer of light from overhead onto the foggy mirror. I studied my ring, thinking back to when Kellan and I had first met. Things had changed so much in such a short amount of time. For any human, our relationship would have been far too quick and irrational, but, as I'd learned, it wasn't uncommon for a vamp. It was just more proof of how different the human world was from the vamp world. How different my life was now compared to then.

Drexel knocked gently on the bathroom door. "Are you okay?"

I opened the door. "I'm fine." My voice was low and calm.

He analyzed me, his eyes traveling up and down me. His lips lifted at the corners; amusement brightened his eyes. "Nice outfit."

I cocked my head. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

He straightened immediately, the military training of his past surfacing as he erased all emotion from his face. "Ask away."

"Are..." I bit my lower lip, trying to think of how not to offend him. "Are you gay?"

His eyes slightly narrowed. It would have been unrecognizable to even the most highly trained human. "Why does it matter?" His tone was a harsh bark, terse.

I threw up my hands. "It doesn't. It was a stupid question that you don't have to answer."

I grabbed my dirty clothes off the bathroom counter and headed into the closet to toss them in my hamper. When I returned, Drexel was still standing in the same spot. His jaw was clenching, his eyes were squished shut, and he was running his fingers along his palms. I'd clearly upset him.

I carefully approached him, placing a hand on his bicep. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I guess Don't Ask, Don't Tell should be carried over into the vamp army, too." I tried to lighten the mood, but only stuttered into worse territory. I sighed. "I'm sorry, Drexel. I should have just let it go. It's not important."

That's when I saw it, the single red tear that slipped down his cheek. I walked around him, facing him. I used my thumb to wipe away the stray droplet. He opened his eyes, more tears sitting in the wells of his eyes.

I smiled softly at him. "It doesn't matter."

He chuckled lightly. "I'm supposed to be the tough guy here."

"From what I can tell, you've been strong your whole life. Everyone deserves a moment of weakness."

"I'm a disgrace to the marines of my human years. The CIA is more liberal, but the upper executives are all hardcore Republicans with the belief that I'm a living abomination. The vamp army has adopted the same idea as the U.S. human Army, yet when you're surrounded by men originating decades and centuries ago in a time when the mention of it was taboo, I'm not accepted. I'm not acceptable. You must swear on your life not to tell a soul."

My heart broke for him. I couldn't imagine living all of eternity forever forced to hide who I truly was, forced to pretend I didn't desire who I actually did. I placed a hand on his cheek. "Your secret is safe with me."

He nodded. I watched as he hid all that had been unveiled moments ago. In mere seconds his face was an unreadable mask. "Let's go."

When we pulled up to Mel's house, the first thing I noticed was an unmarked car parked across the street from her house.

"Friend or foe?" I asked.

"Friend. Bladang."

Drexel led me to the front door. Before I could knock, the door flung open and I was in Gabi's arms. "O.M.G. You scared the bejesus out of me, *chica!* Don't you dare do that again." She squeezed me tighter to emphasize her point.

I hugged her before gently disentangling myself. "I'm okay, really. A little sore, that's all." Most of my wounds had healed. At the house I'd checked my back. It had been bad, but the bruises were already fading to a yellowish-brown color.

"Oh." She promptly released me, as if only now realizing that I'd sustained injuries.

Drexel shut the door behind us.

Gabi's eyes traveled from me to him. "Who's the bear?"

"Be nice," I snapped. "He's my personal bodyguard."

"I thought Kellan was your bodyguard?"

"Yeah, well, he's too busy discussing offensive tactics with Auggy and Kalel."

"I don't know how I feel about him and Kalel being all buddy-buddy now." Gabi tugged me by my hand into the living room and plopped down on the sofa, dragging me with her. Drexel remained standing, but planted himself right beside the couch.

"Kellan's needed a few new friends. No offense to Craig; he's great. I just think it's about time Kellan had more than one person to turn to."

"I can relate." Gabi nodded her head towards the kitchen. Jack poked his head out at that precise moment.

"I heard that, my dear," he chimed in.

"I know." She smiled.

"What happened while I was gone?"

“Nothing really. We saw a few vampeens nosing around in the backyard, but they disappeared pretty quickly.”

“Good.” I stood up. Drexel took a step to the side to allow me to pass. “I’m going to go downstairs for a bit.”

“Sure.”

Drexel followed me down to the basement. Mr. Hartford and Craig were quietly pacing around the coffin. I noticed several weapons tucked into their pants and a bulge in their pockets. They weren’t taking any chances, not that I blamed them.

“Hey,” I waved. They both looked up.

“Hello, Lexi. Hello, Drexel,” Mr. Hartford greeted us.

Craig eyed Drexel suspiciously. After a few moments, he finally said, “Hey.”

“How is she? Does she seem okay?”

“We can’t open the Dracula chamber to check.” Craig motioned to the small windows near the ceiling in two places. They weren’t large, but they were letting in quite a bit of sunlight, which was a no-no during one’s transformation.

“Oh, yeah.” I sucked my lower lip between my teeth, staring down at the bright pink box. “I’m sure she’s okay. I mean, the coffin didn’t hit the floor.”

“She was jostled about pretty badly, though.” Steven’s forehead creased as he stopped his pacing.

“If she was hurt, she’d heal like a vamp, though, right?”

“It depends on how far into her transformation she was, how much of her cells had been reprogrammed already.” Mr. Hartford placed a hand on top of the casket.

I came up beside him, setting my hand atop his. “She’ll be fine. She’s a fighter.”

“I can’t argue that one,” he said with pride.

We all settled into an amicable silence for the next several hours. The sun was just about to set when Aunt Claire came downstairs.

“Hey, how is everything going?”

“Not sure yet,” Mr. Hartford answered.

“Just a few more hours till you see that everything is fine.” She turned to me. “I made an appointment for you and Kellan to see the condo tomorrow morning at 10 a.m. If you like it, then we’ll put in an offer. If not, we’ll keep looking,” she assured me.

“Thanks.”

“Of course. I’ll be upstairs if anyone needs me.” She waved and headed back up to the main level.

Another hour passed before Kellan got there. I excused myself to go see him with Drexel in tow. He’d just stepped into the living room when I arrived.

“How did everything go?”

“Good.” He opened his arms to welcome me in. I snuggled into his chest, allowing him to wrap me into him. “*You look very sexy in my shirt.*”

I smiled against his hard pecs. “*Thanks.*”

“*What did I miss?*”

*"I'm more concerned about what I missed."*

*"I'll pull you in when the time's right. For now, I'm asking you to trust me."*

I peered up at him. *"I trust you. I just don't trust them."*

*"Auggy and Kalel have your best interests in mind, too."*

*"Not the same way you do."*

He nodded his head in agreement. *"Claire told me about the appointment tomorrow. She said you had the specs on the property."*

I scrunched my features. *"I left it in my other pants. Sorry. I already know it's the one, though."*

*"How?"*

I swallowed the serum threatening to rise in the back of my throat. *"Because it's the one Jack showed us in his vision in Puerto Rico."*

Kellan stiffened in my arms. *"Then we shouldn't get it."*

*"There's no use trying to escape fate, babe."*

He took a swift step back. "So you're saying there's no point in trying to escape my fate?" Every one in the room looked towards us.

"Of course not." I shook my head adamantly. "You know that's not what I was implying."

"Then explain what you were."

"That I like the place and it's probably the one I would have chosen anyway."

Jack stepped into the living room from the dining area. He zoned in on me, causing me to fidget. "It is the one. All others would fall through, forcing your hand to follow fate's ordainments."

"No offense, but I don't need your little mind shit right now." Kellan grimaced.

"Kellan!" I cut my eyes at him. "I'm sorry, Jack." I threw the apology over my shoulder, the heat of my anger focused on one man. I felt the telltale blaze illuminating my veins. "I don't know why you're so touchy lately, but I have too much on my plate to deal with a melodramatic vampire, too."

"It's funny how quickly you can dismiss me." He gave a humorless snicker.

"You know that's not what I'm trying to do. You know you took what I said out of context and applied it to a completely different topic." Electricity crackled on the surface of my skin.

"Then maybe I should take you kissing Kai out of context. Maybe I should take what you did with the Bladangs out of context. Maybe I should take how often you've lied in the past supposedly to protect me and others out of context."

"So that's how you want it, Kellan? You're ready to fight and pick apart everything we've done to each other in the past?"

"If that's what it takes to make you realize."

"To realize what?" I yelled.

"How petty, ignorant, and immature you can be. How freaking selfish you are."

His words stung, like a whip slicing my skin. I expected those words from my enemies. I expected those words to be spoken by anyone but him. He was supposed to support me, not tear me down.

All the fight left me, my body ceasing to be a conductor. I walked past Kellan and out the front door. Tears stung my eyes as I descended the front steps and headed for the sidewalk.

Drexel was beside me every step of the way. "He wasn't thinking straight. He was seeing red," he offered, keeping pace with me as I strolled down the sidewalk.

"I know."

—

## Chapter Twenty

We were near the entrance of Mel's neighborhood when a car slid along the curb. Drexel yanked me behind him.

"Back away from her now." I'd recognize that angry voice anywhere.

I pushed Drexel aside. "It's okay! Stop." I held my arms straight out, stopping Kai's onslaught.

"Who the hell is he?" Kai demanded.

"Just calm down. The army assigned him as my bodyguard."

Both men sized each other up, their chests puffing as they breathed in each other's scent. When they both lost the rigidity in their bodies, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Kai, this is Drexel. Drexel, this is Kai. He's one of the Bladang leaders."

"Hi." Kai extended his arm. I was surprised by his gesture.

Drexel seemed to be, too. He hesitated before returning the greeting.

Kai swung his eyes back to me. "Why are you outside when you've got a big target on your back?"

I shrugged.

He cupped my face. He was completely serene as he gazed down at me. "Leka, it's not safe for you out here. You would need a lot more than one vamp to fight an army, which is what you have coming after you."

“Me and Kellan got into a fight.”

His features grew tight. “*Babooz*. I can’t believe he let you go. Just because you have a disagreement doesn’t mean he shouldn’t protect you still.” He grabbed my hand with the ring on my finger. “This is worthless if he isn’t willing to honor it even when he’s angry.”

I stared down at my ring, at my hand wrapped in Kai’s. As much as I wanted to defend Kellan, I didn’t have a justification in this moment. From where Kai was coming from, he was right. It left a kink in my relationship, a weak spot.

Kai gathered me into his arms, enveloping me tightly. “I’m sorry, Leka. I didn’t mean to upset you more. I just have strong feelings about what a man should do for his fiancé.”

I pressed my face into his chest, inhaling his familiar scent. Kai was home, just as much as Kellan was. I couldn’t explain it. I don’t know that I even wanted to try. In some ways, it was nice knowing that he would be there if things didn’t work with Kellan, but what was I supposed to do now, when I wanted comfort and the only one to give it to me was Kai?

“We should go.” Drexel’s voice was urgent, his eyes focused on something in the distance.

I followed his gaze. My stomach tangled at the sight of Kellan coming right for us.

—

## *KELLAN*

My heart lurched at the sight of Lexi wrapped in Kai’s arms. I couldn’t get pissed at her because I’d just told her

off, but I sure as hell was pissed at him.

At the fastest human run possible, I approached them. Kai didn't bother backing away from Lexi, despite how awkward she seemed to be feeling.

I pushed his shoulder. "Take your hands off her."

"Kellan." I ignored the plea in her voice.

"You need to get over yourself, *brah*. I'll tell you the same thing I told her. That ring on her finger means nothing if you're going to let her go outside with a target on her back *alone* because you've got something up your ass." He kept an arm around Lexi's waist, but the rest of him was leaning into my space.

"She had *him*." I pointed to the massive bodyguard behind him.

"One guy can't hold off an army of attackers. Every man counts right now."

"I don't know where you get off telling me how to act and what to do with *my* fiancé, but you need to back the hell off." My blood was pumping, rage rising. My gums were begging for me to shred him.

"Guys, please don't do this." Lexi moved, placing herself in front of Kai. I dropped my gaze to her. Her eyes were pleading with me. "Please, Kel."

"Is this how it's going to be? Every time we fight you're going to run to him?" I couldn't keep the acid from my tone. I was trying to curb my vampire instincts, trying to keep from pummeling someone, but she wasn't making it any easier. The fact that she'd gone right to him killed me.

"I didn't — " she began.

“Are you that immature?” Kai laughed. I couldn’t hold back the growl that escaped. That sent him barreling with laughter. “Oh, God. You are. This isn’t about Leka — this is about your own insecurities.” He moved her to the side, stepping forward. “Let me give you a little piece of advice. Never let go what you’re not willing to give up, angry or not.”

“Let me give you a little piece of advice. Never touch another man’s woman unless you’re willing to lose your manhood for her.” I grabbed him at his lower ribs and jerked him towards me as I bent into him, effectively kneeing him in his jewels.

He hunched over for a minute before coming up swinging.

“Guys, stop!” Lexi’s voice was a distant reprimand as I defended myself against Kai’s attack.

His fist swung towards my face, but I blocked it with my forearm. His other swung low at my gut. I tried to leap out of the way, but he caught my hip. I charged at him, trying to tackle him to the ground, only to be ripped off him by Lexi’s bodyguard.

“Stop!” Drexel ordered. “You are in public, well within the sight of humans who could call the local police. The last thing we need is to explain an assault with no evidence remaining.”

Lexi stared at me. She didn’t even bother to hide her disappointment, which made me feel more awful than before. I didn’t mean to say the things I did. I didn’t mean to constantly let her down. Maybe she was better off with someone else.

I studied her for a moment, watching as her chest rose and fell behind my shirt. Damn it. She was mine. There was

no way I could give her up. So I was stupid sometimes, so I made mistakes and acted like a complete ass. I loved her. I just had to try harder.

Feeling the fight leave me, Drexel let me go. I took a step towards Lexi, but she took a step back. My chest tightened, my gut twisting. I tried not to let her see how much that hurt me. “Kai, drive her back to Mel’s.”

He looked me up and down before grabbing Lexi’s hand and leading her to his car. I stood there, watching her walk away with the other guy, my heart cracking at the reality that I could be losing her right now.

“Give her time and flowers. You really messed up,” Drexel said. He jogged across the street and hopped into the back seat of the SUV.

I sighed. I would need a lot more than flowers to make up for this one, but I would do it. *Because I love her.*

—

### *LEXI*

The sun was gone and the moon was steadily rising in the sky by the time we pulled into Mel’s driveway. Why did twenty-four hours fly by some days and drag on others? Usually I found time dragged on the worst of days.

“You okay, Leka?”

I studied Kai’s profile, trying to get my bearings, trying to find solid ground again. Kellan had given me over to Kai. He said for me to go with Kai, right after he fought him for touching me. Did the drama ever end? How could we bring peace to our kinds if we couldn’t even find peace in our relationship?

“No. I’m not okay. Take me back to him, please.”

“You can’t be serious,” Kai scoffed.

“Oh, I’m dead serious. And if you won’t take me, then I’ll just get out of the car and go there myself on foot.” I lifted my chin to challenge him. He narrowed his eyes at me and puckered his lips. “Please, Kai?”

He began mumbling under his breath. I only understood half the words, though. He threw the car into reverse and backed out of the driveway. We found Kellan strolling at a slow human pace, his hands in his pockets. His muscles pulled on the sleeves of his shirt as he walked.

I leapt out of the car before Kai put it in park and ran straight for Kellan. I knew without looking that Drexel was behind me. Kellan looked up right as I hit the grass lining the street in front of him. I was ready to light into Kellan with a vengeance.

“You listen up and you listen good, mister. You are never to speak to me that way again. I don’t care how angry you are at me, you are never to call me a name, never to deflate my intelligence, and never to talk down to me, period. This is an equal relationship. We’ve both made mistakes, and we’re both going to make mistakes again. That doesn’t give the other person the right to tear them down over it, though.

“And another thing, if you don’t want to be with me, then just tell me. Don’t throw me into the arms of another man because you think that’s what I want. Ask me what I want, Kellan. I’m always frank with you. I don’t beat around the bush or play games, but that’s all you seem to be doing lately. I’m not asking for an in on what you, Kalel, and Auggy are up to, but I damn sure expect a heads-up if you’re walking into danger.” I threw my left hand up in front of his face. “This ring on my finger says that we both are there to protect each other, support each other, and,

above all, love each other, even when we're angry, even when the other person has messed up, even — "

He hauled me into his arms and planted his lips on mine before I could go on. He wrapped his arms around me, cradling my back as his lips caressed mine. He was soft, yet urgent; there was angst in his touch, yet somehow it seemed to calm me. I relaxed into him, allowing my mind to open as our souls fused together again, as they always did.

*"I'm sorry. I know I can never take back what I said or how I acted, but I do love you. I will always love you and want to make us work."* There was sincerity in his thoughts.

*"You didn't act sorry. You came at me like a bat out of hell. Don't come at me angry twice in a row."*

*"I'm a guy. Better. I'm a male vampire. We're impulsive and run off testosterone, which sometimes makes us think with a different head or not at all."*

*"I don't care what you are, I just care about how you treat me. You could be a criminal, and as long as you loved me and treated me like an equal rather than a victim, then I would love you still."*

*"So if I killed Kai, you'd still love me."*

I bit his lower lip, drawing blood, as I pulled back. He laughed, wiping his lip. "Not even funny." I shook my head.

*"Okay, bad example."* He drew me back into his grips. *"I'm not perfect, and I'm going to mess up again."* He stared over me at the bun atop my head before meeting my gaze again. *"Just promise you'll keep me in line. Say something then, or before if you can, not long after I've opened my mouth and inserted my foot."*

I chuckled. "*Deal.*"

"Are you two done yet?" Kai sighed.

Kellan looked at the vampire leaning against his car across the street. Kellan's eyes lit up with mischief. "For now we are."

Kai didn't buy into Kellan's jab. "Fine. Get in the car and let's go." He didn't look back before climbing into the driver's side and starting the vehicle.

—

## Chapter Twenty-One

“It’s time,” I called as I looked at the clock. It was two minutes until midnight, until my new vampire best friend was revealed.

Gabi, Jack, Aunt Claire, Kellan, and I went down to the basement to join Craig and Mr. Hartford. Kai had taken off shortly after we returned to the house. He never even said why he’d come in the first place.

“Eek! I’m so excited,” Gabi squealed. She grabbed my hand, pulling me closer to the casket with her. We all waited on pins and needles around the coffin.

Craig checked his watch. “It’s time.”

My heart thundered in my chest as I clung to Gabi. This was it. This was Mel’s big moment, a moment we’d all been anxious for. Mr. Hartford and Craig each grabbed one half of the coffin and lifted the lid. A chill ran down my spine as I stared at her. She was gorgeous. Mel had always been beautiful, but she had a new glow about her, even in the darkness of the basement.

Craig fell to his knees, taking her hand in his. Tears wet Steven’s eyes as he gazed down at his daughter, willing her to wake now.

I jumped when Mel’s eyes flew open; my hand flew to my chest. I laughed silently at myself. Gabi squeezed my hand tighter.

“Holy sugarplums. This basement hasn’t been dusted in what looks like a century.”

“Wow. Such beautiful first words.” I giggled.

She sat up, grabbing the back of the coffin, unfamiliar with her rapid speed. "Whoa. That felt like a roller-coaster ride." She turned her head and studied Craig beside her.

"Hello, love." His voice was tender, his eyes mesmerized by the sight of her.

"Hey, yourself, cutie. Did you know that I have night vision?"

He chuckled. "Really?" As if he didn't have it himself.

"Uh-huh. And I can see that you're even cuter than I thought you were." She leaned in close, inspecting him further. Her eyes roamed his face like she was seeing him for the first time. "I never realized you had a couple of freckles on your face. They're adorable."

Mr. Hartford cleared his throat. She looked up at him and smiled. "Hi, Daddy."

In the blink of an eye she was out of the coffin. Craig and her dad stabilized her as she worked on adjusting her speed and balance. "That's going to take some getting used to. I feel like a car that has a rock on the gas pedal and no one steering me."

"That's actually a good analogy," I said. She threw a smile at me over her shoulder.

With her standing, I was able to really get a good look at her. She appeared to have filled out her clothes a little more, putting on weight rather than losing it. Outside of that, she looked like the same old Mel, but with a healthy complexion. I'd never realized how sallow and sleep-deprived she'd appeared before. Her skin was radiant, her hair gleaming like a multi-tonal rainbow of blonde.

She stood on her tiptoes and gave her father a long hug, followed by a kiss on the cheek. Craig yanked her into his arms right afterward.

Mel sniffed the air. She pressed her nose to Craig's chest, her eyes widening. She proceeded to inhale him repeatedly in different places. "Mmm. You smell amazing."

Craig laughed and stepped just out of reach as she moved to his armpits. "I don't smell like dandies and florals everywhere, love."

"I'm going to turn on the light now," Aunt Claire stated.

Mel squished her eyes shut as if she were a human who'd been sleeping in the dark and was warned of the impending bright pain of her eyes adjusting. Craig ran a hand over her back. "It's not the same. Your glammers don't burn as a vamp."

Light flooded the room, allowing us all a candid view of our newest transformer. Mel blinked a few times, looking around the room. "O.M.G. I can see everything. Holy sugarplum fairies. Do you see what I see, Lex?"

"Depends. What do you see?" I smiled, amusement lighting my soul with bliss as I watched her. I could only imagine how this was for my family after my transformation.

"If I really concentrate, I can see the colors that make up the white of the bulb. And sweet fig plums and pie, I can hear everything. Mr. Martin's snoring is atrocious." She sniffed the air again, her senses on overload. "And..." She looked directly at me. "You baked while I was asleep, didn't you?"

I beamed at her. "Ding, ding, ding!"

One second she was beside Craig, and the next she was hugging me. It was going to take some time to get used to her being able to keep up. I was accustomed to her human pace; her vamp speed tipped me off-kilter. I threw my arms around her enthusiastically.

“Are you going to hog her all night, or do I get some attention, too?” Gabi pouted sarcastically.

Mel giggled. “Of course you do, Gab.” She reached out with one arm and tugged her in, creating a three-way hug.

Mel abruptly withdrew. “Ugh! Someone stuffed me like a turkey, because these jeans are too tight.” She lifted her shirt and unbuttoned and unzipped the offending pants. She breathed a sigh of relief. “A million times better.” She looked around the room before cuddling closer into me and Gabi. She peered down her sweater through the collar. “Ugh. God is so cruel sometimes. He gave me at least five to ten pounds on my body, but tell me why he left my boobs exactly the same puny size?” She harshly exhaled in a huff.

Gabi shrugged. “Sorry, *chica*.”

Craig came up behind Mel, nuzzling her neck. “You make my pitter patter regardless of the coozy of your tidbits, love.”

She blushed, leaning into his caress. “Whoa! Is it hot in here or is it just me?” she moaned. Suddenly, she broke away from him, rubbing her neck. “Um, why do I have the inane desire for you to bite me?” No sooner had she moved away from him than serum flooded her mouth. Her eyes flew open as she clamped her mouth shut. She bounced in place, her arms flailing as she panicked.

I gripped her arms firmly, pulling her attention entirely to me. “Listen to me, Mel. Swallow it. That’s your serum.

It's what will heal your injuries and the wounds of others if you crave human blood."

She swallowed hard, standing there stricken in front of me.

"It's okay, Mel. Every vampire experiences it. We all have it."

"And vampires?" she croaked.

"They have it easy. Their serum oozes from their gums. We're the ones stuck with an awful gag reflex."

She looked at Gabi. "You know, I hate you just a little bit more in this moment."

Gabi laughed her off. "That's just the way the cookie crumbles. And speaking of cookies, we have sweets that Lexi baked earlier waiting for you upstairs in the fridge."

Mel ran her tongue over her teeth. "How do you know what you want?"

"You won't until you try. If your serum level doesn't go down with human food, then you're after blood. You can consume both fine, though. You just have to make sure you take in more of what your body actually craves," I explained.

She nodded her head. "Okay. That doesn't seem that bad. I can do this." She closed her eyes, her fingers flying to her temples. "Did you ever feel like you were in a weird tunnel? Or maybe the matrix? I don't know. Everything is so vivid, so overwhelming. I can't even think straight right now. It's like I'm in some alternate universe where everything is so... so... loud."

"It takes time to adjust to it all," I said.

“You’ll acclimate yourself in no time, sweetie,” Aunt Claire said encouragingly.

Mel flinched. “I even hear cars in the distance.” She grunted. “It feels like I live in New York City. People are sleeping, but I hear so much that it sounds like everyone is up and moving about.”

I watched her carefully. Fear coiled in my stomach as I remembered my dad’s transformation. He was turned into a vampire, but he didn’t turn out right. For some reason, Mel’s actions and reactions were jolting my memories of him. I sucked my lower lip between my teeth, working out my angst on it.

Two arms encased me from behind. Kellan’s warmth pressed against my back. “*She’s going to be fine. Everyone handles the change differently.*”

I stared at her, studying her carefully as her eyes traveled the room again. She abruptly soared upstairs, inadvertently crashing through the door that led to the main level.

She cursed under her breath. “Um, sorry, Dad.” I heard her fumble for her footing. It wasn’t that we weren’t graceful; it’s that we responded to what our brains told us to do at a quicker pace.

Craig, Aunt Claire, and Mr. Hartford chased her upstairs. Steven reassured Mel that he wasn’t upset and that her accident-prone agility was to be expected the first few days at least.

Jack put an arm around Gabi. “She’s your friend.”

“Oh, please, like you haven’t dealt with a few vampeens in your life.”

“I have, just never at their infancy. It’s quite comical.”  
He smirked.

“Hey! I heard that Jack-o-lantern!” Mel cried from  
above.

“Oh, she’s going to be fun.” I wagged my brows, Gabi  
and I cackling together.

—

## Chapter Twenty-Two

We all reconvened in the kitchen. I noticed Drexel stood in the shadows most of the time. He acted like a fly on the wall rather than an imposing brute. Mr. Hartford had already begun cooking a steak and some eggs for Mel.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I seriously hope my cravings center around actual food and not humans. Can you imagine how hard it would be living with Kyle, the whole time craving him? And my dog. Poor Ruby might end up being a snack.” She fidgeted. “Maybe I should let her stay with my aunt.”

Craig smirked, kissing Mel’s cheek. “Your Ruby will never be slurp-worthy, and Kyle, the pitten bonger that he is, would sniper your sniffer. He smells more like the mangy mucker than Ruby.”

“Are you saying my brother stinks?” Mel’s fists dug into her hips.

“If the Quaker quakes.” Craig shrugged.

“Ugh. These pants are killing me.” Mel disappeared upstairs. I heard her rummaging through her closet.

“Is it me or is she a bit... flighty for a new vamp?” I scrunched my brows, trying not to worry.

“It’s her personality. It’s been amplified. Combine it with her new senses and abilities, and she’s a firecracker. Craig and I plan to stay by her side for at least the next week straight to monitor and help her,” Mr. Hartford said. He removed the steak and eggs from the fry pan. Blood from the steak immediately ran onto the side of the plate

with the eggs. He dug out a fork and knife from a nearby drawer and set the food on the dining room table.

Mel returned in a pair of VS capri sweats, a staple in the comfort section of our wardrobes. She stuck out her bottom lip. "Like, none of my clothes fit me anymore. It's depressing. All those fabulous items are just in the trash because *someone* thought I'd be at my optimal health a few pounds heavier." She crossed her arms over her chest.

Half of us jumped back as she whipped past us, focusing on the dining table. "Is this for me?" Her eyes lit up as she rocked from side to side at her waist.

I wrung my hands. Her sporadic and erratic actions were eating at me. Kellan brushed into me from behind, linking his fingers through mine, effectively keeping me from twitching. I leaned into him as I watched Mel cut into the steak. She didn't bother sitting. She stuffed the large piece of meat into her mouth, chewing with gusto before swallowing.

She cocked her head to the side. "What am I supposed to be waiting for?"

"If your serum level doesn't go down, then you require human blood, not food," I replied.

She bounced up and down, clapping her hands. "Yay! I'm a foodie!" Mr. Hartford visibly relaxed. I gathered from that one move that he wasn't looking forward to teaching his daughter how to properly feed from a human. "Ooh, but I think I still want to try your dessert stuff, Lex."

"Why don't you finish your food here first, honey?" Aunt Claire suggested.

"Being a vampeen isn't any more fun than being a human if I can't skip right to dessert." She pouted.

“Oy, *chica*. You are... Hm. You are certainly a handful at this stage.” Gabi’s face was twisted in a partial cringe and partial amused awkward expression.

“You’re just jealous ’cause you can’t keep up.” Mel winked, sauntering to the fridge for the treats I’d baked earlier. She passed the cake to Craig before taking out a plate with the cupcakes and cookies on it. She sniffed at the plate, scrunching her nose. “I don’t really smell much. Only the lingering scent of chocolate and vanilla.”

“It’s probably because they’re cold. It tends to subdue the smell.” I squeezed Kellan’s hands, waiting, anticipating her reaction.

I watched as she carried the items to the table. Craig had set the cake beside her steak and eggs on the table. She sat down in front of the food, the cold plate from the fridge still in her hand. She looked like a panther preparing to pounce on its prey. Without warning, she dropped the plate on the table, the glass of the platter creating a loud noise upon its collision with the table. No sooner had she dropped the plate than she’d stuffed all of its contents into her mouth.

We all stared in shock and amazement as Mel devoured the cupcakes and cookies, followed by the entire cake I’d baked alone. Even Drexel seemed surprised. She moved on to the steak and eggs next, and successfully polished off everything that had been in front of her in just under a minute.

She sighed. She stacked the plates on top of each other and stood to take them away. Steven kept opening and closing his mouth. In the end he reached for the now empty dishes and took them to the sink. Mel shrugged.

Abruptly, Mel's eyes widened in alarm. She made a face similar to sucking on a lemon, grimacing as she swallowed the serum that'd risen. She shook her body out. "Ugh. I don't know if I'll ever get used to that. At least I don't have to walk around living the true life of a vampire living off humans, although their blood actually tasted good in the desserts. Or maybe it's just your desserts that taste good, Lex." She seemed to be talking to herself more than any one person, although she'd addressed me in the end. I opted to remain silent, allowing her to talk through her thoughts as they came.

She strolled beyond us toward the living room. Halfway there, she turned and faced us all. "Is there something wrong? Oh! Sweet sugar, did I grow an extra appendage?" When no one replied, she frowned. "Um, am I that much of a freak at this point?"

Recognizing the hurt in her tone, I let go of Kellan and went to her. I grabbed her hands and led her into the living room. I pulled her down on the sofa with me, squaring my shoulders towards her. "I think we're all a little shell-shocked. As overwhelming as it is for you to get used to this way of life, we're still adjusting to having you completely in this world. And, to be honest, I'm not sure I was prepared. You're vivacious and quick, certainly not like the human Mel I'm familiar with." She retreated. I immediately sought to amend her interpretation of what I was saying. "I'm not saying it's a bad thing. I'm just saying that it's new to all of us, and it'll take time. If we're staring, it's because we're trying to compute that you're one of us now, not because there's anything wrong with you. You came out perfect." I smiled.

She seemed to lighten at that. "Thanks. This isn't what I thought it would be. It's a little harder. The moment I think something, I'm doing it. There's no delay like when I

was human. That and I think I'm the first vamp ever to get a migraine. My head is pounding with all this racket."

"Give it a few days." I squeezed her hands. "In a week, all of this will be but a distant memory. It'll feel like merely a dream. Plus, you have a lot of us here to help you."

She narrowed her eyes at Jack. "Except for a certain someone who just wants to laugh at me."

"Oh, no, Melanie. I do not wish to laugh, but you are entertaining. That is not a bad thing. Should you need help, I would gladly give it to you."

"He just talks big and bad," Gabi said.

"Hmph. Are you willing to help me right now, Jack?"

"Sure. With what?" To his credit, he didn't hesitate.

Mel's grin was the biggest I'd ever seen; her eyes glittered with some unrecognizable emotion. "I want to paint your car pink, Jack-o."

Gabi struggled to stifle her reaction, one of pure indulgence. Poor Jack.

Jack coughed; a single brow rose in a questioning challenge. "Why?"

"Because every villain always drives a black car, and I think we should start a new trend. Plus, considering what you put Lexi through, I figure, you at least owe us a little ball-busting power." Mel shrugged her shoulders.

I released her hands, throwing mine up in the air, thus announcing my neutral stance.

Jack turned to Craig and Steven. He met their gazes directly. "Forgive me." In a flash he had Mel pinned against the wall.

Drexel moved within an inch of Jack, prepared to intervene if necessary. Craig was next to him. I could tell he was debating whether or not to pound into Jack.

Jack focused on Mel. "This is what power is. It's not the material things a vamp owns; it's his strength coursing through his veins. You aren't even an hour into your birth and you're already challenging a mature vampire. This is the help I'm offering you. It is a piece of advice. Don't mock that which you can't persuade, and never confront an opponent you haven't observed because you'll surely lose." He gently set Mel back down on the couch. Turning, he came chest to chest with Craig.

"Don't ever treat her like that again. Perhaps you've forgotten, mate, but I've oogled your style before, and I'm not piltered to face it." Craig's body was a mass of tension.

Jack chuckled, slapping Craig on the shoulder. "Relax. I meant to help her, not intimidate her."

"Um. I have an idea. Mel, why don't we go make an inventory list of all the clothing items you need to purchase? That way you won't forget anything if you get distracted by the noise." I wanted to slide past any more impending drama. I thought we'd experienced enough over the past forty-eight hours.

"Kiss that brain." She giggled. "I love it. Let's go, ladies." Mel rushed towards the stairs, pausing at the bottom. "Clair, Gab, come on," she ordered.

I fell into step behind them, Drexel pinned to my rear the entire way.

I looked at Kellan. "*Have fun with the guys. Keep the peace.*"

*"Thanks. You've really left me with a fun job."*

I winked at him, then raced up to Mel's room with the girls.

We spent the next eight hours laughing, sharing, and bonding over everything from worst outfits worn to most embarrassing moments. To my dismay, Drexel didn't seem the least bit bothered; he never exhibited any signs of impatience. Rather, he hung back silently. It was as if he wasn't even there.

We'd taken our time stuffing most of Mel's wardrobe into trash bags for donation; we'd meticulously created an itemized list of what we were discarding so she could repurchase it or find something similar in a size up. I was proud that by the end of our long session, she was much more balanced and graceful in her movements. In repetitively bending and unloading her closet, she'd gained control.

"Oh, I can't wait to go shopping! My dad said he would buy me whatever I wanted as a sweet-sixteen present. I hate to inform him that I want a whole new wardrobe." She danced in place, staring at the thirteen thirty-gallon trash bags set around the perimeter of her bedroom. "He'd better take me today, too, because I'm not wearing this outfit again tomorrow."

"You have a couple pajama pants that still fit," I reminded her with optimism.

She rolled her eyes. "That's not even nice, Lex. I wouldn't be caught dead out in those."

"In some ways you are technically dead. You're human part of you is pretty much dead anyway," Gabi stated. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"Such morbidity. I completely agree with you, Mel. You should go shopping today. Human or vamp, you feel better

when you're wearing clothes you like and are comfortable in. Confidence is key no matter what you are." Aunt Claire crossed her legs as she sat down on Mel's bed.

"I always liked you, Claire. I used to wonder if you and Lex were actually related, but since she's turned vamp, her style has vastly improved. I just wish you'd gotten a hold of her sooner." Mel tweaked my nose.

"Yeah, yeah. I may need to go shopping again, though, if my clothes keep getting destroyed." I tried not to think of the events of earlier.

The room grew quiet.

"Okay. What are you guys not telling me? What'd I miss?"

"A lot."

"Ugh! It's my curse, I swear. I always miss all the juicy stuff." She plopped onto the bed beside Aunt Claire.

"You didn't miss it in my car."

"Don't remind me. Since you brought it up, though, what are you going to do about a car?" Mel looked at me expectantly.

"I'm not sure, really."

"You can drive one of your parents' cars if you'd like," Aunt Claire offered.

I shook my head immediately. "I wouldn't feel right. It's...it's too close to home for me."

She nodded her head. "I can talk to Auggy about an army-issued vehicle."

“So he can keep even closer tabs on me? No, thanks. The thing would probably have interior and exterior cameras as well as a gazillion satellite tracking devices.” I chuckled despite how serious I was.

“You’re probably right. I’m sure Kellan wouldn’t mind shopping for a new car with you, or I can go if you want.” Aunt Claire was right about that one. I think all men have an appreciation for cars to a certain degree.

“Thanks. I’m not in any rush. It seems like I’m always with someone these days, so it’s not at the top of my list.”

Gabi checked her watch. “Well, girlies. It’s been fun. I have to head out, though. I’ve got Bladang business to tend to.” She scowled. “That’s what I get for cutting my honeymoon short.”

“Thanks for coming.” I gave her a hug.

She gave the other women a quick embrace. “I’ll call someone. We should do a spa day. Maybe that’ll ease the tension of executing a few vamps.”

Mel lifted her brows. “Do you really?”

“It’s part of the job,” Gabi replied. “Talk to you later.” I heard her descend the stairs. She said her goodbyes to the men and left with Jack.

“Jack never showed me my bakery lady.” I feigned upset.

“He told me he’d e-mail it at a later date,” Aunt Claire said.

“Oh, okay. No biggie.”

“Those were really good dessert thingies, Lex.” Mel shook her head emphatically to further assure me of her

statement.

“I’m glad you liked them.”

Aunt Claire stood. “It’s about time we get going, Lexi.” She gave Mel a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Take care. Try not to wreck the house.” She winked at Mel.

“I don’t think I’m that bad.”

“I’ll see you downstairs, Lexi.”

“Okay.” I waited until Aunt Claire had closed the door before sitting on the bed next to Mel. “Can you believe you’re a vampeen?”

“It seems surreal. I remember when you came back from your *vacation*.” She threw her fingers into the air, creating quotation marks.

“Yeah. That was definitely an interesting night.”

“You’re the reason I made it through, Lex. I remember how poised you were. You were so well put together even though it’d just happened. And with everything that you’ve faced since then... You’re amazing. You’re the vampeen I’m aspiring to be. You give me hope. That’s how I know I can pull myself together. That’s how I know that everything will be okay. Because you’ve shown me that it will be, no matter what or who comes at you.”

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. “Half the time I feel like a fumbling mess, but I appreciate your sentiment. Regardless of whether you’re a human or a vamp, you’re going to struggle with something. I learned that it’s not what’s happening to you, it’s how you’re reacting to what’s happening to you that determines how it affects you. So just stay strong. It’s hard in the beginning, but I promise it does get better. You learn to tune things

out." I patted her thigh with my hand. "Are you ready for some exciting news?"

She smiled, facing me. My arm fell to the bed. "Always!"

"I'm going to look at a condo with Kellan. It's in downtown and has vamp security. If everything works out, then I'll be moving."

"I'm so happy for you. I'm sad for me because downtown seems so far from me, but I'll be over all the time."

"Eventually you'll move into Craig's place. It's closer." I pursed my lips. "Does Craig even spend time at his house anymore?"

She laughed. "Not really. He has a luggage full of clothes here. My dad's set him up in the spare bedroom."

"Does your dad like him?"

"He adores him. They're opposites in a lot of ways, but somehow they're still two peas in a pod. It actually gets annoying sometimes."

"That's good, though."

She lifted and dropped her shoulders, her head nodding in unison.

"Have you thought about school anymore?"

"You know, when we were younger, I always said I wanted to be a fashion designer, and my backup plan was to be a veterinarian."

"You still can be."

“Yeah, but before I was in a rush. I didn’t want to flounder around with fashion and then be forced to rush through school, only to end up a thirty-year-old vet intern. Now, though, since I know I have essentially all of eternity to pursue it, I don’t feel the same pressure. I would actually be okay with getting my GED and then getting a job at the local coffee shop or at a department store.” She sounded wistful.

“I’m leaning towards a GED, too. With everything going on, I wouldn’t have a normal high school experience with normal memories even if I wanted to. I’m already different. I’ve already left that world behind in most ways. It’s strange, because at first I missed it. I fought hard to have everything I did as a human, but as I’ve adjusted to my new life, embraced who I am now, I’m not as upset.”

“How about Monday we go together to withdraw and sign up for a GED class?”

“I wouldn’t want to do it with anyone else.”

She beamed. “I’m so excited for the future, Lex.”

“You know, I am, too. It’s a little scary to think about, but I also know the unknown can be exciting. It’ll be great to see where we’ll be in ten years.”

“How about twelve when it would have been our ten-year high school reunion? If I was human, I would have eaten that shit up. I would have flaunted my success and fashion prowess in everyone’s faces. Can you imagine Jason and Jenny then?” She broke into a fit of laughter. “O.M.G. It’s so wrong, but I’m sure Jason will end up a pot-bellied, washed-up salesman on the brink of divorce or in an unhappy marriage, and Jenny will probably still have her looks but be completely dependent on her husband.”

I rolled my eyes. “My, my, you’re cruel. Maybe we should plan to crash the party, though.” My lips lifted with indulgent mischief.

“Aww. I love you, bestie.” She yanked me into a bear hug. “We’re just there. No matter how different we were at times, we’ve always been on the same wavelength. I love it!”

I squeezed her for a moment before breaking away. “Well, I have a house to go see, and you have a shopping trip to plan.”

“Take pictures. I’ll call you later.” She ushered me out her bedroom door.

I knew without checking that Drexel was behind us, and the guys were waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“Don’t gander your yullers all in one packle.” Craig smacked Kellan’s shoulder lightheartedly.

“I don’t plan to drain my bank account. I’m just going to look at a place,” Kellan said.

“Uh-huh. You’re takin’ her, though, mate. Women always gidder your doughballs.”

“Hey!” Mel ran straight into Craig, knocking him backwards.

“Uh, I’ll see you guys later.” I waved at them.

“Good bye, Lexi. Bye, Kellan. Thanks for everything.” Mr. Hartford opened the front door for us.

“No problem. ‘Bye.”

“Catch you later, Steven.” Kellan tossed a hand his way.

“Bye, loves. Don’t piddle it all,” Craig yelled after us.

I looked at Kellan. “He’s your friend.”

“And look at yours,” he countered.

“We really were made for each other.” I smiled.

He pulled me into his side as he escorted me to his car, Drexel in tow.

“I’ll follow you, but don’t try to shake me,” Drexel stated.

Kellan nodded his head. He opened the passenger door for me. It wasn’t long before we were on our way to look at our future home.

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

“I can’t believe my best friend is a vampeen.” I gazed out the window as we sped down the interstate.

“Both of our best friends are vampeens.”

I giggled. “You’re the odd man out.”

“Technically, I did still turn like a vampeen.”

“I love you regardless of what you are.”

He laced our fingers together across the console of his car. He lifted my hand to his lips.

We sat in comfortable silence until we got off the exit for downtown Charleston.

“What’s the address?” Kellan asked.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket. I chuckled. “Aunt Claire texted it to me. She always thinks of everything.” I passed my phone to him.

“We’ll be a block and a half from the army headquarters,” he stated.

“I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing.”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

He handed me back my phone and focused on the road. Five minutes later we’d found parking a block from the building, since the on-site parking was gated, literally, with a wrought-iron gate obstructing the entrance to the garage.

Drexel opened the door and Kellan held my hand as we stepped into the lobby of the building. We immediately had

to pass through metal detectors. The alarm sounded. A security guard, presumably the ex-army vamp, considering the speed at which he moved towards us and intercepted us. He had an athletic build that appeared a bit lanky in his head-to-toe black uniform. The scowl on his face said he meant business.

He looked right at Kellan. "What are you packing?"

Kellan pulled out his wallet and flashed something at the male.

The guard lifted his chin to Drexel. "And you?"

Drexel cut his eyes at the guard. "Don't fuck with me, Sanders. You know I'm still on."

"What are you all doing here, then?" Sanders pressed, blocking us from further entering the space.

"We're here to look at a unit for sale. Our realtor should already be here. Claire Maxwell," I said.

"Wait here a moment." He sped off to the front desk. I saw him flipping through a log.

"It's nice in here, minus the uptight security." I studied the vaulted ceilings with recessed lights and modern pendant lighting. The floors were travertine, and the concierge desk stationed in the center of the space was dark cherry wood with a granite counter. Seating areas had been strategically placed, with the floor-to-ceiling windows on the front of the building offering a nice view of the coffee house and another tall, architecturally exquisite structure.

Sanders returned to us. "I just need to make a copy of your I.D.s, and you'll be good to go."

I raised a brow. "Isn't that a little much?"

He leaned in a little closer, hovering near my face. Kellan tensed beside me and Drexel stepped up next to me. "From the looks of it, you need all the security you can get, little girl. The army doesn't assign their men to bodyguard vampeens on a regular basis. You must be special. So, unless you're going to object to me I.D.ing everyone who walks in the door, including whoever is after you, then I suggest you just hand over your photo I.D.."

"Aren't you a pocket full of sunshine?" I rolled my eyes, passing him my driver's license.

He chuckled. "I'm not all bad, am I, Drexel?" The way Sanders looked at Drexel hinted at a heated past. The only problem was I couldn't determine if it they'd had a relationship that turned sour or if they'd had a disagreement over business.

Drexel grunted, following Sanders to the concierge desk. He made copies of our photo I.D.s before pointing us to the elevators off to the right side. There was a set of elevators to the left as well, but I decided to follow the directions of the person who actually worked there.

Kellan punched the call button. "Why does he rub me the wrong way?"

I didn't reply. Instead, I faced Drexel, watching him closely. I waited until we got on the elevator to ask. "Personal or business?"

He pursed his lips, refusing to hold eye contact with me for longer than a second. "Both."

I tried to picture the two men together. They were the opposite of each other. Drexel was muscled with bulk, while Sanders had a leaner build. Drexel had short dark brown hair and brown eyes, whereas Sanders had overgrown blond hair and piercing blue eyes. Drexel was rougher

around the edges, while Sanders was more polished. They both were about the same height and had equally hard alpha personalities, but I felt like Drexel would be the one to crack first in a fight.

I slipped my hand into Drexel's, giving it a gentle squeeze. He gazed down at me, his face a mask to the emotions I knew were brewing inside him. He faced the front of the elevator but left our hands joined.

We stepped out onto the sixteenth floor. We were deposited into a mini lobby with a few club chairs, tables, and plants. There was a hallway on the right and left that dead-ended at a narrow floor-to-ceiling window, allowing light to stream in. From what I could tell, there appeared to only be four units.

Aunt Claire opened the door on the left side of the right hall and waved us over. Drexel immediately dropped my hand at the sight of her. Kellan slung his arm around me and headed towards her.

"Come on in, guys." Aunt Claire welcomed us into the space.

My chest constricted as we entered the space; my serum level rose just enough to make me aware of it. The condo was exactly like the pictures, though perhaps it was a little roomier, and it was exactly as Jack had shown us. I numbly browsed the rooms; my fingers skimmed every surface.

Kellan finally cornered me in the kitchen. "*Knowing what we do, do you still want it?*"

I bit my lower lip, searching the layout for any visible flaw. I couldn't find one, though. In truth, I knew this was the perfect place for us, but I didn't want it to be. Jack's

vision had tainted my dream. I understood now how knowing the future tended to ruin the present.

I locked eyes with Kellan. *"What do you want?"*

*"I want to be with you."*

*"How about a useful answer?"*

*"I love it, but I can tell that you're hesitant."*

*"I'm hesitant about what's set to happen here, not about the place itself."*

*"Then we won't hold a prediction against the condo."* I caught his double meaning.

*"We really shouldn't."*

I kissed him, colliding my lips with his. We instantly connected. I hadn't realized how tense I'd been until he pulled me into his body, secured me in his grip, and eased my fear. Every touch was of confidence, of reassurance. We knew what the future was. While it plagued our present, it also gave us an opportunity to prevent it and to change the future.

*"Don't worry, babe. I'm not going anywhere."*

*"I've learned that we don't know the number of days we'll be granted. Just because we have the opportunity to live for eternity doesn't mean we actually will."*

He tilted my head back, his lips drifting over mine with an easy grace. *"The future is never set in stone until it happens."* He withdrew his lips, keeping his arms around me. *"What do you say? Would you like to live with me in our own home, Miss Jackson?"*

I smiled up at him. *"Yes, I would."*

*“Do you want to look at any other places?”*

I shook my head ‘no.’

He kissed me once more. “Claire, we’d like to put in an offer.”

“You don’t have to offer on the first place you see. We can take our time and look at a few others for comparison.” She closed the gap between us.

“We wouldn’t move forward if we weren’t sure about it,” Kellan stated.

She looked at me inquisitively. I nodded my head, answering her silent question. “Well, then. Let’s put together an offer.” She gathered some papers. “How low below asking did you want to offer? Remember to leave room for negotiations.”

We all turned to the door at the sound of it opening. Drexel was there in a second, greeting the intruder.

“Hello.” He brushed past Drexel. “That won’t be necessary, Claire,” Will said.

“What are you doing here?” I knew my face reflected the shock I felt. He was full of surprises.

“I’m handing you the contract to this property and the keys.” He placed a few printed pages on the island, along with four sets of keys and two key cards.

“How did you manage this?”

He grinned wide. “Easy. I own this building.”

“But — ” I began.

He held up a hand. “Lexi, your life has been my life’s work. It’s my job to ensure every detail falls into place. This

just happened to be one of those details.” He slid the keys towards us. “Now I just need you and Kellan to sign here. It’ll take a few days for all the legal stuff to get done, but feel free to move in right away.”

I opened and closed my mouth several times, trying to register everything.

“When did you buy this building?” Kellan asked.

“I didn’t. I was the one who had it built. I’ve owned it since the beginning. I knew this day was coming.”

“Well, you’ve certainly made this an easy transaction.” Aunt Claire stuffed her papers back into her manila folder.

Will analyzed me for a moment, his face etching into a frown. “Lexi, I’ve always had your best interests at heart. I know the prediction better than I know myself. I also know that you’re meant to be here. Your purpose is bigger than mine. I’m merely facilitating things. I knew I had to be the one to own this building because otherwise there was a chance that someone would have occupied this unit. I’ve made sure this unit never sold. It’s been sitting here, waiting for you. And now you must move in, and you and Kellan must create what you’re supposed to here.”

I felt like his words were coded with a message, but I was too frazzled to figure it out. “Thanks, Will. We do appreciate it. I was caught off-guard, though. I thought we were coming here to look at the unit and make an offer, not come out with keys and more of your riddles.” I chuckled near the end. He would be the perfect person to think up *Jeopardy* answers.

“Wonderful. Please sign here.” He pointed to the spots on each page where we needed to initial or sign. Kellan did the same. “It was a pleasure doing business with you. Oh,

and don't worry about Sanders. I gave the lad a stern talking-to just now. He won't rile you again."

"You gave *him* a stern talking-to?" I smirked.

"Believe it or not, Lexi, I can be quite the demanding arse."

I laughed. "I would pay to see that, Will."

"Let's hope you never have to." He gathered the papers and stuffed the pen back in his pocket. "I'll be checking on you from time to time to ensure you're still on course. And, as always, I'm here if you need anything." He turned towards the door.

"Wait. How much do we owe you for the place?"

He glanced back. "Consider it my contribution to vamp peace."

"That's not fair, though."

He stopped at the door, facing us fully again. "I won't argue, Lexi. Perhaps you don't feel it, but what you and Kellan are doing is important. Don't let logistics distract you." He opened the door. "Have a wonderful day."

"Uh." I looked at everyone. We all seemed to be in the same confused state. "So, what do we do now?"

Kellan was the first to snap out of it. "You and Claire go shopping, and I'll rent a truck to load up everything from the house you want and move it here."

"Won't you need another person?" He squared me with an amused look. "Okay, I know you don't need one to move the stuff, but I mean with getting a truck. Won't you need someone to drive your car or the truck?"

He shrugged. "I figured I'd call my dad since he's back in town now."

"Oh! Do you think your mom will want to come shopping with us?"

"The woman loves to shop, so I'm sure she will." He watched me for a minute, his eyes twinkling with delight. "You seem happy."

"I am."

"Good." He kissed my cheek. He pulled out his wallet and passed me a black credit card. "Text me what you want me to bring from the house, and put everything you buy on here. Don't forget paint if you want the walls a different color." He turned to Drexel. "Take care of them. Make sure they go in your car." Drexel nodded his head in acknowledgement. "I'll see you later. Have fun."

Watching Kellan leave, I thought he seemed less stressed; I hadn't realized how hard being at my parents' place was on him. He never said anything, but compared to now, it was night and day. It was as if he was finally free, the same way I would be of my haunting memories in their home. And it would always be their home. I would never be able to consider it mine, which was the driving factor behind this move.

"Well, let's call Beth and go have some fun," Aunt Claire chimed in. Her eyes lit up as she looked around the space from a designer's point of view. "I'll make a list of the basics so we don't forget the essentials."

Within the hour, Aunt Claire, Beth, Drexel and I had parked outside a local furniture store. It wasn't until we were in there that it hit me. This was really happening. I was really going to be on my own, living as an adult. I was

officially leaving behind my human, childhood years and embracing the more mature, fast-paced life of a vamp.

It was scary, and it was surreal. Yet, all the while, I felt a small surge of exhilaration rising within me. Despite my reluctance, it felt right. It was right for me.

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## Chapter Twenty-Four

“What style furniture do you like?” Beth asked as we entered the furniture store.

“I don’t have a defined style, really.” My chest tightened. I didn’t have a defined style because it’d already been defined for me in the vision Jack showed us. I never wanted a glimpse of the future again. Knowing it had only ruined what should have been wonderful moments for me.

“Do you prefer leather or fabric?” Aunt Claire ran her hand along a suede sofa as we navigated the large showroom.

“Leather is easier to clean.” I stuck with what I knew they wouldn’t question.

“I know from my son’s current bedroom that he prefers black over brown.” Beth scanned the space.

“Hello, ladies. Is there anything in particular that you’re searching for today?” A tall male dressed in a business suit approached us, handing us each a flyer.

I took the flyer. My heart pounded at the featured sofa and love seat set on the front page of the ad. I stared at the sleek black leather upholstery. The material wasn’t baggy or overstuffed; rather, it had a streamlined design with a few tufted points. The couch had recliners on each end. My racing pulse slowed a bit, warming to a new thought. I could picture Kellan lounging in one of the recliners with me lying across the sofa, my head in his lap. I could easily cozy up with him on these. I imagined myself with a book in my hand and him either on the laptop or watching TV. A smile crept on my face as the vision grew roots.

“Lexi?” I slowly looked at Beth. “Are you okay, sweetie?” Her eyes softened as she watched me.

I smiled a little wider. “Perfect.” I held up the flyer and pointed to the set on the cover. “I want these.”

“Excellent choice. Those are just over here if you’d like to test their comfort.” The salesman led us over to the area where they were set up.

Drexel sat on the love seat. His body was massive compared to the smaller sofa. He gave me a small, timid smile as he stood.

“How is it?” I chuckled.

“You have my approval.” He nodded once.

“It’s great to have a man’s perspective.” Aunt Claire placed a hand on Drexel’s forearm, winking, before she moved to the sofa with Beth and me.

All three of us sat down on the sofa. I was stationed in the center between both women who played a maternal role in my life. It was amazing how things came together. They were supportive; they were wonderful to me and Kellan.

“What do you think?” I asked them.

“I love the modern design.” Aunt Claire pressed the button that opened the recliner.

“I think Kellan will love them.” Beth grinned as she looked at the tables stationed around the couch. “Do you like the accent tables and coffee table?”

I didn’t even have to look at them to know that they would be the ones I’d purchase. “I’d like the entire package minus the lamps.”

“Wonderful.” The salesman took out a pad of paper and started copying numbers from the tags attached to the furniture. When he was finished he grinned at us. “What else were you in need of today?”

Beth chuckled. “Oh, Gary, we’ve only just begun. My daughter-in-law needs to furnish an entire house.” She linked her arm through mine, standing with me.

My heart warmed at her sentiment. ‘Daughter-in-law’ flowed well; it felt right. As much as I dreaded things, hesitated with things, because of the vision, I couldn’t deny the serenity that seemed to meet my fear.

Aunt Claire and Beth led me throughout the store, helping me select the remaining items. Drexel lingered close behind us every step of the way. We ordered all the living room furniture, a desk and chair for an office setup, a dining room table, several barstools for the island, and a bedroom set for the master bedroom. Paintings and photos of cities around the world in all shapes and sizes with a black and white theme were purchased to hang throughout the condo; the pictures were the unifying items for the space. Regardless of any other elements, or the differences in those elements, the art created cohesion.

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The next twenty-four hours were a whirlwind. We called and had all the utilities transferred to Kellan’s name since he was over eighteen. Kellan, Claire, Beth, Al, Drexel, and I painted the bedrooms and bathrooms of the condo, opting to leave the living room, kitchen, and bonus room the stock creamy beige color. Kellan and Al moved all of my bedroom furniture and put it in one of the spare bedrooms in the condo to be used as a guest room. We basically re-created my old bedroom; it was a scaled-down version since the new space wasn’t as large.

Aunt Claire's new home-buyer's checklist came in handy on our shopping trip. We purchased all the essentials for a home, including everything I would need to start my bakery business and the large grocery list that accompanied it. It was exhausting, yet gratifying. They left Saturday afternoon, leaving Kellan, Drexel, and me to finish putting everything in its new place. The furniture was set for delivery in a week. I was afraid to admit that everything was working itself out perfectly.

"I didn't realize how expensive or time-consuming it would be to furnish a house from scratch." I frowned, opening a new box of plates. I continued to put away all of the dishes, glasses, bakeware, and silverware I'd picked out.

I stopped and studied the cupboards, quickly filling them with domestic items. I couldn't believe how quickly life had changed for me. At the beginning of the school year, I'd been a human student with human ambitions and desires. Now I was a vampeen, uneasy about quitting school, but feeling like there was no other workable option, and unpacking in a new home with my fiancé. My life was unrecognizable. I was unrecognizable.

I could remember being a little younger and dreaming of losing weight and becoming popular overnight. I would fantasize about some football jock asking me to prom, and then gushing over me on the night of the event, complimenting everything about me. It was easy to dream; it was much harder to make it a reality, though. Had I stayed human, it never would have become a reality. I didn't have the strength and drive to be persistent.

What I struggled with giving up wasn't the mundane daily grind of going to school; it was certain memories that went along with it, the biggest being prom and graduation.

I was sort of looking forward to dancing with Kellan under cheesy gymnasium decorations. I wanted the thrill of walking across a stage in front of a crowd of people and being handed my diploma, the proof that I'd survived twelve grueling years of nonstop education. It was undeniable proof that I wasn't a quitter.

I frowned. I wasn't a quitter, not when it came to anything but my weight. Was I making a mistake in giving up on the experience of high school so easily? Worse, was I letting go of some pertinent lessons I'd yet to study? A GED was an overview; high school was detailed. I was a detail-oriented girl.

I jumped as Kellan cornered me in the kitchen, having been deep in thought. He eyed me suspiciously. "What's going through that head of yours?"

I opened my mind to him. *"I know school is important. It's one of the few things my parents pushed, and rightly so, but it seems so obsolete right now."*

*"Babe, we're not human. It's humans who rely on knowledge to survive. They're vulnerable; we're not."*

*"Doesn't seem that way."*

*"That's because you're one of a handful of vamps with a bounty on their head."*

*"But still, life is simpler for them. I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss it. I also think I might regret missing out on certain memories from those years, too."*

*"The big man always has His reason, and from what I've seen, it's a damn good one. You can't deny that you're a stronger person now than before, but that also means you're different now than you were before."*

*“That’s circumstantial.”*

*“Exactly. Your circumstances have changed, which means your priorities have to be reevaluated, too.”*

I stared into his eyes, half annoyed that he was right and half relieved that I wasn’t impulsively blowing my future.

“For what it’s worth, Mel’s dad was right. For us, for our situation, we’re better off getting our GEDs. You’re a vamp, but you’re still not superwoman. You can’t handle assassins, the army, your grandfather, and everything else and maintain focus in school. Sometimes you have to take a step back in order to move forward.”

I curled my lips, gazing into his emerald eyes. “You are so smart, Mr. Bancroft.”

“And you are so sexy, Miss Jackson.” His voice had a husky growl to it that sent shivers down my spine.

He captured my lips, our minds and souls meshing into one. His hands caressed me as his mouth spoke confidence and peace for me regarding the decision.

He tilted my head, intensifying our connection. His touch was commanding, yet endearing. His tongue slid along my bottom lip with grace before he nipped it.

My body tingled with awareness, and my heart leapt into overdrive as I pressed my chest into his. His hands dipped to my rear, pulling me even closer, aligning us.

I gripped the lower part of his T-shirt, holding on for dear life as he kissed me senseless. I felt his muscles rippling and coiling beneath its surface.

“What do you say we christen this place?” His dimple winked at me with his smirk.

“Lead the way.” I smiled, leaning into his chest.

We both turned around and came face to face with Drexel. He had an awkward expression. “I’m, uh, just going to step out for a bit.” He quickly disappeared out the door.

“Aw. I feel bad.” I stuck my bottom lip out.

“I don’t. I’m ready to ravish you, Miss Jackson.” Kellan hefted me into his arms and took off for the spare bedroom, kicking the door shut behind us. I laughed as he tossed me on the bed, quickly covering me.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

Kellan went with Mel and me to withdraw from school on Monday. It was surreal to be back in the halls full of humans who were clueless to the paranormal world running parallel to theirs.

“Hey, Lexi.” Jason walked right up to me, his book bag haphazardly hanging from one shoulder. He had a pep in his step, a cockiness to his approach. “You ready to go out on that date?”

Mel choked on a laugh, crossing her arms over her chest as she watched the interaction. Kellan stood back. He knew I would handle him. He knew I needed to be the one to handle him.

Jenny and a group of her friends walked by at the moment. She rolled her eyes, trying to act as if it didn't bother her that he wasn't paying attention to her.

I no longer envied them. I cocked my head a bit, trying to dig deeper to see if I'd suppressed those feelings of inadequacy and desire. They weren't there, though. Had I really come full circle already? Had I finally embraced my own life, my current status, whether it made me popular or not?

“You just gonna leave me hanging?” Jason grabbed my hand.

I didn't jerk back, but I didn't feel the slightest of sparks. I wasn't giddy, which I knew was how I'd have been as a human. He was the popular jock; he was the All-American dreamboat so many girls fantasized as being the center of attention. I didn't realize how much progress I'd made, didn't recognize the transition I'd undergone, until

this point. I had actually shed my biggest human insecurity: ineptitude. Every one wants to be loved and accepted for who they are, and the best crowd to receive that fluffy image is with the popular group. Suddenly, what they were, what they represented, was nothing more than a superficial manifestation.

I squeezed his hand, meeting his eyes. “Thanks for the offer, Jason, but I don’t have any interest in being with you or a part of your crowd. If you’d open your eyes, though, you’d eventually see that Jenny, despite her dramatic antics, really does care about you and wants to be with you. I don’t think it’s about the status quo with her. I’m confident, though, that, once you two mature a bit more, you’ll be able to work things out.” I let go of his hand. His quickly fell to his side. He narrowed his eyes at me. “Good luck with her, Jason.” I patted his upper arm before breezing past him.

A quick glance over my shoulder showed him still standing there. I could see his jaw working, like he was opening and closing his mouth, trying to process my words and respond. Hopefully this would bring about an epiphany for him.

Kellan pulled me into his wings. “*You handled that very well.*”

*“Thanks for letting me handle it.”*

He nodded once.

—

We glamoured our way through the withdrawal process. We were of the legal age to withdraw; however, the guidance counselor wanted to protest our move. In the end, she gave us the information for an online GED prep

course and a weeknight class option at another local high school.

“Well, that was fun.” Mel raised and dropped her brows, like an exclamation point to her sarcasm.

“Yeah,” I sighed. I linked hands with her and Kellan as we walked out the school doors. It would be the last time we were inside these walls. It was a bittersweet moment.

“We should do something crazy,” Mel exclaimed.

“Like turning vamp wasn’t exhilarating enough for you?” I eyed her sideways.

She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s loud, not exciting. That school was atrocious. I wanted to snap the neck of every flashy and obnoxious teen in there.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“I think it would have been worth it.” She lifted her shoulders, skipping off ahead of Kellan and me.

“Craig’s going to need a leash for her.” I laughed.

“I heard that,” she called.

“I know,” I said.

Kellan shook his head. “What am I going to do with you two?”

“No clue.” I pushed past him to the car where Drexel was anxiously waiting. He’d been pacing beside the car, keeping an alert lookout on the building. He gave a visible sigh of relief as we approached.

“Get in,” he ordered.

I hesitated for a moment. “Is everything okay?”

“No, get in.”

“Oh, God. Lex, I want to be dropped off immediately. I don’t think I’m ready to kick some vamp ass. Humans, all day, but vamps... a little intimidating still.” Mel settled into the back seat next to me. She was forever fidgeting since becoming a vamp.

Kellan climbed in front with Drexel. “We’ll drop Mel off first, and then you can tell us what’s going on, Drex.”

The burly vamp nodded his head. He immediately started the SUV and took off towards the main road.

Kellan’s phone rang, and he quickly retrieved it from his pocket. A glance at the screen showed an unknown number. For some reason, the hairs on my body stood on end.

“Yeah?” Kellan answered the call, not an ounce of uneasiness in his voice.

I could only hear a muffled male tone on the other end, which meant that he was speaking low and fast.

“Compton.” Kellan promptly hung up, shoving his phone back into his jeans.

“*What’s going on?*” I focused on Kellan. I couldn’t see his face.

“*Later.*” He immediately shut me out.

The drive to Mel’s seemed to take forever. Craig was waiting in the driveway for her. I hugged her. “I’ll call you later.”

“You better.” She narrowed her gaze, authority in her tone.

I nodded. “Go.”

We watched to ensure that she and Craig got inside safely. The moment the front door closed, I curled my hands firmly around each male's shoulder. "Now tell me what's going on."

"Sanders called. Someone was trying to sniff out your new residence from the outside. He intercepted, but the person got away." Drexel stared out the windshield, no emotion in his voice aside from a bitter irritation.

"Auggy sent some guys over, but they couldn't find anything. Whoever he or she was didn't leave a trail of any kind, scent included." Kellan fisted his hands in his lap.

I promptly released their limbs, sliding back into the rear seat. "Let's go, then." I kept my tone neutral.

I pulled out my cell phone and quickly dialed Kai's number.

"Leka?" He sounded surprised.

"I have a quick question."

He hesitated a moment. "Of course."

"What security firm do you use for your compounds?"

"All of our security measures were created in-house and operate in-house. I don't trust easily." The last part of his statement sounded like it was aimed more at me than the topic.

"Would you be open to sharing for the right price?"

I jumped as Kellan punched the dash.

"This is a company vehicle. You dent it, and it'll be your hide on the chopping block." Drexel's eyes glared darts at Kellan, his face an icy veneer.

Kellan's response was a sharp huff. His outburst split me. He wasn't happy about my call, but he also knew that we needed to feel somewhat safe in our new place if it was ever going to be considered home. That's what had happened with my parents' house. It'd lost its appeal after everything. I was no longer comfortable there, constantly walking on eggshells.

Kai still hadn't responded. "Um, don't worry about it, Kai. I'm sorry I asked. I'll... uh... I'll figure something else out."

"Don't. Your safety is important. I'd rather have a hand in the pot and know that there's no crack." He took a deep breath. "I'll be over in two hours. Make sure your *vamp* keeps himself in check. I'm doing this to help you," he bit out. As if things couldn't get any more awkward.

"Thanks." I hung up, not wanting to prolong the discomfort.

The drive back to the condo was tense. No one spoke. Drexel faced the front, focusing on driving, while Kellan stared out the passenger window. His right hand ping-ponged between his chin and his temple. A sour feeling washed over me. I didn't understand Kellan's rationale.

Abruptly he turned on me, his eyes red. "It's my fucking place to protect you, not this musclehead or Kai. It's my place. You're wearing *my* ring, not theirs." His tone was pure acid. I could see the storm brewing inside him. It wasn't about me, though. This was his own insecurity that he would have to deal with. I couldn't change it for him.

I averted my eyes, fidgeting with my hands in my lap. The moment the car was parked, I leapt out. Drexel easily caught up with me.

“He’s pissed at himself, not you,” the bodyguard stated.

“I know, but it’s uncomfortable when he lashes out at me like it is my fault.”

“He bottles it up inside. Eventually he’s going to do more than yell. Be careful.”

I stopped, grabbing Drexel’s forearm. I steadied him with a level gaze. “Kellan isn’t perfect, but he would never lay a finger on me.”

“You know him better than I do, but it’s clear he’s unstable.”

“Because everyone keeps threatening him. First my grandfather tries to kill him, then Kai tries to move in on me, now God knows who is lurking around a place we’ve barely moved into.” I shook my head, my gaze traveling back to the car across the garage. Kellan sat in the car, pinching the bridge of his nose. I furrowed my brows, looking back at Drexel. “He’s always had issues with coping. I thought they were in the past, but perhaps not.” My heart splintered at the admission. As much as I wanted to defend Kellan, his actions spoke louder than any words I could have said.

Drexel placed a steady hand on my back. “Let’s go talk to Sanders.” I let him lead me inside.

The ex-army vamp immediately pointed us to an office on the left side of the lobby. He closed the door and immediately flicked the lights off. A few taps on a computer had a projector rolling down from the ceiling. A moment later footage appeared on the screen.

“This is the perp. It’s not the best angle, but whoever it was knew about our external security measures.”

Sanders frowned.

I studied the grainy image. The person was dressed in head-to-toe black with a ski mask on. He or she was scaling the building with a rope.

“From what we can gather, he hooked the railing of your balcony and was using it as leverage to climb the walls. A neighbor several floors below you contacted us when she caught a glimpse of someone outside her window.”

“What do you have in mind?” Drexel crossed his arms over his chest, a glower on his face.

Sanders stared at Drexel for a few seconds too long. My heart softened. I didn’t know what had happened in the past, but the man still cared about Drex.

“I’ve already gotten the approval from William to add a few flush cameras on the balcony. Nothing short of closing in the space will keep them from trying the same toss-and-climb thing, but at least we will have an immediate visual and can act quick enough to hopefully catch the intruder.” Sanders turned to me. “As for you, I don’t know what kind of trouble you’ve gotten yourself into, but don’t let him leave your side. I’ll also have a guard checking your floor more often. If push comes to shove, I’ll permanently assign someone to your floor.”

I wanted to argue that I hadn’t done anything wrong, but I knew it didn’t matter at this point. “I have a friend who’s coming to install some security features later.”

“How long have you known this *friend*?” Sanders leaned back, wrapping his arms around his chest.

“I trust him.” I knew Kai, just like Kellan, wouldn’t do anything to hurt me.

Sanders pressed his lips into a straight line. His lips weren't overly plump, but still clearly defined. They all but disappeared as he considered me. I could tell he thought I was an immature, ignorant young vampeen. He was probably right on some accounts in comparison to their level of experience.

"He's one of the Bladang leaders. I trust him."

Sanders' chuckle held no humor. "If you're sure."

"I am." My voice was barely above a whisper. I turned on my heel. "I'm going upstairs."

"She's not who you're making her out to be." Drexel shut the door behind him, shadowing me to the other side of the lobby. "It's the years he spent as a secret agent. He doesn't trust anyone."

I faced him. "He trusts you."

The big man actually blushed. "We were partners. We had to trust each other."

"You didn't trust him, though."

His expression was stoic. "I had my reasons."

"I'm sure you did." We both stood in front of the elevators, waiting silently for the bell to ding, announcing its arrival. "He still cares about you."

Drexel stared ahead at the shiny metal doors, watching them open. We boarded. He pressed the floor number. The doors closed behind us. We were just starting our ascent when he spoke. "I know." It was a solemn response.

I chanced a glance at him. He had his guard down, a moment of weakness. Clearly this was something that still

ate away at him inside. I felt for the vamp. Heartache was never fun. I linked my fingers with his, letting him know that I was there.

The second we arrived on the correct floor, Drexel's emotions disappeared behind a façade again. One day he was going to have to come face to face with his feelings, get beyond his past and everything that still haunted him to this day. *You can't run forever.*

Even as I thought this, I knew it was the same for Kellan. The longer I was with him, the more I knew about him, and the more I knew about his demons. One by one they'd surfaced. I loved him in spite of his bitterness. I loved him in spite of his insecurities. I loved him in spite of his behavior. But I knew there would come a day when love wasn't enough. His issues were a lasting wall between us. We would never reach our optimum potency so long as he hid his true feelings from me, so long as he hid the truth from himself.

—

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Drexel insisted on entering the condo first. He scoped out the space before allowing me to go inside.

I studied him. He hadn't let his guard down again since the elevator, but I knew his mind was still lost, his heart sinking in an ocean of unknown. "How about some yummy treats?" I smiled, going for a light mood.

His lips lifted slightly at the corners. "Depends on what you have in mind."

"And that depends on what you're in the mood for." I headed for the kitchen and began pulling out baking ingredients.

"When I was a child, my mom made delicious brownies." He came over to the island in the kitchen. His gaze traveled over the items I was pulling out. "She would give me a plate with a big piece of brownie and a cup of vanilla milk." He chuckled, lost in a memory. "She said fairies kissed the milk and that's how it became sweet with vanilla. It wasn't until I was older that I caught her putting some vanilla beans in it and mixing it with a spoon."

"You were close to your mom?" I pulled out the KitchenAid stand mixer and began measuring out and dumping the dry ingredients into the metal bowl.

"At one time, yes." His face turned hard again, and I knew to back off.

"This will be my first time making brownies, so hopefully they turn out well." I turned the mixer on low and starting cracking several eggs. "Would you mind brewing a bit of coffee?" He quirked a brow. "Hey. Who's the

professional here?" I pressed. That sent him moving towards the cupboard for the roasts.

We fell into a comfortable silence, working quietly around each other in the kitchen over the next couple of minutes. We both looked up when the front door opened. Kellan trudged into the kitchen. He was calmer than we'd left him.

He stopped in front of the island, watching what we were doing.

I chanced the question. "Are you okay?" I tried to avoid looking at him so as not to push him.

"I'm better than before."

Kellan stood there for a minute as I finished thoroughly blending the brownie mix. Drexel passed me the coffee, and I measured out a bit and poured it into the mixing bowl.

"A baking pan, please, sir." Drexel promptly retrieved the right dish and set it on the counter beside me.

Both men watched as I transferred the wet mixture into the pan. I turned on one of the double ovens to preheat before getting out a small pot and a glass bowl. I added water to the pot and set it on the stove, turning the heat on high to later turn down. I tossed some semisweet chocolate chips into the bowl to be melted slowly by the steam from the water.

I washed the mixer's bowl and put it back in its place. I measured out some powdered sugar and dumped it into the metal bowl. I went to the fridge and grabbed the blood. I measured out a good amount of the blood into the container with the sugar. I returned to the stove. Seeing most of the chocolate soft, if not melted, I turned off the

heat. I grabbed a whisk and moved it in the bowl until the chocolate was hot silk. I then emptied the chocolate into the mixer's bowl with the sugar and blood and combined all of the ingredients. I added a dash of coffee near the end to enhance the chocolate flavor.

My gaze floated to the boys, who were enraptured by what I was doing. I smiled as I continued to work. I stuffed the brownie pan into the oven to start baking. I dumped the small pot of water into the sink and promptly poured some blood into the saucepan. I turned the stove back on, setting the temperature to medium. I placed the pot back on the burner, where it would stay for a minute while the blood reduced into a thicker sauce.

I retrieved yet another bowl from a cabinet and poured some heavy cream and a few drops of vanilla extract into it. I snatched a clean whisk from a nearby drawer and began beating the cream at a swift, vamp pace. At the one-minute mark I had beautiful stiff peaks of whipped cream. I tossed the whisk into the sink and placed the bowl in the fridge.

The guys still hadn't spoken. They were still watching me with a keen fascination.

I pulled out the blender, prepared to try to make a vamp-friendly Frappuccino. I pooled three-quarters cup of coffee, one-quarter cup of milk and one cup of blood into the blender. I tossed in a hearty handful of chocolate chips and pressed the 'Puree' button on the equipment. Satisfied with the way the ingredients were merged together, I grabbed the Starbucks coffee ice cream from the freezer and threw two large scoops of it into the blender, followed by two cups of ice. I pressed the 'On' switch on the blender and watched as all the ingredients came together into a frosty treat.

I gathered three glasses and three plates from a cupboard, along with three spoons and three straws. I turned the blender off and separated the glass pitcher from the base of the blender. I set the pitcher in the freezer to keep the ingredients cool. I spent the next few minutes transferring the whipped cream into a pastry bag. I checked the blood sauce on the stove; happy with the way it'd reduced and thickened, I removed it from the heat.

I was just about to pull the brownies out of the oven when there was a knock on the door.

Kellan's nostrils flared, and he visibly stiffened. Drexel went to the door. I knew just by Kellan's reaction, though, that it was Kai.

"Let him in, Drexel," I called.

Kai and Drexel both returned to the kitchen. "Whatever that is, it smells amazing," Kai said. He stepped away to drop a large plastic container on the floor.

"Thanks. You want some?"

"Definitely." He smiled, moving in to stand beside Drexel at the island.

The men watched me closely as I assembled everything. I placed a large piece of hot brownie on each plate. I poured the blood chocolate icing on top of each brownie, allowing it to run over onto the plate. I piped a decorative swirl of whipped cream and then drizzled the blood sauce on top, finishing off my masterpiece.

I retrieved the vamp frap mix from the freezer. Grabbing an extra glass, I divided it into four cups. I added whipped cream on top, followed by a drizzle of blood. I slid a straw into each glass and put a spoon on each plate. One

by one I placed the treats in front of the men. They each gave me an appreciative look before diving in.

Moans echoed through the room. I'd heard the saying, "The best way to a man's heart is through his stomach," but I didn't understand it until now. Kellan and Kai weren't fighting; they also weren't grunting at each other or scowling. They were caught up in the glory of food. Perhaps good food did have its place in preventing wars.

I allowed myself the simple pleasure of absorbing their reactions to my food. It was the greatest joy watching their eyelids fall to half-mast as they closed their mouths over a spoonful of ooey-goopy goodness; their lips puckered and cheeks caved in as they sucked up the vampuccino. *Ooh, I like that name.* Within minutes their plates were clean and their cups empty.

"That was so good, babe." Kellan licked his lips.

Drexel nodded in agreement. "You made my mother's brownies taste like dirt."

"I'm glad I came when I did. You're going to make a killing in this baking business." Kai sucked his spoon into his mouth, trying to get every ounce of flavor off it.

"Thanks, guys."

I began to pile their plates and cups together. Kellan seized my hand between both of his. "Don't worry about the dishes. I've got them. You just drink your drink. I think you'll be surprised how close you came to the real thing." He immediately took over for me.

"I'm going to get started on the security stuff," Kai announced, pointing towards the container.

"I'll help him," Drexel offered.

“Thanks.”

Kellan had the counters cleared and wiped down within a minute and focused on washing the dishes. “Drink,” he ordered.

I smiled, bringing the straw to my lips. The moment the flavors hit my tongue, I moaned. This was what I’d been missing from my human days: the perfect cold coffee drink. The tiny bits of chocolate were so small they instantly melted upon contact with the heat of my tongue, blending into the taste of everything wonderfully. I alternated slurping the drink down with zest, sipping slowly, trying to savor all of it, and dipping my straw in the whipped cream and blood, then sucking it into my mouth.

Within two minutes I handed Kellan my empty glass. “I will definitely be making that again.”

He winked at me, his smirk revealing his dimple. My heart warmed at the sight of him. His hands were covered in soap suds as he washed the dishes at a gentle human pace. The domesticated side of him riveted me. I could stand here all day watching him. It was a moment of fascination, like watching a tough biker clad in leather cuddle a little puppy.

“You like what you see?” He wagged his brows.

“Always.” My reply was breathless.

—

It took Kai and Drexel a couple of hours to run all the necessary wires and set up the security system. The end result was nothing short of jaw dropping.

“I feel like I’m in a maximum-security prison.” I eyed all the features nervously.

“Only you have HBO and a shower to yourself.” Kellan smirked.

I rolled my eyes, focusing on Kai as he walked us through everything. He handed us several remote controls that were linked to cameras throughout the condo, inside and out. There was now a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall between the dining room and the living room showing all of the camera feeds. He’d installed a fingerprint entry system on the front door. Only people whose fingerprints were in the master record would gain entry. He’d taken a new scan of our fingers with a handheld scanner.

“I’ll scan Sanders on the way out, but I’m giving him emergency access only, which means if the alarm is tripped, then he’ll be able to get in.”

“What if someone’s outside, like earlier where someone was by the balcony, but not inside yet to trip anything?”

Kai pursed his lips. “Do you trust the guy enough to give him total clearance into your private space?”

I instinctively looked to Drexel. “Is he trustworthy?” I knew this would push him to admit something to himself as well as answer my question.

He swallowed hard, a glint in his eyes. “Yes.”

“Add him. If I’m uncomfortable with it later, then we can remove him.”

Kai didn’t look happy, but nodded his agreement nonetheless. “There’s an emergency lock feature on the bedroom doors. If someone breaks in, you can call security and wait for their arrival in one of the rooms. I’ve sprayed the doors and windows with a clear material that should make them bulletproof and laser-proof.”

“If someone breaks in and I hide in the bedroom, won’t they be able to see me on the camera feed?”

“In any bedroom but the master, yes. With the remotes, you can disable the cameras with the click of a button. So if someone’s staying in the guest room and you don’t want to intrude on their privacy, you just click the power button on the remote attached to it.”

“There are so many remotes.” I frowned.

“I’ve installed an app on both yours and Kellan’s laptops that will allow you to have total control of the cams as well as a live video feed of them from anywhere without the remotes.”

“That sounds more my speed.” I set the remotes he’d handed me on the kitchen counter.

“Thanks for doing this.” Kellan stuck his hand out towards Kai.

Kai reluctantly shook Kellan’s hand. “I didn’t do it for you.”

“I know. I still appreciate it, though.”

Kai didn’t reply. His gaze settled on me. “I’ll check on you later. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will, thanks.” I moved towards him, wrapping my arms around him. I pressed my face into his chest, inhaling him. I savored his scent since he was the only vampire I could smell. “I really appreciate it.”

He hugged me back tightly, not caring that my fiancé and bodyguard were watching. I drew back and he cupped my face. “I’ll always be here if you need me.” He kissed my forehead and backed away. He picked up the nearly empty container that he’d brought with him.

“Oh, wait. How much do I owe you?”

He looked at the guys, then at me. “Your safety doesn’t have a price tag, Leka.” And with that he walked out.

Guilt rode me. He was such a good guy. It killed me that I couldn’t be with him. I knew if I was, I’d be longing for Kellan the whole time. I’d be lying if I said there weren’t times when I thought of Kai while I was with Kellan. I didn’t love them the same, but I still loved them both, which never ceased to wrack my heart.

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## Chapter Twenty-Seven

It'd been a few days since Kai had installed the security in the new condo. Our furniture was set for delivery tomorrow, and yet today Kellan had insisted I come with him to an unknown location. I knew it was serious when Auggy called Drexel and told him to stay behind.

"Where are we going?" I asked, staring out at the break of dawn. He didn't reply. Trepidation chilled my bones.

Trees whirled past as Kellan sped down the interstate.

"There's something I need to tell you." There was uneasiness in his tone.

My gut tightened at his words. "What is it?" My voice was barely above a whisper.

"I've been hiding something from you." He glanced at me before facing the road again. "I've been sneaking around at night."

My heart nearly stopped beating as serum drowned my mouth. I couldn't breathe, couldn't speak. I openly stared at him, wondering what I'd done wrong.

"I've been wanting to tell you for a while, but wanted to wait until we had something concrete."

"We?" Air escaped my lungs in a heave. "I... I don't believe it." My chest caved in as the world closed in on me. How did I not see it when we connected?

"Listen, Lexi." He narrowed his eyes. "I'm not him. I'm not some image of sparkling perfection. I have an ego that needs regular petting. I have an appetite that will always

require a human to satiate it. I have wants that don't revolve around you. I'm sorry, but I refuse to be a puppet."

"Wait!" I threw my arms out. "You're not cheating on me, are you?" I stated more than asked.

"Of course not." His features pinched as if he was annoyed.

"You know, if you'd open your mind more often, we wouldn't be facing this issue."

"Why would you think I was cheating in the first place?"

"Kellan, replay your side of this conversation verbatim and then ask me that question again." He seemed to calm a bit, as did I. My serum level lowered as my heart resumed its regular, irregular melody. "And, by the way, I would never compare you to a fictional character."

"That's good to know." His lips lifted slightly.

"So who have you been sneaking around with?"

"Auggy and Kalel."

I rolled my eyes. "Why the dramatic buildup? I already knew that, remember?" He focused on the road ahead, not turning towards me. "There's more to it. It's not who you've been with, it's what you've been doing with them, isn't it?" He continued to stare out at the pavement.

"O.M.G. Tell me you haven't been trailing my grandfather."

He didn't flinch, didn't move. He gave nothing away.

"Kellan?"

He pursed his lips rebelliously.

"Kellan!"

“Yes, okay. We’ve been scouting out the house he owns just outside Ridgeville.”

I ran my fingers across my forehead. “What did you find?”

“He’s planning something. We think it’s another attempt to grab you. The number of vampeens in and out of his compound has steadily increased every day this week,” he stated.

“How has this been working? Do you all go together and watch?” I eyed him sideways, twisting in my seat. At his silence, fear pummeled me. “Don’t tell me you go alone.”

“We do what we have to do, Lex. We take turns individually and together. We compare notes. We’ve invested a lot of time into this strategy.”

“What exactly is your strategy?”

He turned off onto an exit ramp. He glanced at me then, focused on the road again. “We’re sending you in to surrender, and then following behind you once they confirm you’re alone and let down their guard.”

“You’re going to throw me to the big bad wolf?” My chest constricted, air caught in my lungs. I swallowed my serum, which was quickly on the rise again. I was hurt and confused. Wasn’t he the one preaching about protecting me?

“If there was any other way, then we would do it.”

“What about brute force?” I countered.

“Too much security. We’d never be able to get through.”

A dark, ominous cloud seemed to cover me. I tried to steady my pulse, to stabilize my racing mind. “How do you expect to get past security once I’m inside?”

“You’ll be wearing camera earrings similar to the ones you wore in Spain. We’ll be able to see everything they do and crack through. What we can’t get through, we’ll force our way through.”

“You’re aware of what you’re asking me to do, right?”

He whimpered. The distressed noise revealed just how hard this was for him. “I don’t like it. In fact, I hate it. But there is no other vantage point; there’s no other way to take care of this problem.” He grabbed my hand, pulling it to his chest. “I swear on my life that you will walk out of there alive.”

I noticed he didn’t promise that I would walk out of there unharmed, only alive. For a male who preached about protecting what was his, I didn’t feel protected in that moment. This was a time where I was being forced to trust him.

“Is that what we’re doing today? You’re sending me in with only a moment’s notice?”

He came to a stop at a red light. His brows furrowed deep. “Of course not. I would never do that to you.” Abruptly, it looked like he was trying to hold back tears. “I wanted you to come so you could see what you would be walking into. If you don’t like it, if it scares you, then we’ll pull the plug. That’s what this is about.”

The light changed to green and he sped off again. A couple miles down the road, he turned off onto a nondescript street. The gravel gave way to a dirt road crowded by trees. Eventually we pulled up to an abandoned

home; two vehicles were already parked there, though I didn't recognize them.

He squeezed my hand and then released it. "Let's go."

I slid out of the car with a little trepidation. Kellan secured my hand and led me up to the front door, which seemed to be about the only thing intact still. He opened the door and walked right into the space.

Dingy walls with moldy wallpaper met us in the foyer. The wood floors of the home were scuffed and warped in several areas, stripped of their former glory. Kellan had obviously been here before because he led me upstairs and to the right, directly into the master bedroom. Auggy, Kalel, and another officer had maps laid out over an old stained mattress, the only item in the room. Their combat boots looked warm next to the mildewed carpet. A black and green layer of mush sat in every corner and along the baseboards. Had I been human, I would have keeled over by now probably. No wonder it was abandoned.

Gazing around the space, I felt bad for the house. I could tell it had beautiful bones. Sadly, the land was worth more than the property itself in this state, and with the hazardous germs everywhere, no one would set foot in here without a HAZMAT suit.

"Where's the closest army base to here?" I asked.

The men all looked up at me, having cut their discussion short.

"We have a satellite office outside Columbia," Auggy stated. His eyes quickly returned to the maps.

"And the Bladangs?"

“The lake house or downtown Charleston,” Kalel snapped.

“I think one of you should buy this property and convert it into an army bunk slash satellite office.”

All of them gave me an open stare, brows lifted at me this time.

“Any target they may have is likely to stay in the bigger cities where there’s plenty of food.” Auggy crossed his arms over his chest, sighing as if I was bothering him with trivial things he didn’t want to waste time on.

“Which is precisely why they would never be found in the country.”

“We’ll discuss it later,” Kalel said. “We have more important things to focus on. Come here.”

I approached the bed. Kellan was right behind me. To me, the many maps looked like a cluster of lines and dots.

Auggy pulled one to the top of the pile. “This is Cesar’s local compound. We found out he’s been hiding out here about a week ago. We’ll be running on foot approximately 21.2 miles northwest to the target location. That’s what’s circled in red in the middle of the map. The smaller blue circle down here is us.” He pointed out the circles. I tried not to smirk. It wasn’t like I was blind.

“Here’s the important piece, babe.” Kellan dragged the map closer to me. “All of these dots are vampeens. We marked them where we first saw them on the map. The chart at the top shows the marker to day guide with a daily tally to the side; that’s what these numbers are here. There’s a different color for every day we scouted.”

I swallowed hard. I knew my eyes had widened. “How many are there?”

“We haven’t been out there this morning, but as of last night, two hundred and thirty-two.” Kalel extracted the map, gathering the others with it into a pile.

“In one house this size?” I couldn’t withhold my dismay.

“Your grandfather has years and numbers,” the unfamiliar officer said.

“This is Chek. He’s Auggy’s top guy for infiltration,” Kellan said.

The male was short, even next to Auggy, with a Middle Eastern heritage. Jet-black hair hung over the tops of his ears and over the collar of his black Lacoste polo shirt. Dark copper skin made the Hawaiian-born Kalel look pale. Chek wasn’t highly muscled, but I could see a hint of definition in the lower parts of his arms. His chocolate eyes were keen, aware of everything.

Chek nodded a ‘hello.’

“Hi.” I waved my hand once.

“We believe Cesar has an underground unit similar to the Bladangs’. We’re not sure how far out it extends. For all we know, we could be standing above it now.” Kellan pulled me into his side protectively.

“The original purchase documents are dated in 1909. There was an extensive reconstruction project that commenced, but no permits or county docs indicating what was completed. Of course he used human workers so they’re all deceased and useless.” Kalel sighed. I could see the frustration in his features.

Chek took a map from the pile and set it in front of me. "This is an architectural drawing of the perimeter from what we could see. We can't get too close, which is why we need you to go in. Once we have the specs of the inside, we can get in. Going in blindly, though, would only be a bloodbath."

"Won't it be a bloodbath anyway with all those vampeens roaming outside?"

He averted his eyes to the paper between us. "Every war has a built-in number of sacrificial lambs."

"Wow. That makes me feel better."

"There's no way to avoid it. Every man who agrees to a contract with us knows the risk, just as every human signing up with the military knows the chance of peril." Auggy's deep voice was gruff, rough. It fit his words this time, the way he spoke of death as an everyday occurrence that was no big deal. Those were the thoughts spoken by someone who was accustomed to it, a tough vamp with an even tougher attitude.

"How close will we get today?" I asked, wanting to focus on something different.

"All of us will get you within a mile of it. Then Kalel and Chek will take you the rest of the way. We'll have a radio if you need backup, but it's for emergencies only," Kellan advised.

I took a deep breath. "Well, let's get this done and over with." The guys started to leave. "Auggy, a word, please."

The military brute turned back to me; he was unreadable. "Yeah?"

"Have you apologized to my aunt yet?"

“I don’t think that’s any of your business,” he bit out.

“When it comes to my family, it most certainly is. She was distraught after you left with the High Authorities that day, and given the amount of time she’s spent with me lately, I’m assuming you haven’t dug your head out of your ass and made up with her.”

He growled. “Like I said, none of your damn business.”

“Augustine! Do you love her, for crying out loud?” My hands gripped my hips; I felt my forehead creased with lines from my frown.

“Of course I do,” he huffed.

“Then stop acting like the hard-ass you are and let love be your soft spot. She deserves a good man, and if you’re not willing to make the sacrifice for her, then she’ll find someone else who will. My aunt has never wanted for male attention.”

He looked me up and down. “You’re bossy for such a little thing.”

“And you’re being stupid for a guy with brains.”

He puckered his lips. “I’ll call her later. Can we go now?”

“Yes.”

I followed him through the upstairs to a staircase in the back. The stairs led down and dropped us off in the kitchen. He pushed through a swinging door into what I guessed was a sitting room at one time. The back door was open already, indicating it was the way the others had left.

Stepping outside, I saw the other Kalel, Check and Kellan huddled beyond the shore of trees.

"I put the maps in my car," Kalel stated.

"Good." Auggy brushed past the men and headed deeper into the forest.

Within twenty-five minutes, at top vamp speed, we were a mile out from our target.

"Your best vantage point is in the trees," Chek whispered.

"We'll get you as close as possible, but then you'll have to climb." Kalel looked at me, checking to see if I was still with them.

"Okay."

*"Be safe, babe. I'll be nearby if you need me."* Kellan gathered me close and kissed my lips. He was soft and reverent, yet quick, as if he knew danger was lurking.

"Out of curiosity, why can't all of you come?"

"Too many bodies to hide. It increases our risks of getting caught. All it takes is one leaf crunching." Chek squared off with me. "I promise we'll keep you safe."

"For what it's worth, I trust them," Kellan said.

I nodded my head. I reluctantly withdrew from his embrace and went to Kalel. He placed an arm around my shoulders. I looked up at him. "Let's go."

He gazed down at me. "Let's go."

We took off, Chek leading the way. We curved northeast as we got closer to the property. Chek slowed in front of us. He turned back to me. "No talking past this point."

I swallowed hard, nodding my head in understanding.

“I can read your thoughts without Kellan around. Open your mind if you need me.” Kalel ran his hand over my hair.

“Okay.” My voice was barely a whisper.

Chek took the lead again while Kalel fell behind me, protecting my back. Slow but steady heartbeats came into my hearing range as we got closer. The footsteps were quick and graceful, but not silent. These vampeens weren't expecting anyone. It was obvious they felt safe here.

Chek abruptly stopped in front of me. He backed us up behind a large oak tree, the trunk just wide enough to conceal us. He peered around the corner, but popped back quickly. I deduced that there was a vampeen nearby.

Kalel checked around the other side of the trunk. His eyes drifted from right to left, obviously watching the clueless vampeen.

Once the coast was clear, Chek directed us closer to the home. We had to hide several more times. The closer we got, the more vamps there were. Once we were within earshot of the compound, Chek help me scale an oak tree. He and Kalel were close behind me.

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## Chapter Twenty-Eight

We were close to the top when Chek abruptly leapt down, hitting the ground with a small thud. A second thud fell behind his, meaning I was alone in the tree. My eyes widened as I gazed upward.

A slender redhead with dazzling green eyes alight with fire glowered down at me. The lack of a heartbeat indicated she was a vampire. She squatted, perched two branches above me. She clutched a flechette pistol, and it was aimed at my chest.

My heart took off, and my veins illuminated in a flash. She drew back at my light show, cocking her head. It was the momentary distraction I needed. I jumped ship. Kalel and Chek caught me and we took off in the opposite direction of the compound, my glow fading the farther we went.

The girl wasn't deterred for long. She was on our tail in an instant. I heard the whistle through the air. Chek dove, the arrow slicing through the shoulder of his shirt. It didn't slow him down. He was back up and running in no time.

We bypassed Kellan and Auggy, who took off after us.

"Don't you guys have any weapons on you?" I grumbled in a hushed whisper.

"Yes, but we can't be caught fighting on the vampeens' territory," Chek stated.

We'd traveled at least two miles by now. I was growing frustrated with them, so I took matters into my own hands. I stopped, spinning on my heel to face the woman. She'd

halted the moment I had. I heard Auggy curse in the distance behind me.

“*Stay back!*” I shouted in my mind, knowing Kellan would hold them.

“Who are you?” I asked. “You’re obviously not one of them.”

She lifted the pistol, pointing at my chest. “I will ask the questions.” She had a thick accent, Russian if I had to place it, though I’d never seen a Russian with auburn hair before.

I decided to wield my powers in this situation. “I can shoot electricity from me that would flatten you before you could pull the trigger.” I thought of things that angered me, like Kellan’s outburst and the destruction of my car; my skin blazed blue.

“I guess we’ll have to see who’s faster.” Her finger hit the trigger, the stake flying towards me.

I focused on the threat she presented. I threw my hand out in front of me. Electricity shot from my hand. I gasped. It didn’t reach far enough to knock out my target, but it did burn the stake to a crisp in midair. It fell to the ground with an audible plop.

“What are you?” Her tone had bite. She was fiery.

“Who are you?” I countered.

She was trained; I knew that much. She’d concealed her emotions, facing fear head-on like a pro. She was also dressed in a hunter green jumpsuit with a brown utility belt holding an array of weapons. She was definitely skilled.

“It does not matter who I am.”

She withdrew another weapon. This one was a traditional gun. I cringed internally. Hitting the bullet this time would cause the casing to explode.

“Answer this, then. Are you with or against Cesar?” I asked, trying to stall her.

“What do you think?”

“Against, but I never assume I’m right.”

She sighed, dropping her arms and concurrently her weapon. “You are not fun. You don’t make my blood boil.” She scrunched her forehead.

“My friends and I don’t want to hurt you. We don’t care what you were doing there, but if you have information that would help us, we’d like you to share it.”

“No.”

“What if we shared our info?”

“I do not trust a lightbulb,” she sneered.

I frowned. “How long have you been assigned to roam here?”

She narrowed her hazel eyes at me. “You are beginning to make my blood boil.” She raised her weapon again.

I huffed. “Fine. I get it. You’re an assassin or a spy or some fancy vamp double-oh-seven. My point is, if you’ve been assigned here for a while, wouldn’t it be nice to cut your trip short, to have a little time to relax? If we work together, then we can both be done a lot quicker.”

“You are no spy. You have no pizzazz.”

My light show vanished. I glanced down at my black jeans, dark green Converse sneakers, and black tank. Okay, so I wasn’t dressed in an upscale designer one-piece with custom pockets and a cut that emphasized women’s curves. It didn’t mean I didn’t have a little bit of talent in the spy department.

“In the time that you averted your eyes, I could have tranquilized you and then decapitated you. Proof that you are a child playing with matches.”

I shrugged. “But you didn’t. Why?”

“You have not proved to be a threat. I only attack those who attack me first.”

“*Come out of hiding behind me.*” I heard the men softly approach.

The girl’s eyes widened and her breath caught as she gazed beyond me. Behind me I heard three men breathing, and one not.

“You have powerful friends.” She stared over my head. She’d locked eyes with someone.

I turned, surprised to see Kalel caught up in this woman. I’d never seen that look on his face before. It was one of awe, one of instant attraction. I smiled. Well, well. It seems Kalel had finally met his mate.

“Help us help you,” Kalel stated.

Her eyes glittered, her chest rising and falling in quick rhythm. Oh, my. Was she turned on just at the sight of Kalel? Things immediately shifted to awkward.

“Um, would you two like a room?”

She cut her eyes at me. “Not funny. The earth is full of energy, full of life. To be pulled so strongly towards one life source is mother shouting for your soul to listen.”

“So you’ll help us and we’ll help you?”

She glanced back at Kalel before meeting my gaze. “I will help him.”

“Fair enough.” I felt the tension behind me dissipate at Kellan stepped forward and wrapped his arms around me.

Kalel closed the gap between him and the woman in an instant. He stared down into her eyes. “I’m Kalel.”

“I am Francesca.”

They studied each other for what felt like hours. “Is this how it was supposed to be between me and you? I’m feeling a little gypped right now,” I said to Kellan.

Kellan chuckled lightly. He kissed my neck. “I’d like to think we had a similar experience when we kissed.”

No sooner had Kellan stated it than Kalel captured Francesca’s lips. Heat radiated off the pair. Their connection was palpable. I averted my eyes, not wanting to intrude further on their intimate moment.

Kalel and Francesca gazed into each other’s eyes.

“You are the one I have been waiting for.” Her voice was breathless.

“And you are who I’ve been waiting for, only I didn’t even know it.” Kalel sounded dumbfounded; I couldn’t see his face to confirm it.

“Are they for real?” Chek asked. I looked over my shoulder. The male had a brow raised and an expression that said he thought this was drama class, not reality.

“When did this operation turn into a couples retreat? Let’s go, Kulani,” Auggy roared.

Kalel secured Francesca’s hand in his. I watched whimsically as the couple walked beside each other. At that moment, I knew nothing could distract them. They were caught up in the whirlwind of love at first sight. I’d never

seen anything like it. I didn't even think it existed until now. Sure, I was heavily attracted to Kellan at first glance, but it wasn't instant love. I grew to love him quickly, but it wasn't instantaneous like this.

My heart warmed for Kalel. He deserved this. I just hoped Francesca proved worthy of his love and adoration. None of us knew anything about her, aside from the fact that she was a trained spy.

We were just about to step foot into the clearing for the abandoned home where we started when Francesca froze.

"You did not go in here, did you?" She seemed afraid, worried; the opposite of what we'd known of her thus far.

"Yes, why?" Kalel stiffened.

"You must go, quick!"

"What? Why?" He panicked.

"The air. When you go inside, tiny molecules seep into your pores. They are what they call molecular trackers. You are in danger." She shook her head. Her eyes watered as she met Kalel's gaze. "There is no way to get them out. Whoever owns that house now knows where to find you." Her face crumbled as she slowly backed away.

"No! Don't go!" Kalel cried.

She spun on her heels and took off. Kalel dashed after her, but Auggy and Kellan caught him.

"Don't be stupid. If you're with her, then they'll track her with you. She's safer away from you for now," Kellan declared.

Kalel's nostrils flared, and his chest rose and fell in rapid succession. His hands balled into fists repeatedly in quick blurs of motion. "Let's go. I have a chemical chamber at the lake house. It can maybe cleanse our cells." He jerked out of Kellan and Auggy's hold and flew to his car. He peeled out before we could even get to our vehicles.

I turned to Auggy, anger furling inside me. "How could you? Why didn't you sweep the house? Don't you check for chemicals, for traps, for anything of the sort?"

"It was abandoned over seven years ago. The county records show it belonged to a — " He cut off mid-sentence, his eyes narrowing at the house. "Shit!"

"Who was it registered to?"

"Edna Maxwell," he reluctantly answered.

"This was my grandmother's home?" I stared up at the two-story home. What a twist of fate. My grandfather had a home twenty miles away all these years, yet interacted with his family only once or twice a year. Perhaps he watched them from afar? I didn't understand his logic. Worse, how was this once beautiful home destroyed so quickly? It'd been less than a decade since her death...

"What the hell, Auggy?" Kellan bit out. "Even I would have caught on to that one."

"At least we know who will be tracking us," he stated.

"Yeah. The enemy!" Kellan grabbed my hand and zipped o the car. He chided himself. "I can't believe I was so stupid! This whole time, we've been aiming to be careful when Cesar knew we were there. Why didn't he attack us then? It doesn't make any sense. We were on his turf, one at a time, and yet he did nothing."

I climbed into the car. Kellan stared ahead at nothing. I studied the perimeter of the forest. Slowly vampeens approached the edge.

“Go! Drive!” I cried.

Weapons began flying towards us. Kellan got the car in gear right as the first vampeen leapt onto the car, the sheer force of his jump denting Kellan’s roof. Kellan sped off, but the vamp held tight.

“Swerve the car,” I commanded.

Kellan drove the car in a maze-like pattern down the dirt road, trying to shake the vampeen. It wasn’t until he could take a sharp ninety-degree turn onto the main road that the vamp flew off the car into the trees.

“I know what he was waiting for,” I stated, awareness hitting me like a ton of bricks.

“What?” Kellan didn’t take his eyes off the road.

“Me. He knew at some point that you would have to bring me in. Now he has a permanent way to track me.”

Kellan was quiet, but his expression screamed danger. I’d never seen him look so lethal. He appeared ready to shred anything in his path, from a kitten to a giant. He ground his foot on the gas pedal until it hit the floor of the car.

I watched him closely the rest of the drive. He remained in control of the car the entire time, though he did push it to the max. His Beamer surprisingly didn’t give out, though.

He parked the car in the Bladangs’ driveway and was outside opening my door before I could get my bearings. He pulled me to him. He stared at me harshly. “I swear I

will get whatever the hell it is out of you.” His brows furrowed. He was biting the inside of his mouth. That’s when I realized he was angry at himself on top of the situation.

I placed my hands on his cheeks. “Stop. I know you didn’t do this on purpose.”

He stepped backward, away from my touch. He laughed grimly. “I’m always going off about protecting you and taking care of you, and then I lead you right into the arms of danger. How’s that for being a great fiancé? Oh, and then I’m stressed and constantly losing my temper on top of it all.”

I didn’t reply. There was nothing I could say in this moment that he would listen to. He was on the pity train. Was this what I was like? More than one person had said I was a masochist. Taking everything into my own hands, trying to protect everyone else at the potential cost of my own life.... We were both a mess. This mission had hit too close to home. Cesar was hitting us too close to home.

“Let’s get inside so we’re not a visible target at least.” I spoke softly, calmly.

He didn’t argue. He led me into the house, not even bothering to knock.

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## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The moment we were inside, Kai rushed us. He punched Kellan square in the jaw. I squealed, covering my mouth with my hands. Kellan swung back at the vampire, connecting with his lip. Kai's lip split open, blood dripping.

"Stop! You're fighting the wrong person here."

Kai glared at Kellan with disgust. "If anything happens to her, it's on your head."

"Let's go," Kalel called. He stood beside the door that led down a hall to the weapons room and lab.

Auggy and Chek barged in the front door, Auggy mid-rant when he noticed Kellan's bruised jaw and Kai's bloodied lip. They were both already starting to heal, but the damage was still visible. "For Christ's sake, can't you two give it a rest? At this rate you're going to kill each other and leave her with no one. You may as well call a truce and consider a ménage."

I drew back, my eyes widening. I immediately flew to Kalel, not wanting to see the guys' reactions or even consider it. I loved them both, but it didn't mean I wanted to be with them both, especially not at the same time. It wasn't fair to them.

"Come on." Kalel ushered me into the back hall and led me through several doors to the massive weapons room. It'd been a while since I'd been back here.

The warehouse was expansive, larger than any I'd ever seen. Weapons of every kind lined the walls and shelves in neat sections. The tall, clear bin of grenades startled me every time, though.

I followed Kalel through the maze to the laboratory tucked in the right rear section of the space. The first person I looked for was Ralph, but I didn't see him.

"We've turned him over to the High Authorities," Kalel said.

"Have my thoughts been open this whole time?"

"No, but I know you well." He approached a ghastly pale male with bleached blond hair, pale blue eyes, and not an ounce of fat on his body. His lack of plumpness caused him to have a sallow appearance that aged him beyond his years. I heard no heartbeat, indicating he was a vampire. "Rupert, this is Leka; Leka, this is Rupert."

"Hello." The man smiled shyly and nodded his head in a courteous greeting.

"We have an emergency. Odorless gas with molecular trackers has seeped into our pores. Any way to extract it?"

The male immediately went to the oversized Mac desktop computer and began typing an equation on the screen. He faced us, a grave look on his face.

"Just give it to me." Kalel was impatient.

"I can remove it, but I would have to dehydrate you with a chemical powder to an extremely dangerous level."

"How dangerous?" Kalel focused on the scientist.

"Possible irreversible damage."

"Why?"

"Because it is a vampire-class chemical that I would have to use, not a human-grade one."

Kalel punched the table in front of him. Glass beakers of liquid shook. "Are there any other options?"

"Without knowing the specific formula you've been introduced to, I can't do anything more," the meek vamp replied.

"How could you get to it?" Kalel pressed.

"I would have to remove a chunk of flesh down to the muscle."

Kalel ripped off his shirt. "Do it."

"Kalel! Don't. We can find another way."

"No, Leka." He closed his eyes. "I've never felt anything so concentrated. I know you have to understand to some degree, but I'd do anything to be with her again, even if it means enduring some pain to get there."

"Then he'll have to do both of us, because the chemical may affect vampeens differently from vampires."

His focus shot to me. He ground his teeth. "Fine."

"We don't know where the trigger was aimed, but most of the time it's higher rather than lower. I will cut the minimal amount from the center of the back where the neck meets the shoulders," Rupert said.

"Just do it already," Kalel growled.

Rupert fumbled around for a surgical blade and tweezers. I grabbed Kalel's hands, willing his attention to be on me.

"It's a good thing the others are doddling; otherwise, our plan would have been squashed by now."

He smiled, gripping my hands. Rupert came around the table and sprayed a liquid on Kalel's back. I knew the second the knife had bitten into his skin because his entire body tensed; he squeezed my hands before softening his clutch. Rupert grabbed a Petri dish off the table and laid the thin slice of skin and tissue in it.

The scientist pressed a tissue to Kalel's back. "Turn around and let her hold this in place."

"I don't need it."

Rupert shrugged his shoulders, tossing the bloodied paper into the trash. He came around to my rear. I focused on Kalel, looking no place but in his eyes. He was strong. He was always brave, the perfect big brother I never had.

I lifted my shirt over my head, leaving my arms intact so the shirt covered the front of me. I felt the cold liquid freeze my pores. I gasped, my eyes watering as the blade pierced my skin. A sharp pain shot through my upper body and down my arms.

Kalel frowned. "We have company."

"What the hell are you doing to her?" Kai yelled.

"Leave him," Kalel ordered, his voice echoing through the space.

"He's slicing her up. The hell I'm going to leave him," Kellan barked.

"Don't!" Footsteps halted at my panicked, agony-stricken tone. "Hurry up, Rupert."

One final cut, one last blazing ache, and then he said, "Done."

I breathed a sigh of relief, feeling the blood beginning to pour down my back. Kalel hugged my hands before releasing them.

“There better be a damn good explanation for that move, Kulani,” Auggy snapped.

Kalel didn't reply. He watched as Rupert examined the flesh beneath the microscope. He dissected the skin into smaller vertical slivers and transferred them to other dishes. He added a different-color drop of liquid to each dish, followed by some clear fluid.

“You have blood running down your back.” Kellan pressed a cloth to my back. He came around my side and kissed my cheek. His upper body was bare. It was his shirt pressed to my back. “It should start closing up in a minute or two.” He held the shirt in place until the time had elapsed. He prompted me to fix my shirt when the bleeding had stopped.

I gazed around. Kai, Auggy, and Chek stood off to the side. Chek was searching the place high and low, what for I wasn't sure. I didn't get an uneasy feeling. His actions seemed more habitual than anything.

“I have good news and bad news,” Rupert announced.

My pulse accelerated; my muscles stiffened. I looked at the dishes. One in particular stood out. The liquid had turned a frightening black, completely clouding over the skin. Rupert had separated the lineup. Kalel was on his left; I was on his right. It was a dish on his right that had changed.

“Go on,” Kai said. I glanced down the table at him. His lip had already healed, with a minor bit of swelling remaining.

“This only affects vampeens, not vampires.”

I looked at Auggy; he looked at me. Nothing like having a wrench thrown in your plans. He clenched his jaw, turning back to Rupert. “What can you do?” Auggy’s tone was softer than usual, yet still tight.

“I’m afraid we don’t have the correct substance to separate the molecules from your cells and extract them. I can order it, but even with overnight shipping, we’re looking at a minimum of three days.” Rupert sounded empathetic enough, but it did no good.

Kellan had been silent beside me. I’d felt his body clench when the news was given. I was terrified to face him.

“If I get us into Cesar’s, what’s the likelihood that he would have a counter-formula or the stuff we need to get rid of it?” I asked to no one in particular.

“He’s in a compound full of only vampeens, which is who this thing affects. He has to have something we can use. Or at the least, we can possibly gain access to the tracker’s signal read and disable it,” Kalel replied.

“Let’s go with that, then. Just give me a day to get myself together.” I turned to Auggy. “Call my aunt.” I regarded everyone in the room. “Thanks for everything, guys.” I headed for the door. I stopped when I realized I didn’t have the correct access to get in and out.

“I’ve got you,” Kai said, catching up with me.

Kellan was on the other side of me, a grim expression on his face. I slipped my hand into his, trying to reassure him. This was the original plan anyway. The only difference was I actually had to extract something from inside Cesar’s lair.

Once we were back inside the main house, I asked to speak with Kai alone. Kellan glared at Kai. "Don't try anything."

Kai didn't respond. He focused on me.

I waited for the front door to close. "I appreciate everything that you've done for me, and maybe I am a bit confused as to why I have feelings for you, but the one thing I'm not confused about is that my feelings for Kellan are stronger."

"Even though his aren't the same?"

I didn't know what they were or weren't at this point. Kellan seemed as muddled as I was lately. Nonetheless, it would always be a resounding, "Yes."

"I will always be here to protect you when he fails to. I'll always be here to support you when he doesn't." He sighed, shaking his head. He gazed into my eyes. "One of the vamps you love is a ticking time bomb, baby, and it isn't me. I'm not saying that to upset you. I'm telling you because love is blind sometimes, and I don't want you to get hurt."

Based off Kellan's erratic behavior lately, I understood his point of view. I gave him a small smile. "Thanks."

A smile lit up his face. "Come here, Leka." He held out his arms to me.

I moved into his embrace. I immediately stuffed my nose into him, inhaling him, inhaling all I loved about Kai. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Stop beating on my fiancé."

His chest contracted in a laugh. "I'll work on it."

"Thanks." I kissed his cheek and strolled to the front door. I waved. "Bye, Kai."

His look was pensive. "Bye, Leka."

—

## Chapter Thirty

When we returned to the condo, several guests were waiting. I stalled as I came through the door. “Will, Imara, what are you two doing here?”

Drexel stepped forward. “They said it was urgent. I called the High Authorities and received clearance for them.”

“It’s okay. They’re good,” I assured him.

“What’s wrong?” Kellan asked. We all moved to the island, using it as a conference table.

“I am to enter the dragon’s den with you, Alexa,” Imara stated.

“What? Why?”

“She is telling the truth, Lexi. I’ve studied the prophecy, and it says you do not enter alone.” Will placed the thick binder on the island.

In truth, the prophecy was a blur to me. Will had forced me and Kellan to read a translated version of it, but I merely skimmed over it. Who wanted to know that much detail about their future? I’d been freaking out about one vivid scene ever since Puerto Rico. Or perhaps I had willed it to the back of my mind, not wanting anything to do with the possibility that it was all true, particularly the part about Kellan’s death.

I shook my head. “It’s too risky. I’m not even a fan of going in.”

Imara closed her eyes. Silence fell over the room. She opened her eyes. My heart leapt into my throat at the sight

of her irises lost in a sea of white. “You doubt. You do not believe what has happened to be fate, but rather the orchestration of several to make it fate. Regardless of the coordination, fate is fate. If it was made to happen, if it was allowed to happen, then it was meant to happen.” She blinked, and her eyes returned to normal.

Will adjusted the tie over his button-up shirt. He avoided looking at me, finally aware of my innermost doubts about him and everything. He fingered the edges of the worn binder.

I sighed. This wasn’t how I wanted it to be. “Yes, I have doubts, and questions, and concerns and a lot more. But I’ve learned to ignore them. I’ve done my best to accept what was and is. I’m not perfect, and I have a hard time believing that I could ever be the female vamp described in that prophecy. I’m just a teenage vampeen with a pile of hopes and dreams, not a kick-ass warrior who makes the highest powers in the vamp world shudder. I have a hard time with this sometimes because there seems to be such a huge disconnection from who I am to who everyone thinks I am or expects me to be.”

“It is not your job to question the validity of those words; it is your job to believe in yourself enough to become those words.” Imara’s statement was like a blazing arrow that shot straight into and scorched my heart.

Kellan laced his fingers through mine. “We’ve both struggled. We haven’t been the united front we need to be lately, and that’s primarily my fault. That doesn’t help us in the faith department. That’s what that entire book is. It’s two men believing in their visions enough to document them and claim them as truth. It’s our job, though, to make sure they become the truth.”

Kellan turned me sideways to face him. "Let's make them true, babe. Today is proof more than ever of how bad things have gotten." He took a moment. "I'm not sure if you've considered this angle, but perhaps the molecular tracker was left by vampires since it only targets vampeens. At that point, we may have a larger enemy to contend with."

"It was not." Imara's confidence cut through Kellan's theory.

"How do you know?" he countered.

She waited for him to calm down before speaking. "Cesar set the trap to keep all vampeens away. Should anyone disobey his direct orders, he was easily able to track and kill them."

"Why would he do that, though?" I tried to think of a good reason to allow a home to be condemned and continue to rot.

Imara's eyes sparkled with amusement. "You will uncover the truth when the time is right."

I blew out a breath. "No pressure." I caught a glimpse of Will; he was still hurt from earlier. I grabbed his hand. "I'm sorry, Will. I don't doubt your abilities or your dedication. I appreciate everything you've done."

"We both do," Kellan said.

He slipped from my hold. "This book is my life. My job as your Eislom was for my life to revolve around yours. I can't do my job if you doubt the validity of everything."

"I don't doubt the validity of everything. I'm analytical, though, Will. You know that. I'm going to cross-examine everything."

“Yes, I suppose so.” He pepped up. “I’ve grown fond of the two of you. I thought my direct interaction was complete back in Wales, but it seems fate does deliver new twists at times, so I can understand your wariness. Just promise me you’ll address your concerns with me immediately from here on. I am here to educate and guide you. Answering questions is in my repertoire.”

“Really?” I scoffed. “Every time I’ve asked you something in the past, you’ve given a riddle of an answer or none at all.”

“Then we shall work on it together.” His British accent gave a fluent spunk to his words.

“That sounds good, but if you give me the run around again, I’ll thwack you over the head with that encyclopedia.” With my hands on my hips, I leaned into my words.

Kellan chuckled. “Who says ‘thwack’?”

“Indeed.” Will smirked.

I rolled my eyes at them.

“I will be waiting in the lobby at 10 a.m.,” Imara announced.

“Are you sure? Does Jack even know what you’re doing?”

“This doesn’t concern my son. I will see you tomorrow.” She walked herself out. I didn’t like the idea of her coming with me, but I couldn’t deny that she would be a great source of knowledge and tact.

“Do you plan to get furniture?” Will asked, peering around at the space.

“Ironically, it’s supposed to be delivered tomorrow.”

“I’m sure it will look splendid when you’re through.” His eyes sparkled with amusement, as if he knew something I didn’t.

“You’re doing it again.”

“I am going to leave you. I have a library on the second floor if you wish to drop in sometime. Apartment two-oh-two.” He picked up the binder and a briefcase I hadn’t noticed on the floor. “Stay safe, you two.”

“Bye,” Kellan and I called in unison.

Drexel closed the door behind Will, securing the lock in place again.

Kellan pulled me into him. “What do you want to do for the rest of the day?”

“I want to take a nice hot shower, put on my pajamas — ”

“You realize it’s only two in the afternoon.” He smirked, his dimple dotting his left cheek.

“So?”

He chuckled. “Go on.”

“I’m going to put on my pajamas and bake. I figure tonight is the perfect night to try out new recipes for my bakery. I’ll call a few people, see if they want to come try things. My only rule will be it’s a pajama pastry party.”

He kissed my lips. “That sounds like a good day to me.”

I caught Drexel moving in the corner of my eye. “Drexel, do you have any pajamas?” Come to think of it, I

hadn't seen the vamp change clothes, shower, or do anything hygienic since he'd been with me. He didn't stink, though.

"I live out of the trunk of the company vehicle. I don't own pajamas; I own uniforms and weapons."

I looked at Kellan. "*Do you mind?*"

"*Do what makes you happy. I don't mind, though.*"

I smiled wide. "Hm. Well, Drex, I think we need to change that. From what I gather, you're on a long-term placement contract with me, so the other spare bedroom is going to be yours. I want you to go get yourself some pajamas and whatever else you want. That room is yours. Even if you're reassigned, it'll be waiting there for you. It's always nice to have a place to come back to."

He tried to hide his smile, but the tears gathering in his eyes gave him away. I noticed he didn't like to show emotion around other men. "Thank you."

"Now, I'm going to be having a pajama party tonight, so, you, Mr. Bancroft, need to shower and change with me." I pointed at Drexel. "And you need to go to the store and buy yourself at least one pair. I'll gladly pay for them."

"That won't be necessary," he stated.

"Alright, then. I'll see you later." He started for the door. "Oh! And please invite Sanders." He cast a knowing look over his shoulder. He knew what I was up to, but he didn't press the issue. He nodded and trotted out the door.

"I have you all to myself." Kellan nuzzled my neck. He trailed his tongue along my vein.

"You know, I haven't tasted your blood in quite a while." I skimmed my finger down the center of his chest.

He'd thrown away his shirt at the Bladangs' since blood didn't wash out of white, even with bleach.

"Feast upon me." He challenged me.

It was our game of predator and prey. If I caught him, I got to drink from him. If he caught me... well, he got to do what he wanted with me since he couldn't drink my tainted blood.

He abruptly took off.

—

By six, all of our close friends and family had shown up. The condo smelled of nothing but sweet heaven, or so they claimed. Kalel was the only one absent. He'd returned to look for Francesca.

"I love your palm tree and smiling sun pajama pants, Kai." I tried to hold in my laugh.

"These are better than miss Hello Kitty over there." He jerked his head towards Mel.

"I resent that, buster. I happen to love my PJs." She pranced over to the island.

"Hm. I'm beginning to feel my age in these silk pajamas," Beth said.

"Why?" I asked. Her soft pink button-up shirt and pants looked comfortable and stylish at the same time.

"Because only the parents are wearing silk."

Al was wearing black silk pajama bottoms with a V-neck white T-shirt. He snuggled up behind his wife. "I like what you're wearing." She blushed.

“Okay, and I’m getting a little creeped out by my parents groping each other. I’ll be over there.” Kellan sauntered off to talk to Craig.

Gabi joined the round table at that moment. “What are you working on right now, Lex?”

“I’m trying my hand at a blood pudding pie.”

“I don’t know what it is, but it sounds delish.” She licked her lips.

“Remember, guys, I want you to be brutally honest. If you don’t like something, tell me.” Several acknowledgements followed, but nothing that made me believe them.

Jack pushed his way between the crowds at the island. “Here is your new logo and website.” He spun the netbook towards me.

I stopped whisking the pudding mix, my jaw dropping. “O.M.G. Holy sugar plums! I love it! You did such an amazing job!”

I stared at the screen. The cartoon vamp was wearing skinny jeans, a pink T-shirt, and black heels. Her dark brown hair was Texas-sized and fell perfectly around the animated face, a face that looked a lot like mine. She wore a red apron with “Bloody Bakes” stitched in white across the front. She had a chocolate cupcake in her hand with a chunk missing. Blood was oozing from the center, and a drop of blood still clung to her fangs.

The website had a modern retro theme with bold colors that somehow worked well together. The slogan pasted across the top read, “Now serving delicious desserts for vamps everywhere.” I noticed an order page, as well as a menu link. He clicked on the menu and displayed the

items he knew I'd already made, each with an enticing description below it.

"Great news. You've already got five orders, all from vamps. I ran their IP address and confirmed their information with the global registry." Jack showed the others the site.

"Oh, wow. Thanks."

"This better not take away from your army time, Jackson," Auggy grumbled. I'd laughed when he entered in camouflage pajamas. "*Only him*," I'd thought as I shook my head.

I rolled my eyes. "Let me guess. I'm too valuable of an asset?"

"And I thought I was conceited," the burly vampeen chuckled.

"To answer your statement, no, this shouldn't take up my army time. It's just a hobby turned small business."

"I expect a delivery of your hobby every week to my office. I already told Claire to put in the order for whatever you happen to make that week that sounds good." His eyes lightened. He felt something paternal towards me; I'd caught glimpses of it.

"He did. Told me if I forgot it, then I wasn't allowed to come in." She laughed. She considered him with love. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her cheek. I was happy to see them back in each others' good graces. Life was too short to spend it angry.

I poured the pudding mixture, which consisted of a packet of instant vanilla pudding mix, one and a half cups of blood, a half a cup of milk, and a few drops of vanilla

extract, into my freshly baked graham cracker crust. Since the blood and milk were cold, and I'd used less liquid than the recipe called for, it instantly set. I did scallops of freshly whipped cream all around the edges and a big swirl in the center. "This one's done," I announced.

Gabi immediately stole the dish out from under me, leaving me standing there with the pastry bag of whipped cream in my hands in midair. Drexel came around and retrieved a cake knife from a drawer. He'd purchased disposable plates at the store for me since the sink would already be overloaded at the end of the night.

I smiled when I saw him and Sanders share a look. Time. It healed all things.

We spent the rest of the evening laughing. The best part of the entire event was the lack of tension between Kellan and Kai. For the first time ever, it seemed like they were genuinely getting along. They weren't best friends, but they at least held a decent conversation with each other. It was after one in the morning before anybody left. Others slowly trickled out after that until it was just Drexel, Sanders, Kellan, and me.

"You go get some sleep. Me and Sanders will clean up," Drexel said.

I grinned up at him. "Sure." I kissed his cheek and winked at him. His gaze drifted to Kellan and then back to me. "Kellan doesn't care." Drexel seemed uneasy. "Kellan, do you care if Drexel is gay or straight?"

"Nope. Just don't touch my girl and we're good." He came up behind me, pulling me into his chest.

"See?" He barely nodded his head in acknowledgement. "Work on him, Sanders." I gave the

security officer a kiss on the cheek as well before heading to the first spare bedroom with Kellan.

He pulled me into him on the bed. He caressed my curves in a soothing motion. “Are you nervous about tomorrow?”

“I don’t have a choice.” If I didn’t get everyone in, then Auggy and I had no chance. We’d forever be endangering those around us.

Kellan leaned over me and pressed a kiss to the place on my back where Rupert had removed a piece of me. “Get some sleep, babe. Try not to worry. You’ll have plenty of backup.”

I kissed his lips, savoring the taste of him, the feel of him. His fingers threaded my hair, angling my head back to deepen our connection. In an instant we collided on a cosmic level. The truth of all he’d done over the past few weeks pummeled to the forefront of his thoughts, of his shared truths. His mixed emotions settled into my chest, and the anger he felt towards himself for his mistakes constricted it. I slid my tongue past his, wishing to be even closer, further intertwined. Love was easy; commitment to that love was difficult. No one is perfect, and therefore there will never be a perfect relationship. But a perfect commitment can exist; it does exist for those who seek it.

He pressed his lips to mine several times in quick succession. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I closed my eyes and snuggled deeper into his chest.

—

## Chapter Thirty-One

Auggy was standing with Imara in the lobby of my building. I approached them, my stomach tossing around the blood I'd just drank.

"You ready?" Auggy asked. The first thing I'd noticed was he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt rather than his usual military clothes.

"As ready as I can be." Kellan squeezed my shoulder, reminding me that he would have my back. Drexel brushed his arm against mine, the only affection he would allow in public.

"Claire and I came up with a good idea last night. You and I are going to switch places. This way we can hopefully catch him off-guard. He knows that the molecular tracker hit you and me, but he would never suspect me to stay in your condo while you approach his compound."

I tilted my head. "Hm. He would assume it was you coming instead of me."

"Exactly. Hopefully that will throw him off, at least a little, to where my men and the Bladangs' men can slip in after you." He passed me the earrings. I put them on, adjusting them to ensure they were secure. "Try to make sure you angle your head to the side when they enter codes of any sort so we can capture them and get to you quicker." I nodded. Auggy pat my upper arm. "Everything will work out, sweetie." Was this a new soft side to Auggy?

"I hope so." I couldn't get past my body twisting itself into a pretzel on the inside.

“Felipe and Laurence will be in the air over the area if you need them for anything or if a hostile negotiation takes place. Otherwise, Kalel and Kai will be negotiating anything he offers on both of our behalves.” He turned to Imara. “Take care of her.”

“Of course.” She was dressed in a beautiful green sari. Her black hair was pulled tight at the base of her head.

I glanced down at my own ensemble, feeling too casual next to her. I was wearing tight black running pants, a thin white T-shirt, and tennis shoes. The special diamond stud earrings and my engagement ring were the only other items on me. My hair was in a snug knot on top of my head. I’d given my cell phone to Kellan and left everything else upstairs. I felt naked.

Auggy disappeared towards the elevators with Sanders.

“We need to leave now,” Imara stated.

Drexel led us to his company vehicle while Kellan protected us in the rear.

The closer we got, the tenser my body became. Kellan did his best with gentle touches to try to soothe my nerves. He hadn’t said much. I knew from our connection last night that there was so much more running through his mind than what he let on.

We were met by an army of vamps when we pulled up to my grandmother’s old house. Gabi and Jack escorted us from the car.

Kalel and Kai met us in the center of the home’s clearing. They tugged me between them.

“This is the vampeen who is going in first. She’s the one they want, and the one we need to protect,” Kalel stated. “Imara is her counterpart. She is to be protected at all costs as well.” Imara stepped forward.

“You are to hold off on stepping out until we give the signal. We’ll have an inside view of the compound through her. You slip up, and not only is she dead, but so are all of you,” Kai added.

A woman stepped forward through the crowd. Francesca smiled at Kalel. His eyes sparkled. He instantly warmed beside me at the sight of her.

I leaned over to Kai. “Your brother’s found a new girl. You might want to take a hint.”

“Now is not the time.” He spoke in a rushed whisper. He was definitely not in a lighthearted mood.

In truth, I wasn’t, either. I think it was the nerves hitting my surface. I couldn’t contain them. I stared out at all the vampires and vampeens spreading out over the open land, hiding amidst the forest. They were all putting their necks on the line for me to get out safely.

A part of me wondered what they planned to do with my grandfather if he didn’t cooperate. I didn’t hate anyone, and he was family, one of the last of my family members. I wanted that connection, but my hope wasn’t strong where he was concerned.

Al came forward, followed by Craig and Steven; they joined Kellan. Perhaps I didn’t have a blood family, but I had the love and support of a new one, a different one.

“All army vamps are to report to Steven or myself once we clear out. If you go missing, if you are not accounted for, we will assume you have turned against us and you will be

put on our wanted list." Al's attitude was a no-nonsense approach, at least today anyway.

"All Bladang vamps, the same applies to you. Christian, myself, or Kai will be your contact."

"As a reminder, all vamps stop at the two-mile mark. Do not get any closer than two miles from the house until the signal is given," Kai ordered.

Gabi slipped in between Kalel and me. "We'll meet you on the inside." She was solemn, in business mode. She was giving me a promise she was solemnly swearing to keep.

"I'll see you on the inside," I affirmed.

Kellan grabbed my hand. "Let's go."

We took off running towards my grandfather's house. I didn't slow until ten miles in. I turned around. The sight before me was overwhelming. Hundreds of vamps were sprinting around me. This was an army to protect me. The same men and women I was fighting to bring peace to were in return fighting to protect me.

Tears gathered. "We have to fulfill the prophecy, Kellan."

He wiped the red tears streaming down my cheeks. "We will." His mouth closed over mine firmly. He assured me that he was in this with me, that he would help me see it to the end.

I realized in this moment that it didn't matter if this was fate or not; this was what I wanted to do. I wanted to make a difference in my world any way that I could. I wanted to leave my footprints in the sand a thousand times so no one could miss them, so these vamps who were so

willing to risk themselves for me could have someone fighting for them in return.

“We must go,” Imara stated, cutting into my thoughts.

We resumed our former pace, flying through the trees. We slowed as we reached the two-mile mark. I gave Kellan one last hug and a kiss goodbye. I glanced down the line and saw Kalel hand in hand with Francesca. They would be a couple not to cross. I met Kai’s eyes. He didn’t have to say anything for me to know that he was worried.

“Are you ready?” Imara asked.

I glanced at the horizon once more, overwhelmed by the sheer number of vamps there to defend us. I met her eyes. “I’m ready.”

—

### *KELLAN*

“Pull out your phones and lock in on the frequency we told you earlier,” Kalel ordered.

I yanked out my phone, pulling up the app and accessing the cameras in Lexi’s earrings. My heart was on the verge of slicing through my chest. It might be dead, but it would always beat for her.

My eyes were glued to the phone, watching her every move.

I felt a hand land on my shoulder. “She’s going to be okay, son.”

I pursed my lips, unable to pull myself from the visual in my hand to look at him. “I hope so.”

I frowned as I watched Lexi approach the house. My gut tightened, my stomach twisting. Something was wrong.

I met Kai's eyes. We both knew it. She was in trouble. I gazed out at the horizon, watching as they ambled towards us. We were all in trouble.

—

### *LEXI*

The compound was eerily quiet as we approached. An eerie foreboding settled in my chest. My serum nearly choked me in my throat.

“Control yourself. Do not allow your emotions to control you.” Imara clutched my arm, guiding me to the front door of the plantation-style home.

Not one vamp met us. The other day, they'd been crawling all over the property; the map showed more than two hundred vampeens accounted for, yet there were none present. The front door opened of its own accord. Imara led me inside. The door immediately slammed shut and a metal door fell into place, blocking it. What seemed like hundreds of shutters subsequently locked over the windows. There would be no escaping. *Not good.*

A large chandelier hung in the center of the circular foyer. A wooden staircase clung to the right wall. The house was furnished as if it was still 1900, yet I didn't see a speck of dust. A study sat untouched to the left, and a large dining room was on the right.

Imara walked into the dining room, around the table, and through the swinging door to the kitchen. The kitchen was a modern-day dream; it stood out like a sore thumb amidst the outdated décor of the rest of the home. Near the edge of the kitchen, she opened another door with stairs leading down.

My heart thumped loudly in my chest. Still no vampeens.

I followed her down the steep, narrow steps into what was the original basement of the home. She headed straight for the far side of the space to where an opening had been created. She led me into the carved-out tunnel of concrete. Half a mile in, we reached another metal door. It automatically opened for us, and again slammed behind us.

My eyes surveyed the dark, dingy room. A desk sat abandoned to the right. This was definitely a trap. I felt like I was in a Super Mario game, being led through the castle, forced to keep going despite knowing that big Koopa was waiting.

“Calm yourself.” Imara walked to the door on the other side of the room.

The moment I approached behind her, it opened. We were now in a back office area, similar to the vamp army headquarters. There was still not one vampeen in sight, though.

Imara closed her eyes. Her head popped up. “This way.”

We approached a conference room in the corner. It was set up like any other generic conference space. A large table and black office chairs ate up the majority of the space. A white dry-erase board was mounted to the wall at the front of the room.

I gasped, leaping back when the conference table split into two; a large rectangle of the floor surrounding the table and chairs lifted and separated in opposite directions, leaving a gaping black hole in the center.

“We must jump,” she advised.

I swallowed the serum that flooded my mouth. She held out her hand. I took it. We slid along the wall until we reached the center. I stared down into the open pit.

“One, two, three.” We dove down into the black hole.

I landed on my feet before I fell backward. I was quickly on my toes, looking around. Torches were lit, lighting the barren, concrete room around the perimeter. The way we’d gone deeper into the ground and met a blaze of firing torches, it almost seemed like I was a pit in hell. It had a ‘Daniel and the Lion’s Den’ feel to it.

My heart thundered in my chest. I was grappling with my emotions, trying to keep my lights under wrap.

Imara threw me against the north side of the wall just in time for liquid to hit the floor. It sizzled, eating away at itself. “Acid.”

Suddenly the wall gave way behind us, and we stumbled backward into another room. I turned and came face to face with my grandfather...along with thirty other vampeens.

—

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Imara clutched my hand. She closed her eyes. I felt her energy flow through me, an odd tingling in my limbs. *"Can you hear me?"* Her voice was loud and clear in my mind, like Kellan's.

*"Yes."*

*"There's a computer room with their main power supply panel in it on the other side of the back wall. I'm going to wreak havoc on this room, but you have to get to the power supply. Channel all of your emotions and blow up the box. It's the only way the others will be able to get past the security of the home and reach us."*

*"Don't they have a generator?"*

*"Yes, but there is a two-minute delay. Jack knows this. He will be waiting with the others."*

She released me. I stumbled but caught myself. My eyes studied the room, looking for any indication of something other than solid concrete. At least this room had actual overhead lighting. Even with it, I couldn't locate the break in the wall, though.

"You were foolish to come," Cesar stated.

I ignored him, searching for the chip in the wall. There, between two vampeens in the back of the room, was the mark I was looking for.

Imara stepped forward. She ambled through the small crowd of vampeens, waiting for their master to tell them to pounce. She didn't follow a pattern, merely wove through the bodies. It took me a moment to realize she was gaining

their attention in another way. She would walk to the right, and that would let me slip in through the left.

“Tell me, Cesar, how has life treated you these last few centuries?”

“You already know the answer. Now quit trying to distract my people. It won’t work,” he barked.

Abruptly, Imara caught Cesar in a death grip. All of the vampeens charged her, giving me my window. I frantically raced to the other side of the room. I heard Imara giving them hell. I pressed on the wall, and a door opened. The moment the door slid ajar, they caught me slipping in. Without looking back, I headed for the large tower of wires in the corner. I yanked the lock off the metal cage and jerked the door open. I grabbed as many wires as I could.

A vampeen male grabbed my arm and tossed me across the room. More followed after him, cornering me effortlessly. I guessed it was time to light up like a Christmas tree. I allowed my emotions to surge. I felt the energy sizzling through my body. The vampeens began to back away as my veins illuminated. Electricity crackled over the top layer of my flesh.

Feeling fully charged, I let loose on the room. One by one I tugged them towards me and snapped their necks at the speed of light. Several ran from the room, but I didn’t worry about them. I went straight for the network cables, computer wires, and security power supply.

Pain shot through my hands as I gripped the wires. The lights flickered as my body began to shake. Sparks flew in different directions, coming from the box in front of me. I jumped back when a computer exploded behind me. I fell to the floor, covering my body. The lights cut off and all the

systems shut down, but electrical flickers still sputtered into the air.

Then I felt it. The heaviness set in. *No!* I couldn't pass out now. I had to get out. I had to make sure everyone was safe. It didn't matter what I wanted, though — my body had decided it couldn't take any more. Vamp genes and healing serum made no difference. I succumbed to the darkness.

—

“Leka.” Kai's voice rolled over me.

“Lexi.” I felt Kellan petting my hand.

“Lex?” Gabi sounded so unsure of herself.

My eyelids fluttered. Coming to my senses, remembering where I was, I jumped to my feet, startled by my new surroundings.

Kellan pulled me into his chest. He kissed my head, running his hand down my back. “You're okay. It's okay.”

“I would not destroy my own race. That much you must know by now, Cesar.” Imara steadied her gaze on him.

“Why else would you unleash her?” My grandfather's tone was cold as ice.

“So she could save us all.” Imara was calm and reasonable.

I left Kellan standing there and moved towards the intimate circle. My grandfather and a handful of his men stood on one side. Kalel, Francesca, Kai, Imara, Gabi, Jack, Craig, Steven, Drexel, and Al were on the other. Some looked a little roughed-up, but no visible wounds remained.

“What did I miss? Obviously it was a lot.” We were in the living room of the house. I couldn't see or hear anyone

besides those of us present, though.

“Your grandfather ambushed us. It seems there was more in the molecular tracker than merely a tracker. It had a sound cell that made it possible to pick up the vibrations of your voice and transmit them. He was hearing everything you said,” Al explained.

My stomach dropped. “How many did we lose?”

“That’s not important.” Kai’s voice was calm despite the storm in his eyes.

“So damn weak, just like your grandmother.” Cesar scowled.

“How is caring about the number of vamps lost in the world a weakness?”

“Caring is a weakness.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“So you’d rather spend forever alone than care about someone?” My voice raised an octave.

“I’d rather spend eternity alone than know she was tortured to death,” he snapped.

Shock ran through me. Unnerving chills chased down my spine. Imara gazed right at me, as if willing me to figure it out, to piece together the invisible puzzle. I tilted my head, watching the vampeen. Could he? Would he? Did he? Imara nodded her head.

I squared off with Cesar. “Oh, my God. You killed her, didn’t you?” The words were thick on my tongue, the realization transparent.

“She was my only weakness,” he conceded.

“So that made it right?” Serum drowned my mouth; my gums ached.

“Babe.” Kellan laid a gentle hand on me but pulled back when I began to illuminate.

“No. But I’d rather her death be quick and painless in my own hands than at the torturous mercy of my enemies.”

“A mercy kill? That’s what you’re going to claim?” I ground my teeth as bloody tears stung my eyes. “You’re a selfish bastard! I hope every vampire on this earth descends upon you!”

Electricity crackled over me. I thought back to the picture of Gran in my kitchen. She was laughing joyfully as she swung me around in the yard outside. Her eyes sparkled with joy. She looked at me like I was a wonder in her world; she gripped me as if I was an irreplaceable treasure, never slipping once. Her words still echoed within me now. *“Ally, you have to dream big to achieve big, and I know you’re going to do big things.”*

“Why didn’t you protect her?” I demanded.

“Because they always find a way, just like you did.” He lost all resolve.

“Was it worth it?” I nearly spat the words.

He pressed his lips into a thin line, his eyes looking beyond me into the distance.

“So you gave up the love of your life, true memories with your children, peace of mind, and stability for a war that was never yours to fight?” I was beating him further into the ground, unable to get a grip on my rage.

“For family honor,” he corrected.

“Excuse me. You gave up your new family for a father who neglected you.”

He balled his hands into fists before relaxing them again.

“I know I’m right. He was so focused on proving his worth in the eyes of vampires that you only existed as a soldier, not a son. Cristiana had the right idea in running, but you wanted exactly what he did, only not from vampires — from him.”

You could hear a pin drop in the room. Vampeen hearts thudded loud as drums in the silent space.

“I have news for you, Paps, he’s dead. You’re never going to win his favor, but you are going to lose everyone else’s over an ignorant ambition.”

He stared at me, his thoughts unreadable. “There are precisely nine vamps in the world who are telepathic and twelve with X-ray vision. They are rare in ratio to our majority status, but there are none like you, Alexa. I’m proud of you. You’re doing what this old vampeen should have done long ago: changing things. But it’s too late for me. So I’ll cut you a deal. You never let another vampire set foot on any of my properties, and I’ll stop making a sport of them.”

A bit of hope died inside me. I knew I wouldn’t be able to change people; I could only hope to inspire them to change. I was disappointed that after all this I had hit a wall. All the blue within me faded away. I was shutting down, numb.

“Will you sign a contract to that effect?” My voice was monotone.

“If it’ll get these roaches off my property stat, then yes.” He glared at every vampire with disgust.

I stepped towards him. “Just so you know, when you sign this, you’re signing away your great-grandchildren and me. I don’t want my children growing up with hatred. If you’d close your eyes, you’d realize we’re all the same. Different lifestyles, different religions, different colors, but we all share the same foundations, the same simple gene. We’re merely people, and I’ll never understand why so many choose to live and judge by labels.” I intertwined my fingers with Kellan’s. “Kalel, will you — ”

“I’ve got it.” He nodded his head once, assuring me he’d legalize everything. “Steven, you and Al stay behind with me. The rest of you head off the property.”

Imara touched my shoulder. “You did as fate needed you to.” She brushed past us, leaving me no chance to respond.

Gabi waved goodbye; Jack nodded his head in our direction.

“Beautiful, love. Fiddlin’ eagle, mate.” Craig clapped Kellan’s shoulder on his way out. No doubt he would rush home to Mel. I couldn’t focus on them, though. I was stuck on the merry-go-round of what’d just happened, what’d been revealed.

Kellan led me away from the house, away from the frustratingly unchangeable.

*“You can’t change people.”*

*“I know, but out of everyone I’ve come across, I wanted to change him the most. He’s a reflection of me in some way.”*

*“No, you’re a reflection of what he could have been.”*  
Kellan cupped my face. *“Do you know how many vampires you’ve saved?”*

*“I just wish — ”*

*“Stop wishing, Lexi. We’re meant to bring peace, not a radical shift in beliefs. He’s always going to look at us like we’re the enemy, but at least he’s no longer going to kill us for something we can’t change. We’re here to teach acceptance, and sometimes that doesn’t accompany support.”*

I sighed. *“I know you’re right. It’s just hard to accept.”*

*“Well, if it’s any consolation, I not only accept and support you, I love you.”* He kissed the tip of my nose.

I grinned up at him. *“Ditto.”*

—

## Chapter Thirty-Three

I was emotionally drained by the time we parked at the condo. I didn't understand how one man I barely knew could affect me to such a degree. He had stripped me bare, rubbed my insides raw.

I tried to rationalize it; I tried to understand his point of view, but for the life of me, I couldn't find any angle in which killing Kellan would make things better. I couldn't picture killing him as the ultimate show of love.

I shuddered. I struggled to suppress the gory images wracking my mind. I couldn't get past the visual of Gran cooking something in the kitchen, as she usually was when I spoke with her. She'd be standing over the stove, stirring something in a pot, completely unsuspecting of Cesar's move. I closed my eyes, willing the scene to disappear.

I was surprised when Drexel hugged me. I pressed my face into the heavily muscled vamp. Tears grew rapidly; it was like mourning her death all over again. Emotions stuffed my lungs, making breathing a little harder.

"Let's get you inside," Kellan said.

The men escorted me up to the condo. I pressed my thumb on the pad. The moment I heard the beep, I pushed open the door. I stopped short at the dining room table greeting me, and the pictures on the wall. I tiptoed deeper into the space. New towels hung over the oven handles. A second stand mixer sat on the counter down the way from the other one. Leather bar stools were nestled against the island. I smiled. I'd completely forgotten about the furniture today.

“Surprise!” Mel yanked me to her side. Aunt Claire and Beth stood behind her.

Mel led me into the living room. Déjà vu hit me at the sight of it. They’d arranged an office area in the back of the space, just as the vision had revealed. It didn’t have a computer atop it yet, but Aunt Claire had fun with the office supply setup. They’d also purchased two three-tiered bookshelves that lay flush with the desktop; they’d arranged them next to the office area. A few of my books sat in horizontal stacks on different shelves. *Just like the vision.*

I pushed past my trepidation and focused on the effort these women had exerted to do this for Kellan and me. Everything was laid out, completely decorated, from the rug I certainly hadn’t purchased to the large LCD TV on the wall in front of the sofa. They’d taken the time to hang curtains over every window, and they’d also hung all of the pictures around the condo, filling the walls and making it feel like a home.

“It’s beautiful. You all did such an amazing job. Thank you.” I hugged each of them. Kellan and Drexel trailed behind me, taking it all in with me.

“O.M.G. Wait until you see your bedroom.” Mel dragged me towards the master bedroom. She threw open the door and shoved me into the room. Clearly she hadn’t gotten a handle on her new strength yet.

Seeing the bedroom set in the store was one thing, but having it in my room was another. I’d gone with a black plantation shutter-style bedroom set. The gray walls looked soft next to the black of the furniture. Several plants added pops of vivid green, and the crisp white comforter set added a certain brightness to the space. The black and white photos on the walls created an upscale feel, like I

would be sleeping in a luxury suite in the Caribbean rather than my own room.

“I love it.”

Kellan came behind me. “It turned out good. I don’t feel emasculated in it.”

Mel chuckled. “Poor Craig. I won’t be this generous with him in our home.”

“I can picture it now. Pink, pink, and more pink.” I laughed.

“I’ll add a few touches of black and silver,” she said. “Come here.” She grabbed me, pulling me with her. I had to leap around Kellan to avoid running into him. “We also did your room, Drex. After Lex told us she gave you a permanent shack here last night, we decided to give you a little something to work with.” She gripped his hand in the blink of an eye, tugging him with me towards the second spare room.

I reached out and opened the door this time in fear of her charging right through it. She let go of us, ushering both of us into the space.

Blue walls were accented by several of the black and white pictures I’d purchased. On the back wall was a grey microfiber sofa with a navy blue chenille blanket tossed haphazardly, yet stylishly, over it. Two dark wood end tables sat on each side, but only the one on the right had a lamp on it. On the opposite wall of the sofa, a flat-screen TV was mounted to the wall. Spanning half the wall below it was a large, streamlined desk with more office supplies.

“The sofa pulls out into a bed,” Mel announced.

I gazed at Drexel. He was taking it all in, trying to hold back his emotions. He met my eyes. "I've never had my own room."

Little by little I was getting to know Drexel better. He really was a great, deserving man. "I hope you like it."

"It's great." He smiled.

"I love it," I declared as I returned to the living room. Beth and Aunt Claire were sitting on the black leather sofa. Kellan had already opened the recliner and lounged back. "Why am I not surprised?" I shook my head in fabricated dismay. Beth chuckled, patting Kellan's stomach. I smiled at them. "Why don't I bake you all something?"

"Why don't you go rest?" Aunt Claire fussed. "I know what you've been through today. We all were here when Auggy got the call. Your body can handle a lot, honey, but your electric thing has to take a lot out of it, even for a vamp."

I sat down on the sofa, squishing myself between Beth and Aunt Claire. "Did he tell you about Gran?"

She nodded. "I'd had my suspicions for a while, but Auggy confirmed them before he left earlier."

"I'm sorry."

She rested her hand on my thigh. "There's nothing to be sorry for, Lex. You can't control everything in life. There was nothing any one of us could have done to stop him."

I sighed. "I know. Doesn't make it any easier to accept, though."

"I've always loved your heart, Lexi," Beth said.

"Thanks."

The women stood. I heard Mel talking poor Drexel's ear off in his room. Turning had really wound her up. I was sure it would mellow out over time; it had taken me a bit of time to adjust to everything.

"Mel," Aunt Claire called. Mel practically appeared out of thin air in the living room. "We're going to go. Did you want me to drop you off?"

I frowned. "You don't have to leave. I'm really not tired."

"We know, sweetie, but we have men to meet at home." Beth leaned in and kissed my cheek, and then Kellan's.

"Understandable."

"I should go meet Craig and my dad. Gabi wants to do a mani-pedi day, Lex. I'll call you tomorrow sometime so we can plan it," Mel said.

"Sounds good." I got up off the couch and hugged the women again. "Thanks for everything."

"We should be thanking you. You're making your mom very proud, Lexi." Aunt Claire squeezed me tight. "I'll call you later."

I saw them out the door. As I turned back, Kellan was waiting there for me. He gave me a come-hither look. I skipped into the dining room where he stood.

"Why don't we go take a nice hot shower and then snuggle in our new bed?"

"You really know how to woo a woman, Mr. Bancroft."

"And then some." He brushed his lips across mine fleetingly before shepherding me to the master bedroom.

—

Kellan and I lounged around the house until around noontime the next day.

“Mind if I go out with Craig for a while?”

“Of course not. Go; have fun.”

“Call me if you need me.” He kissed me before grabbing his wallet, cell, and keys off the dresser.

“Bye,” I called.

I listened as the front door shut. He locked it behind him. I rolled over in the bed, stretching languidly. The sun was high in the sky, trying to breach the barrier of the curtains. I knew I should be up doing something; I just didn't know what. The house was clean. I'd baked and shipped those orders the other night at the party. My GED prep course didn't start for two weeks. Mel and her dad had a father-daughter day planned today, and Gabi was heading back to Miami for a few days. She, Mel, and I had a spa date in a week, which she promised to be back for.

I climbed out of bed and headed for the living room. I heard the TV on in Drexel's room. I didn't know if he was actually watching it or writing, which I'd discovered he enjoyed last night. It turned out that Aunt Claire's office supply obsession came in handy.

I opened the cupboards, staring at the baking ingredients. I'd been standing there for a good five minutes when there was a knock on the door. I glanced at the security cam feed and ambled to the door.

“Kalel, come in.” I was taken aback by his unexpected visit. I stepped back, allowing him to slip inside. “How is

everything?" I cocked my head, trying to read him, but he gave nothing away.

"Leka, please sit down. I'm afraid I have some bad news."

With those words, every ounce of fear in my body came out of hiding. Serum rose in my throat, coating my tongue. My heartbeat quickened. I swallowed hard, unable to focus.

Silently I closed the door and led him into the living room. I sat on the sofa. Awkwardly, I faced him.

"Who is it? What happened?" The words fumbled out of my mouth.

He rested beside me and cupped my hand. "Your grandfather."

I felt the numbness spreading. It's not that we were close, but I did care for the man on some level, wished him no ill will. After all, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. "What happened?"

"He committed suicide."

I sat there for a minute, my mind trying to wade through the shock. "How? I mean... I thought it was impossible for us?" I asked more than mused.

"Not when you have a seventeenth century-guillotine and can decapitate yourself." He squeezed my hand.

I knew my mouth was hanging open. I couldn't help it. I didn't know how to react. I knew he wasn't stable. What man dedicates his life to the cause of war and hatred? But this was unexpected. I was disappointed in him that he wasn't brave enough to ask for help, and disappointed in

myself for walking away from him, from my family at a time when he clearly needed me, needed my influence.

“There’s more.” Kalel waited until I focused on him again. “He left a note attached to his shirt.”

“So I guess we don’t turn to dust right away?” He frowned. “Sorry, bad timing. I’m just...boggled.”

He nodded and continued. “The note said, *‘I leave everything to the one that showed me the error of my ways, Alexa Lorryne Jackson.’* He signed it and pressed his seal to the paper, legalizing it.”

“When you say ‘everything,’ what exactly are you talking about?” I couldn’t think straight.

“Three businesses, thirteen homes across the globe, one jet, two yachts, and an entire army of vampeens.”

I opened and closed my mouth several times in succession as my gaze traveled the room. What was I going to do with all of that? I could barely manage myself, let alone all of the above.

Even more so, I couldn’t believe he left it all to me. I couldn’t comprehend that he was truly gone. I’d just seen him yesterday. I didn’t know which one stumped me more, his death or the fact that he left me everything. ‘Flabbergasted’ didn’t even begin to explain my current state.

Kalel sat silently beside me; he was watching as I computed the information. “I, uh, don’t really know what to say or do at the moment.”

He gently rubbed my thigh. “You have a couple days before everything is transferred over. Your grandfather retained a lawyer, who assured us he’d take care of it.”

“Why?”

“In short, he was overpaid. Apparently a transfer receipt of several million accompanied by an overnight letter from your grandfather ensured he would take care of this final detail for him.”

“Wait, so he...” I swallowed, my mouth feeling dry. “He died yesterday?”

“No, today. The lawyer alerted the vamp army, who of course contacted the High Authorities.”

“He planned it.” The words felt like peanut butter stuck to the roof of my mouth. I should have called, checked in on him somehow.

“It’s not your fault, Leka. I doubt you could have changed his mind.”

“But I could have tried. For Christ’s sake, I practically drove him to the edge yesterday. I just wouldn’t stop poking him about something that’d already passed.”

“You need to stop the self-deprecating. You weren’t sent to save the world, Leka, only to have a strong impact on it. You’re more like Queen Elizabeth than Superwoman.”

I sucked my lower lip between my teeth. “He could have been a great man.”

“Some aren’t meant to be.”

“That’s alarming.”

“It’s all about balance. It’s only in balance that you find peace.”

I’d never thought of it like that. “Thanks, Kalel.”

He retrieved a small clear cylinder with a white powder inside from his pocket. "He also left you this." I immediately knew it was the molecular tracker extractor.

"Did you take some for the lab and Auggy?"

He nodded. "Done."

"Thanks again."

He nodded. After one last analytical gaze in my direction, he stood and headed for the door. "Call if you need anything."

"Okay."

"Lock the door behind me."

I chuckled lightly at his surly tone. "Yes, Dad."

He winked before walking out the door. I knew he was waiting on the other side for me to lock myself in, not that it would stop a vamp.

As I strolled around the corner to the living room, Drexel was waiting. His hands were shoved into his pants pockets. "You want to talk about it?"

I bit my lip, trying to hold down the emotions that continued to rise. I shook my head 'no.'

"Come here." He lifted me into his arms and carried me to the sofa.

I think it was the combination of everything that'd happened in the last couple weeks that threw me over the edge so swiftly, but my grandfather's death was a sharp jab. I idly wondered how fate dealt with those who decided to take it into their own hands. And really, what would drive a person to end it all? Everyone suffers; everyone has hurdles and challenges.

I snuggled into Drex's chest, hugging him tightly.

—

## Chapter Thirty-Four

I'd traveled several thousand miles across the Atlantic to sit across from an uptight lawyer who seemed to scrutinize my every word.

The curt lawyer sat across from me behind an expensive mahogany desk with intricate carvings. Everything in his office was large and overstated. It was an intimidation tactic, but I wasn't sure why he would want to intimidate me when I was technically his client through my grandfather.

"Why not donate to vamps?" His face was a mask to his emotions, but his tone was harsh.

I lifted my chin slightly, seeking confidence for my answer. "Because it's about helping the ones who need it the most."

"Believe it or not, there are a lot of poor and homeless vamps," he stated. He glanced down at the contract before peering back up at me expectantly. He reminded me of my grandfather in many ways. I could see why he had retained the man.

"But they won't catch a cold sleeping in the rain or pneumonia from the snow and a thin jacket. They also rarely have children to care for, are rarely without a food source, and have the endurance to get anywhere without a car."

He eyed me with interest now. "Point made," he acknowledged. His lips twitched in the corners, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "I'll see to it that suitable recipients are located. We'll present their profiles to you for a final approval. Upon acceptance, we'll draw up the

papers to sign over the homes to them anonymously. Now, about the vehicles.”

“I’m sorry, vehicles? This is the first I was made aware of vehicles.” I sat up in the chair. Kellan squeezed my shoulder, his arm firmly behind me, reminding me of his presence and support.

“Yes. Each property has roughly five vehicles, most of which are valuable classics.”

I guess that made sense, considering how long my grandfather had been alive. “Did he have any friends?”

“Mr. Euskadi didn’t believe in friends. Either you were his ally or his enemy, with the expressed focus being his life’s mission.”

It wasn’t until I was sitting here that I understood just how lonely and desolate a life my grandfather lived. He truly did sacrifice everything for his father, for a man who was as lost in his ignorant cause as he was. He had money, he had power, but he never truly experienced life. It proved that money didn’t automatically equate to happiness.

I looked to Kellan, seeking his input. “Do what feels right.”

I turned back to the stout lawyer. “Find war veterans, if possible, vets who were at war the year the cars were made. I want people who will appreciate the cars and take care of them. Preferably some that have been neglected or not given the recognition they ought to have. I want the final say on those as well.”

“Very well.” He made a few notes on the legal pad before him. “And per Kalel’s relay, you are to maintain ownership of the businesses and vampeen army.”

“Yes.”

“You are a strange one, indeed, Ms. Jackson; the opposite of most of my clients. I shall see to it that your requests are attended to, though. I’ll be in contact for the charity options. I just need you to review and sign these papers. Once you sign them, you will be the titled owner of all of Mr. Euskadi’s assets.” He slid the stack of papers towards me.

I didn’t understand half of the legal jargon, but I pieced together the parts I did comprehend to ensure they were indicating the correct outline of ownership. Kellan leaned in, scanning through the pages with me. He nodded, assuring me they were okay to sign.

I picked up the pen from the desk. The pen weighed a ton, the finality of my grandfather’s life in its ink. The weight of the world seemed to press on my chest as I scribbled my name along the line. I initialed where the lawyer indicated on a few other pages. I knew what lay ahead. I was accepting the responsibility to manage an army of people stuck in the same mental rut as my grandfather. I lifted my head towards Kellan. His strength and confidence encouraged me. I wasn’t in this alone. I was lucky to have my own army of people supporting me. It’s true what they say: The family you inherited at birth is rarely the family you have at your side on your deathbed.

“I’ll be in touch.”

I nodded, standing as Kellan stood with me. I leaned into him, allowing him to lead me out of the office.

Kalel met us in the hallway. “We’ve managed to rally them all together for you.”

“Really?”

“When will you stop underestimating me, Leka?” He smirked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Someday.”

“Kai’s pulling the car around front. We’ll take you over to the Palacio de Congresos y de la Música now. The High Authorities are containing them, but it’s bordering on a bloodbath, considering half the vamp army is pure vampire,” he said.

“No pressure.” I chuckled nervously.

“None at all.” Kalel led us outside.

“You’ve got this, babe.” Kellan dropped his arm from around me and clutched my hand instead, his fingers threading mine. He gently squeezed my palm.

“Feel free to jump in.” I’d never given a public speech.

“You’re the talker, not me. I’m all action.” Kellan wagged his brows suggestively. I laughed. At least I could count on him to break through the tension coiling my limbs. “You’ll do great.”

“Get in.” Kalel pointed towards the waiting vehicle parked along the narrow, cluttered street of downtown Basque Country, Spain.

—

I stepped up to the podium and looked out over the coliseum; I bit my cheeks to keep my jaw from dropping. Nearly two thousand vampeens glared up at me. Serum rose up in the back of my throat as my heart pounded in my chest. I blew out a breath, knowing I had to face them at some point. *Be the change you want to see in the world.* Gandhi’s famous words rang in my head.

I took a deep breath. “I don’t expect respect. I know it must be earned. I also know that it’s wrong to expect you to change overnight. That’s not what I’m asking.”

“Just make your fucking point or get off,” someone yelled.

Guards made their way towards the offending vamp, lifting him out of his seat and alerting me of his identity.

“Put him down.” I spoke with authority, projecting my voice. Whispers slurred together across the room. I waited until the army vamps returned the vampeen to his seat unscathed. Unfortunately, this vamp had proved that I was going to have to be tough on them. “Listen up and listen well, because I’m only going to say this once.” The audience silenced their chatter.

“My grandfather, Cesar Euskadi, was a man on a mission of hate and revenge. He brought you all together to do his bidding, to further his narrow-minded cause. You were his minions, whether you like the term or not.

“That’s not to say he wasn’t an honorable vampeen. He fought hard for what he believed in. He took a stand where others wouldn’t have. He was tough on you, but tougher on himself. Knowing that, I would never want all of his hard work and dedication to go to waste. Rather, I am suggesting that we re-route things.

“I don’t expect you to wake up tomorrow loving vampires. I don’t even expect you to respect them, though I hope that one day you will grow to respect the ones who earn it. What I expect is for all acts of violence outside of self-defense to cease. This is no longer an offensive attack on our fellow kind. Any vampeen caught in the act will be punished by the vamp army under the High Authorities. I’m

sure you're all familiar with their judicial management and understand where you would end up.

"I also understand that for many of you, there was an underlying hope of branching out into mainstream civilization. I'm here to tell you that it's not going to happen. It is for the good of all of us to keep our existence under wraps. If you want to discuss my reasons on a personal basis, feel free to make an appointment. I'll gladly duke it out with you — verbally, of course. Anyone caught or suspected of creating a revolution to this effect will be tried and punished under the High Authorities' judicial system.

"Now I know for most of you, this was your paying job; for a few, your lifelong career. I'm not taking that away from you. Your pay will not be tampered with even by a penny. I'm not going to be slowly picking through the pot and removing what I don't like, either. I trust my grandfather's judgment. I know he wouldn't have retained you if you weren't worth retaining. That doesn't mean that I won't fire your butt in a heartbeat. It means that if you continue to do what your title entails under the new outline, then you won't lose anything, which I think is fair.

"So what exactly are we moving towards? A model of management. Your new tasks will be aligned with the vamp army and the Bladangs. We're all seeking balance here. I'm not asking you to work with vampires. I'm not asking you to vanquish your hatred towards them or be stoned. I'm asking you to help me implement a truce. Keep your fellow vampeen in line. If you see a vampire walking on the other side of the street, rather than take him down, allow him to continue on unharmed. Curse him for filth if you'd like, that's only a reflection of the darkness within yourself, but never allow that darkness to take over again.

“I’m going to open up the floor to questions. I’ll provide as much information as I have at this moment.” I looked out over the crowd, surprised when no one spoke immediately.

The male vampeen who’d had the outburst earlier was the first to inquire. “Will we be assigned territories like before?”

“No.”

“Why?” he pressed. Several vamps around him murmured to each other, their eyes scrutinizing me.

I supposed it was a valid question. “You’re no longer a soldier at war, confined to one region of the world. Given that, I’m not going to fence you off. For some of you, not lashing out at vampires will be a true test of your will, something that a few may even not be able to handle. I am offering you a penance in that you can retreat to the most desolate of locations until you regain control of yourself.”

“And if Cecilia’s army attacks us?” another asked. Kalel had filled me in on the female vampire equivalent of my grandfather.

“Then it will be considered self-defense.” I frowned. It was as if these vampeens were looking for an excuse to fight, which didn’t sit well with me. “I want the oldest vampeen in this room to stand up.”

A blond male with ivory skin and deep brown eyes stood up. He crossed his arms in front of his chest; his feet were planted shoulder-width apart. He glowered at me.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“If you did your homework, then you’d know it.”

“How old are you?” I countered, ignoring his jab.

“Five hundred twenty-six.” His tone was anything but friendly, despite indulging me with an answer.

“Tell me, through your eyes, what have you seen over the years?”

“What’s your point?”

“How many times have you seen history repeat itself?” He stared at me, protecting his cards. “How many wars have been fought and won, yet the initiator, the prime reason for the war, still exists in some form today? For instance, the Civil War. It was a dirty war that began over slavery. Afterwards, slavery was no longer recognized; however, blacks were still treated the same. Fast-forward a hundred years, and slavery is still not recognized and you still have your core group of people who look down on the race over something they can’t change: their skin color. Am I correct in this assessment?”

He narrowed his eyes, rocking back on his heels. “I’ll agree.”

“Guess what, we’re no different. Vamps are suppressing other vamps over something they can’t change. You can’t change the family you were born into or the genes that created you. Likewise, they didn’t choose to be this way and can’t change it, either. We’re all attacking each other because of a title we didn’t ask for. Even worse, the rebels who hate on the African-American race most of the time have no personal reason to; instead, they are holding onto the same hatred their ancestors instilled in them. But this was their ancestors’ fight, not their own. This is Johanne Euskadi’s fight. This is his hatred, and his personal anguish traveling over generations.”

I scanned the crowd. “How many of you have had a negative personal encounter with a vampire? Raise your

hand." I waited patiently as six hands went up in the air. "Look around at the number of hands in the air: six. I would estimate there are about two thousand present, yet only six have raised their hand. Even if we bump the number up to ten, that is still only half a percent. So half of one percent of the people in this room have a personal reason to feel threatened or to threaten vampires. I'm looking for honesty and understanding here. Why are so many of you involved in this? Why did you join this group?"

"The money," several offered.

"Hell, yeah. Money makes the world go around," another added.

"Needed a job," a couple blurted.

"My dad pushed for it."

I zoned in on the area those words were spoken from. "Why did you choose to listen to him?"

"Family honor," the young male admitted. He seemed so young, about the same age as me.

"Would you have chosen this if it wasn't for his insistence?"

"Probably not."

"Do you regret your decision?"

"I'm indifferent." His answers were quick, as if he didn't stop to think about what he said, which meant he probably hadn't stopped and thought about what he was doing.

"So you accepted a mediocre position in an army whose mission you truly don't believe in, but went along with in order to make your father proud?"

“A job’s a job. Money’s money.”

“Not if you sell your soul for it. You’re quick to reply and too nonchalant to have really thought through what you signed up for and what you’ve been doing. Someone once told me that a vampire will always have the upper hand because they act on instinct. Well, we have something that will always trump instinct: heart. Heart and passion go hand in hand. Instinct is irrational, rampant at times, but heart is consistent and focused. So I’m asking you all to figure out what you’ve always wanted to do, aside from murder a hotel full of vampires, and go after it.”

“What’s the catch?” a female threw out from the front row.

“That’s the beauty of it. There isn’t one. Make yourself available for business-related assignments from time to time, and as long as you don’t offensively engage a vampire in combat or conspire or support the revelation of our kind to humans in an effort to live openly among them, then you’re golden. Free to do as you please.”

“To clarify, you’re going to pay us to travel the world doing whatever we want to do as long as we follow those three rules?” The woman was scrutinizing me, trying to pick me apart from her position. It was expected that nothing in life was free. For me, this was a costly move, but one that was worth it if my goal of a peaceful existence could be cultivated.

“That’s correct.” The theatre filled with conversations that melted into one unified hum floating up towards me. “Auggy, a vampeen and member of the High Authorities, is going to take over from here. He’ll answer any further questions you may have. Over the next several days, we will be confirming all contact information. You are not permitted to leave this city until your information has been

confirmed. Afterward, you may select direct deposit for ongoing paychecks or provide the address you would like your check to be mailed to once a month. Once you receive your confirmation contract, you're free to pursue your dreams. I hope you all make your eternity worthwhile."

I stepped away from the podium and nearly jumped at the applause that filled the room. Not everyone clapped enthusiastically. Many were still skeptical, and I was sure many more were mentally limited by their current craft. *Change isn't easy, but if we want a better life for ourselves, it's necessary.*

Kellan wrapped me into his arms the second I stepped out of view. He pressed his lips to mine, our minds easily meshing. *"You've never been so sexy, and I've never been more proud to have you on my arm."*

I snaked my arms around his neck, hooking him to me. He slid one hand along my lower back, pulling me into him; his other entwined in my hair, angling my head so he could deepen our kiss. His lips caressed mine with confidence.

*"Your parents would be so proud of you."*

*"I'd like to think so. I just wish doing the right thing was easier."*

*"It's not supposed to be easy; it's supposed to be rewarding."*

I smiled against him. I kissed a trail along his jawline and down his neck, nipping at his vein.

He groaned. "Not now, babe." His hips pressed into me, warning me.

"Uh, hum."

I spun on my heels. "O.M.G. Where? I mean, when did you... No, how did you get here?"

Mel and Craig walked to us, hand in hand. "Kai wouldn't shut up about how epic this is for our kind and blah, blah, blah, all because of you. I'm mega-disappointed that I didn't see any sexy gladiators in loincloths, though. I mean, there have to be a few of them out there from that era." Her blond locks hung over her shoulders, framing her beautiful face. She smiled wide. "Bible, Lex, you did an amazing job. I don't know of anyone who could have commanded that audience the way you did. You were born to do this, and I know that now better than ever."

"Stop. You're gonna make me cry, and I just fed this morning."

She unlinked her hand from Craig's and stretched out her arms towards me. I fell into her arms, squeezing her tight. She pressed with equal strength against me.

"Hey, mates. Don't flatten each other out. We men like your curves." Mel and I pulled back. She held onto one of my hands, swinging it like when we were younger. "Reality, Lex, you did a bomb stellar job out there. I'm proud of you, love."

I felt my cheeks warm. "Thanks."

"I have an idea. How about we celebrate with one your cakes, Lex?" Mel suggested, her eyes alight at the idea.

"How is that a celebration for me?"

"Beats me, but I sure as heck want some. I so don't know what I was thinking as a human. I'm so glad you agreed to try the whole bakery business thing, Lex. You're going to rake in millions from the vamp world. Gabi's planning to call you about catering her and Jack's official

wedding; well, the wedding in front of their friends, anyway. She wants a huge array of desserts, and with Jack's connections, you're going to have a humongous customer base; I'm sure of it."

She put her arm around my shoulder and led me towards the exit. I reached my hand back in search of Kellan. He slid his hand into mine, laughing as Mel continued to sell me on catering the wedding. She didn't relent, either. I heard it the entire way home. Several thousand miles of nothing but her chitchatting about the same thing in circles. I thought Drexel was going to deck her at one point. *Oh, Mel.*

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## Chapter Thirty-Five

*Two months later...*

The past two months had been nonstop. Running my grandfather's three businesses plus my bakery while taking the GED prep course and managing an entire army of vamps was exhausting. The High Authorities took over the majority of the operational agendas for the vampeen guard, but I still had to sign off on everything and maintain a level of involvement. Thank God I was a vampeen because I wouldn't have been able to keep up as a human.

For the businesses, luckily, I'd found some key people to step in as chiefs of operations, but that wasn't until this past week. All the nonstop going had taken a toll on me. I was requiring beyond the usual couple hours a night of sleep most vampeens needed. When I slept a full eight hours one night, though, that's when I knew I needed to see the doctor.

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"Are you sure?" I wrung my hands, overwhelmed by the idea.

"Positive." Dr. H continued making notes on my chart.

"I...I mean..." I sighed. "We were so careful."

He stopped and looked up at me. His eyes held nothing but kindness, despite not understanding. "Lexi, I've been around for hundreds of years, and abstinence is the only concrete protection available. Coincidentally, I've also learned that there are no accidents."

Tears finally welled up. I'd managed to hold back until this point. "What about my little electricity thing?"

“I’ll need to run some more tests. The protective barrier of the embryonic sac for a vamp is much stronger than for a pure human child, but I’m not certain of the limitations under the circumstances. My advice would be to avoid it, regardless of the effects it may possibly have.”

He handed me a black and white pamphlet containing a rundown of what to expect. “In the meantime, you may need to eat human food more regularly. In fact, it’s not uncommon for pregnant vampeens to give up their blood cravings while pregnant.” He stared at me, probably at the dumbfounded expression I knew was on my face. He placed his hand on my shoulder. “Take it day by day, and please take it easy on the vamp assignments. You know how to reach me if you need anything.”

I numbly shook my head. All I could think about was how I was going to explain this to Kellan. We had above-normal responsibilities and we had better-than-normal young adult financials, but we were still teens. We were still growing up ourselves. The last thing I’d expected was to become a teen mom. You read the statistics, hear the stories, but somehow feel invincible, like it’ll never happen to you.

“Lexi?” I glanced up at Dr. H. His brows were furrowed, his lips pursed as he watched me. “Are you alright?”

I nodded once. Tucking the paper in my pocket, I slid down off the table. “Um, thanks.”

He offered me a small smile before holding the door open for me. “I want you to come back in a week. We’ll do some scans to make sure everything is okay, and we’ll check on the sac at that time, too. I’m guessing by his absence, you’ll need the time to tell Kellan.”

“Yeah.” My voice was barely above a whisper.

“Marianne will set everything up for you. Take care, Lexi.” He passed my chart to the older woman.

I made the appointment, accepted the reminder card and a gift bag. I quickly escaped to Drexel’s car; he’d loaned it to me for the day. I sank into the front seat, punched the key in, and turned the ignition. I immediately switched on all the security functions to be protected as I sat there. I was awestruck. I’d expected a diet adjustment, an activity change, an explanation or solution to my extreme fatigue other than what I’d received. How was I going to explain this to Aunt Claire, to Kellan and his parents?

The tears that had welled up in the office finally cascaded down over my cheeks. I peered down at my stomach. It showed no signs of pregnancy...yet.

I sat silently with my thoughts. One thing I was certain of: I refused to bring my baby into this world as it was. I was young, but I wasn’t without power. I had the ability to change things, to make an impact, and I was on my way to doing just that already.

I drove back to the condo. Kellan was still out with Craig when I arrived. I walked around the house, stopping and staring into the bedroom that I was certain would become the nursery. It was directly next to the master bedroom and was labeled a bonus room. It was the only room we hadn’t touched. It was as if everyone had a sixth sense for what was coming.

The empty room allowed me to envision a design. The lone large window in the space would adorn curtains with a gliding rocker beside it. Next to the rocker, on the back wall, would be the crib with a changing table attached to it.

A dresser or armoire and bookshelf would be on the opposite wall. I could picture a mix of cool colors and dark colors for a boy and warmer colors with pops of bright accents for a girl.

My phone ringing in the distance carried me back to the present. I checked the screen. It was Kellan.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey. My mom wants us to stop by later.” He sounded a bit hesitant.

“And?” I prompted.

He chuckled. “And she wanted to see if you would bring one of your desserts.”

I smiled. Bloody Bakes had really taken off. I’d already required a blood contract with the Bladangs. Drexel and Sanders had pitched in to help me keep up with orders at times. At least I had a valid career to pass on for the baby, and a bit more stability and purpose. It helped that I enjoyed doing it, too.

“Anything in particular?”

“Nope.”

“Okay. I’ll throw something together. Did you want me to pick you up or is Craig dropping you off?”

“He’ll drop me off at my parents.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you there later, then.”

“Sounds good. Be safe. I love you.”

“Love you, too.” My hand absently slid to my lower stomach, caressing what our love had created. *Will!* “*And now you must move in, and you and Kellan create what*

*you're supposed to here." He's so sneaky!* I chuckled to myself over the realization.

I hung up, placed my phone back on the counter, and stared at the kitchen. Recipe ideas flipped through my mind. Idly I wondered if I ought to tell them all tonight at the same time, or tell Kellan alone later. Was it a rule to tell the baby's daddy before anyone else? I began pulling out ingredients for a devil's food cake.

Drexel and Sanders came into the kitchen.

"Did you get a new order in already?" Drexel asked. I'd already baked before I left for my doctor's appointment in the morning.

"I haven't checked. This is for Kellan's parents."

"What are you making this time?" Sanders watched as I added the ingredients one by one into the mixer. I'd learned his first name was Samuel, but he practically chewed your head off if you called him by it.

"Devil's food cake."

Drexel studied me closely. We'd grown close over the past couple months. He was the first to tell me that I needed to rest, that I needed to slow down, and lastly that I needed to go to the doctor. He'd noticed a change in me that even Kellan hadn't yet, or at least he hadn't voiced it.

I avoided eye contact with him, focusing on the ingredients blending in the bowl.

"Talk," he ordered. "What did the doctor say?"

"I can't tell you yet."

"Want me to kick him out?" He nodded towards Sanders. Sanders punched Drexel's upper arm.

I chuckled. “No. It’s not that. I’ll tell you when I get back tonight.”

“I’m holding you accountable.”

“I know,” I droned.

“We’re going to walk around downtown. You want to come with us?” Sanders sidled up to me.

“That’s okay. I’m just going to bake for now. Thanks for asking, though.”

“Sure thing, baby cakes.”

I burst into laughter. “You need to rein him in, Drex.”

“I’m trying. He’s not exactly easily controlled.” Drexel gazed at Sanders, emotions passing between them.

“Well, you two have fun on your walk. I’m leaving when I’m done, so don’t panic if I’m not here when you get back.”

“Call me if you need me.” Drexel kissed my cheek.

“Call *me* if you need me,” Sanders chimed in. He copied Drexel by kissing my other cheek.

I rolled my eyes. “Bye, guys.”

An hour and a half later I stared down at my creation. I’d made a layered chocolate cake with raspberry blood between each thin sheet. The outside was covered in a bloody cream cheese frosting that carried hints of vanilla; the blood with the white cream cheese created a pretty pink coating. I added a bit of detail to the edges before I found myself mixing a batch of chocolate frosting. I was going to do it. Before I could second-guess myself, I wrote the words that would change all our lives.

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Beth met me at the front door, greeting me with a hug after she secured the covered dessert. “How are you doing, sweetie?”

“Good.” I grinned, staring at the transport container.

“Good.” Her eyes went to the oversized Tupperware in her hand. “I can’t wait to break open this puppy. By the shape, I’m guessing it’s a cake.” She closed the door behind me.

“Hey, babe.” Kellan pulled me in for a quick kiss.

“Hey, Lexi,” Al waved from the kitchen. He pulled me in for a brief hug once I entered.

“Hi.”

Beth set the cake down on the island and immediately got out plates and forks. At my hesitant expression, she asked, “You don’t mind if we dig in right away, do you?”

Whoa. I hadn’t planned on them finding out right away, but then again I couldn’t tell her not to; that would be rude. My heart beat a little quicker; I glanced at the guys, who appeared just as eager to have some. I swallowed hard, though no serum was rising.

I’d gone through all the scenarios in my head as I baked. I knew Beth and Al wouldn’t be happy about the timing of my pregnancy, but I didn’t fear being shunned by them. Ironically, I thought my parents would have taken it much harder than they. It still wasn’t a conversation any teenager wanted to have with parents of any sort when it involved them.

My stomach began to knot.

“You okay?” Kellan cocked his head.

I’d been certain to keep my thoughts blocked. I nodded. “Yeah. Um, I hope you all like it.”

Al dug out a cake cutter from a drawer as Kellan popped the airtight locks on the side of the dish. I held my breath as he lifted off the lid. My world came to a crashing halt as I waited with bated breath for his reaction. I watched as he read the chocolate letters stating, ‘We’re Having A Baby.’

I knew the moment it sank in. His green eyes grew darker as his lids stretched wider. Beth shrieked beside Al, her hand flying to cover her mouth. My focus was on Kellan, though. He looked at me, his hands dropping to his side, quickly being tucked into his pockets. Fear was etched in his features; my gut tightened.

“That’s why you’ve been sleeping so much?” he asked.

“Yeah.” My voice was low; I was uncertain.

He studied me, his eyes dipping to my stomach. “How are you feeling right now?”

I decided the truth was best. “Nervous. Scared. Worried.”

I had to give them credit. Beth and Al gave us our space, allowed us to have this moment without their interference.

“Don’t be. I’m not going anywhere.” He opened his arms.

I flew to him, clinging to his embrace. He secured me in his arms. I placed my cheek on his chest, thanking God that I had ended up with such a wonderful man. He never ceased to amaze me. There was so much more to Kellan

than met the eye. He had an inner strength that kept me grounded. I wouldn't be who I was without him, and I certainly couldn't picture getting through this experience without him.

Tears easily streamed down my face as I held onto my protector, my best friend, my partner and soulmate. Age means nothing in the vamp world. It's all about instinct, and my instincts were never wrong about Kellan. From the beginning I was drawn to him over everyone else, and he showed me why in moments like these.

I slowly lifted my head. He bent and softly brushed his lips to mine. His kiss was affirming what he'd stated, what he'd proven. He pulled back, pressing his forehead to mine.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too," I softly replied.

"Oh, my gosh!" Beth exclaimed.

I turned towards her and Al. Her eyes were glossy, proof of her tears still streaking down over her cheeks. She was tucked into her husband's side. She dabbed her eyes, giggling as she did it.

Al looked at his son with respect. I knew it wasn't what they'd planned for us, but I also knew from the love shining in their eyes that they would support us. Though this baby would only have one set of grandparents, those grandparents would be actively involved in its life.

Kellan leaned over and kissed my head.

"Whew!" Beth blew out a big breath. She was flustered, but seemingly happy. She smiled wide. She walked over to me, stealing me from Kellan for a hug.

“We’re in this with you, sweetie. We’ll do whatever we can to help you.”

I felt myself choking up again. “Thanks.”

She broke away, peering down at my stomach between us. Kellan reached out and placed his hand over my womb. Beth copied his move. Al hesitated a moment, looking at me, almost as if he were asking my permission. I nodded, smiling. He stepped forward and linked his fingers with Beth’s, settling over my lower stomach. Kellan grabbed my hand, entwining ours just the same before pressing my hand to the place his lay moments ago.

Beth was radiant as she looked around at their home. “Ooh! Come with me, Lexi. I want a nursery here for when we look after the baby. I was thinking the front office next to the master bedroom would be the perfect room.”

I looked back over my shoulder at Kellan. He gazed back at me, his dimple peeking from his cheek. I felt a sense of peace as Beth led me towards my future: a future that would be full of baby planning and love. Lots of love.

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And now, here is a sneak peek at the next book in the Vamp Chronicles series, Darkness Falls.

## DARKNESS FALLS

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

*And then one falls...*

*In the newest heart-pounding edition of the Vamp Chronicles, follow Lexi, Kellan, Kai and their friends as their worlds collide and are turned upside*

*down. Relationships are challenged and new alliances are formed as vampeens and vampires come together in the greatest battle yet.*

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

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

—

## Darkness Falls

# Chapter One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Baby Cakes?" I smirked.

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

"I hope that one doesn't stick."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I frowned. "This was in the prophecy?"

"Hidden beneath a million hints."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You won’t like it.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Do try, Lexi.” He smirked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No." I shook my head.

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

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

watched me.

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

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

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

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

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

"Kai, I'm pregnant."

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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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