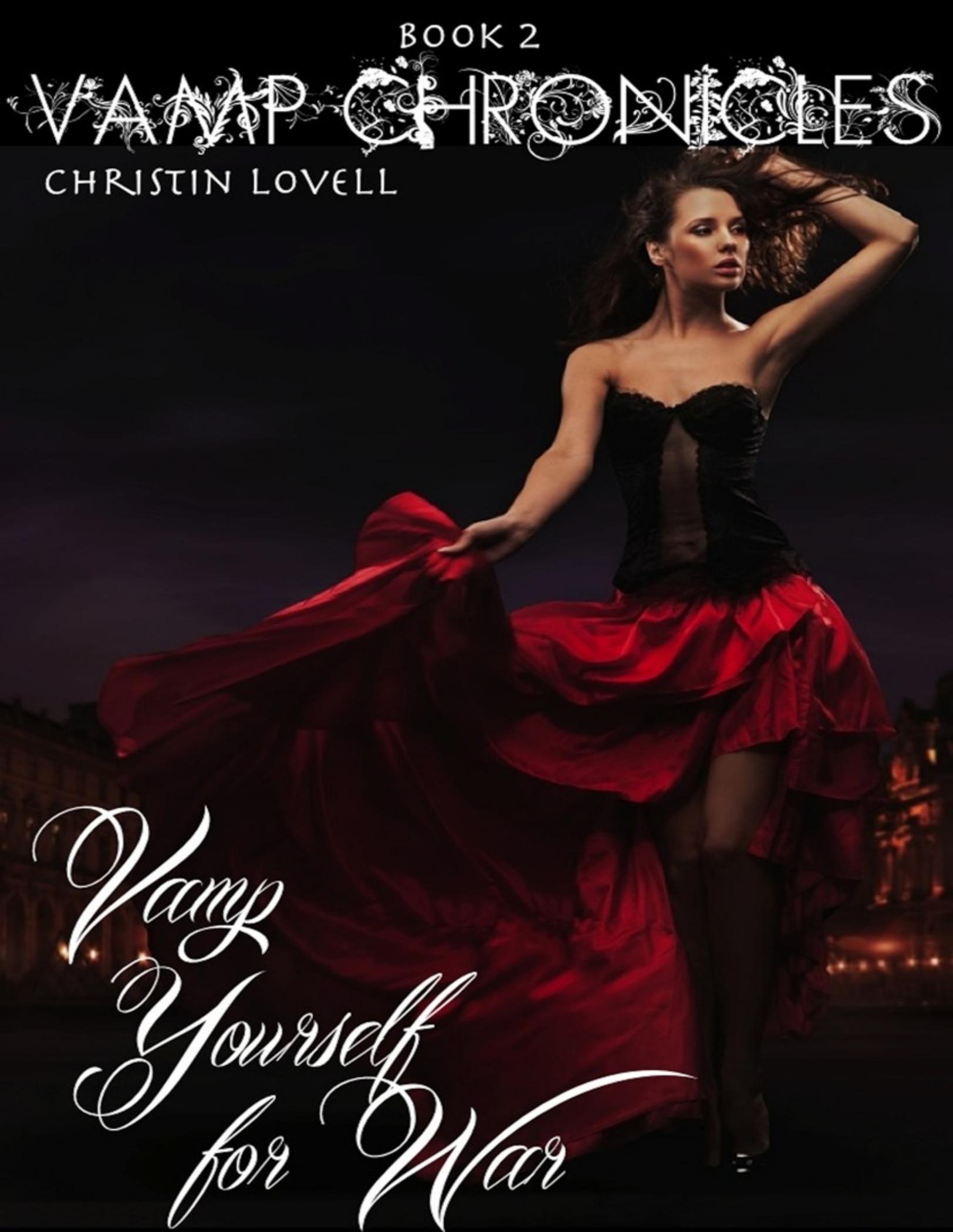


BOOK 2

VAMP CHRONICLES

CHRISTIN LOVELL

A woman with long dark hair is the central figure, wearing a black strapless corset with a sheer bodice and a voluminous, ruffled red skirt. She is captured in a dynamic pose, with one arm raised and the other holding a long, flowing red fabric that trails behind her. The background is dark, suggesting a night cityscape with blurred lights.

*Vamp
Yourself
for War*

Vamp Chronicles
VAMP YOURSELF FOR WAR
Book Two

Christin Lovell

VAMP YOURSELF FOR WAR

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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!)

VAMP YOURSELF FOR WAR

Love will be tested and loved ones will be lost as Lexi's journey carries her directly into battle. She quickly finds that all isn't fair in love and war, especially when you are dealing with the most powerful and skilled vamps in the world. War brings out the best and worst in Lexi. She will be forced to question not only herself and her relationship with Kellan, but her safety and security in all she's known until now.

—

This book is dedicated to my son, Kaleb. You carry the same ability to charm all those you encounter simply by being yourself. Never change. I love you just the way you are.

—

*² "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side
When men rose up against us,
³ Then they would have swallowed us alive,
When their anger was kindled against us;
⁴ Then the waters would have engulfed us,
The stream would have swept over our soul;
⁵ Then the raging waters would have swept over our soul."

⁷ Our soul has escaped as a bird out of the snare of the
trapper;
The snare is broken and we have escaped.*

Psalm 124: 2-5;7 nasb.

—

Vamp Yourself for War

Chapter One

“This is a super car – think Batmobile. You don’t have to pound the gas to get somewhere. Ease down gently on the right pedal,” Kellan instructed.

I sat in the driver’s seat of the new Mercedes my dad gifted me at my birthday party yesterday. As he promised my parents, Kellan took me out to a deserted lot for driver’s ed. I’d carried my permit for seven months now and had an appointment to get my license at 7am on Monday. This left me roughly forty-three hours to learn everything.

“You know, I’m glad you’re a vampire,” I babbled aimlessly to Kellan with a smirk on my face.

“Why is that?” he chuckled.

“Quick reflexes and harder to kill. I can’t give you a heart attack if I royally suck at driving, which seems to be the case thus far.”

“Just press the gas pedal,” he stated moving past my unexpected appreciation over his vampiric DNA.

I gently tapped the pedal sending the tiniest bit of gas into the engine yet the car leapt forward with a vengeance. Thinking fast I slammed my foot on the break sending Kellan against the dash and myself into the steering wheel despite my similarly enhanced reflexes.

“Ha... ha... oops,” I smiled sheepishly.

“Okay. Next time don’t hit the break, just ease up on the gas and the car will steady itself,” he advised. Despite the almost smash of his body into the dash, he remained calm, patient.

“Okay,” I agreed inching my foot down again. The car sped off reaching fifty-five miles-per-hour in two seconds. Heeding his advice, I let up a few centimeters and the car steadied to a safe thirty miles-per-hour.

“Good. That was really good,” he praised. “Now lightly come down on the break.”

I removed my foot, switched from gas to break apparently too fast since the car abruptly jerked to a halt. From the corner of my eye, I saw Kellan tossed forward a few inches though my speed wasn’t outrageous.

“Sorry,” I said. My facial expression showed my embarrassment. I’m stubborn sometimes. I don’t like the learning process – it clearly displays my ignorance on a subject.

“It’s okay, you’ll get it,” he encouraged. “I won’t let you stop until you do.”

“You really are better than my parents when it comes to this stuff,” I commented. “But we’ve been going at this for an hour and I’m bored, not to mention frustrated.”

He opened the door and came around to my side. I put the car in park as he opened my door.

“Umm... What are you doing?” I questioned hesitantly.

“Teaching you how to drive. Get out for a sec.” I sat for a minute before giving in to his request. As soon as I exited he adjusted the seat back and slid into the driver’s spot. “Now sit on my lap.”

“You’re joking, right?” I was dumbfounded.

“Not at all. Sit,” he ordered.

I stood staring at him cautiously. Apparently becoming a vampire hadn't erased all fear and rational from me, which is definitely a good thing in my book.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Hey, no trick questions!"

"Come here Lexi."

"Okay, I'm trusting you," I said slipping into his lap.

"Now, hands on the wheel," he instructed. I properly placed my hands on ten and two; he placed his directly below mine. "Put your foot on top of mine. You're going to feel how I drive, how much pressure I do and don't apply on the pedals," he explained.

"Umm. Okay. I trust you," I reiterated, more for my self-assurance than anything since I was blind and didn't see how this would work.

"Good. Now put the car in drive."

I obeyed. I copied his move from the break to the gas never losing his shoe beneath my own. We started out with him in control and I just mimicked his moves as a puppet. I calculated the push he pressed each time to the break and gas pedals; stop and go, right turn, left turn, up and down the aisles of the abandoned parking lot.

After a few minutes he let go of the steering wheel allowing me to control our direction as he determined our speed. We sat silently as I maneuvered through the course. Having stationed my foot atop his for at least five minutes now, having crossed atop his from break to gas so often, I didn't realize until I stopped at the far end of the lot that I was in control; that I had been driving the last two lanes. I pulled into a spot and locked the car into park.

“I did it!” I squealed.

“Very nice,” he commented. “But we’re far from done.”

“Ugh. Way to burst my bubble,” I pouted.

He chuckled, “The worst is over. Coordination of the pedals is the hardest part to master.”

“Okay, what’s next?” I prompted.

“Three point turns,” he announced sliding from under me to the passenger’s seat.

It took one try for me to successfully complete a three-point turn, although my enhanced vision and new mathematically driven mind did assist me in this objective.

“Perfect. Now, last but not least, parallel parking,” he grinned.

“How do I practice without cones?”

“Easy. With me.” He got out of the car and stood acting as the position of the front bumper of a vehicle. I swung the car into reverse moving sideways and backwards simultaneously until I was inches from Kellan. One second later he was in front positioned as a rear bumper. I chuckled devilishly to myself before hitting the gas pedal. Kellan heard the acceleration instantly and jumped out of the way. I slammed the break stopping abruptly several centimeters from where he was standing prior.

I rolled down the window smiling innocently, “I for sure thought you weren’t afraid of anything.”

He tried to keep from smiling but couldn’t. “You got me. That was good. Actually, that was a Craig move.”

Kellan's best friend, Craig, still lived in Seattle. I knew he'd missed the male companionship since he moved to Charleston, South Carolina a little over a month ago. Yesterday, Kellan gave up his iPod for me, gifted it to me as a birthday present though I knew it was his favorite possession. So in return, I was going to secretly get Craig here before the end of the month.

"So, now that I've passed the course, can I drive back to the hotel? I promised Mel I'd have brunch with her."

"As long as you stay out of the slow lane," he stipulated.

"Now I have to drive like a grandma just to irritate you."

"Don't even try it," he warned.

"Kiss me and I won't," I leveraged. He slid into the passenger's seat. He gently took my hand, despite me being close to indestructible he was still gentle in his caress, and kissed the back of it.

"You know that doesn't count, right?"

"You know you didn't specify where I had to kiss you," he smirked. "Drive back in the fast lane and I'll revisit your request."

"Okay. You got me. You may want to buckle up though," I suggested at the challenge.

Every day I'd spent with Kellan, I'd discovered a new part of me. I didn't realize I held a competitive lever within me. Even more telltale was my rebellion surfacing from time to time since his appearance. Of course, he appeared just as I learned of my true heritage.

“O.M.G. Lex!” Mel cried as I entered her hotel room fresh from my lesson. “The video already has 5,237 hits!”

Of course, my best friend was referring to the tape of Jason and Jenny, the king and queen of the pop crowd, reacting to my remarkable transformation at my birthday party last night. I admit it was a drastic change. I went from a fat, blemished teen to a fit, attractive vampeen blurring the lines between a human and a vampire. Even I was still amazed when I caught my reflection; another vamp myth killed.

Mel enjoyed their faces though. So much so that the moment it ended she raced back to her room to upload her masterpiece to YouTube.

“Holy sugarplums!” I sarcastically replied.

“That was such a low blow. I’m blonde but so not stupid,” she grumbled.

“Yeah, yeah. You know I love you,” I smiled as we slid onto her unmade bed, cozying up to her laptop near the edge.

“I do. That’s why I put up with you.”

“Ha. Ha. I can’t believe we have that many hits in what, seven hours?”

“I know. The whole class must be pasting the link. I’m not the only one who despises those two.”

“True. So are you going to breakfast in your PJ’s or are you going to change?” I pressed as Mel closed her laptop.

“I have to get dressed,” she whined.

“Why?”

“Lex, have you checked your reflection lately? If I ever want to get a guy around you I have to practice and present,” she said, standing to ciphher through the clothes in her bag.

“Practice and present? Do detail,” I insisted.

“Practice as in make sure I primp myself daily with make-up, nice clothes and the curling iron or flat iron to be best presentable. Practice and present,” she explained with precision and pep.

“Uh huh... Don’t you already do that most of the time anyways?”

“Most of the time... before. Listen Lex, please don’t take offense but I feel like I have to work overtime to stand a chance next to you now. Before I could bum-it sometimes, but I don’t feel I can anymore,” she sighed with a twinge of depression seeping in.

The worst part was I’d felt that way next to her before. The difference however was I didn’t even try to hold my own. I allowed Mel’s size zero beauty to swallow me whole. At times I would get depressed, experience a stint of jealousy, but for the most part I ignored it allowing myself to drown in low self-confidence, to sit in comfort within her shadow.

The design comparisons separated us though. I was fat, had acne, wore glasses sometimes and made no attempt to appear fashionable. Mel is skinny, has perfect skin, always has the cutest, coordinated outfits and carries the personality of a bubbly Funshine bear. Bottom line was she stood a chance beside me now but I never did before. It still baffled me as to how, or even why, she felt so insecure.

“Okay. Number one, wake up! You are gorgeous. You’re the whole kit and caboodle fit into the perfect, tiny

package. Number two, hello! I'm not single. So even if some guy was stupid enough to pass on you, I would reject him and shoot him back to you. And last, there is no freaking comp Mel. I would never compare myself to you as the standard or one to beat. So don't do that to me. We're a team. We together put people like Jenny in that position not each other. Now get dressed and I'll be back in a minute," I commanded.

"Where are you going?" she asked still processing everything I'd said despite her curiosity being voiced.

"To change. I feel like bumming it," I winked as I left her room.

It's never my intention or desire to overshadow anyone, especially Mel. I recalled every emotion harbored within my self-esteem plunge over the years. I could be crowned Miss America tomorrow and my self-doubt would still linger. Though I looked like a model now, I still felt like the old Lexi inside which was just how I wanted to be. Just because I was part vampire didn't mean I should lose my humanity. And if dressing down in sweats and a tee would make my best friend feel better about herself then I would.

I was shocked still at how quickly the tables turned. I was still adjusting to my alternate form of travel, a.k.a. running or speed racing as my dad called it. Another twist is the constant noise. I hear beyond concrete walls to their keeper's chat and the blip of a frog hopping in the rain. And now I heard my Aunt Claire chatting away with a friend in her suite, my parents getting dressed and discussing last night simultaneously in their room. I heard another couple down the hall in quite a promiscuous rumble - wish I could tune that out.

My hearing had magnified in such a dramatic way enhancing my surroundings with both good and bad

echoes. The first few days my head was pounding non-stop. I often wished it came with a remote containing up and down volume controls and a mute button. However, given my time, I had adjusted as well as expected and possible. Kellan had supported me every step of the way. He and Mel had kept me from losing my sanity.

I zipped into my room for my two-second wardrobe change.

“That was nice of you,” Kellan stated from the balcony.

“You know you really shouldn’t eavesdrop,” I replied as I swiped my hair into a quick ponytail. “But since you did, you think this is scruffy enough?”

“I don’t think you could ever look scruffy but you do look casual,” he commented.

“Casual and comfy, though I haven’t worn an outfit that wasn’t since becoming a vampeen.”

“It comes with the territory. Your skin is no longer sensitive to the environment and surfaces it contacts,” he casually explained, taking a sip from his coffee mug, though I knew that’s not what was in there.

“Can I have some? I need to make sure I can swallow at least half a plate of food with Mel,” I asked stepping outside to take in the morning air and high tide with him.

“Of course,” he said passing the warm mug to me. I took a sip of the contents to taste for flavor.

“Let me guess... B positive?” I raised the cup to my lips again.

“Getting close. AB positive,” he answered, beaming over my progress.

A smile lifted within me. He still takes my breath away especially when he smiles. His dark brown hair was being blown slightly by the wind. And his emerald green eyes are deep and sultry; they lure me into him every time. And his lips are perfectly proportionate and highlighted by the dimple on his left cheek. When he grins and displays his little quirk I just melt, even though it's physically impossible for a vampire. Inside though, I was pudding. And his dimple drew me down to his jaw, strong yet soft at the edges.

All of his allure doesn't lie in his face alone though. His body is solid muscle clearly defined yet not overwhelming. He is slim, far from lanky but not quite army beefcake material. Standing at around six feet, he is the perfect height and form to encapsulate me with a hug. My face fits perfectly within the center dip of his chest where he always spritzes his cologne for me. I guess my main point is he's perfect for me, alluring and captivating in every way. I so easily get lost in him, beside him. This is the only time I'm able to successfully tune out the world around me, when I'm lost in the wonder of him.

"Lexi," Kellan whispered breaking my concentration. I didn't realize how close he was. He took the mug from my hands and gently kissed my forehead. "Mel is walking to our room now," he announced.

"Oh. Right. I hear her. I'll see you later," I replied.

I opened the door just as Mel was about to knock. "Perfect timing. I was just about to go get you," I smiled.

"Awesome blossom," she perked in response.

Taking in her appearance, I saw that she'd decided to bum it as well. We were paired in our favorite Victoria Secret capris, mine green and hers pink. And while I went

with a white slim fit tee with flip-flops, Mel decided on a navy blue tee and sneakers.

Noticing my quick eye she explained, “You were right. And yes write it down cause I’m admitting it, but what you said was true. I shouldn’t try to compete with you. We’re a team, sisters, and I shouldn’t allow my insecurities to ruin that.”

“I’m glad you came to your senses,” I chuckled. “Now what do you want for breakfast? I hear your stomach growling.”

“Would I look like a pig if I ordered one of everything?” she groaned and laughed at the same time as she moved her hands to her stomach.

“As long as I don’t have to match what you eat,” I smirked as we stepped into the elevator.

“It’s a deal.”

We entered the lobby and made our way towards the onsite restaurant. It baffles me how the cheap hotels always have free continental breakfast yet the ones that charge an arm and a leg make you fork over more cash to eat. I suppose their rationale is if you can afford our rooms, you can afford to buy your own breakfast.

Nonetheless we entered the restaurant and were promptly greeted by a hostess wearing black pants, a button up white shirt and a nametag displaying ‘Heather.’ She led us to a window table peering directly out on the ocean, though every table had some sort of view. Three walls in the four-walled restaurant were entirely floor to vaulted ceiling glass, broadly displaying the painted view of the beach, pier and historic homes surrounding the coastline.

Most of the tables were vertical and lined up to the windows with the larger groups within the center. A closer look showed these were the same collection of pieces the hotel used at my party for seating, though no couches were in sight.

“O.M.G. It smells so good in here. I feel like I haven’t eaten in a month!” Mel exclaimed, flipping through the menu on the table.

The restaurant was fairly empty with a total of five couples and a large family dining in; luckily, the waves crashing outside helped filter out some of the chatter surrounding me.

Reluctantly I picked up the menu to sort through my fate. I’d decided ahead of time to seek out a steak and eggs, which shouldn’t have been difficult given the caliber of this establishment. A quick-eyed skim located my order on page three.

“Have you decided which part of the pig you’re ready to eat?” I prompted Mel.

“I’m not thinking part, I’m thinking all,” she answered enthusiastically. “But for now I think I’ll settle with the Dream Breakfast. It has three sausages, four pieces of bacon, three eggs, hash browns, a slice of ham, two pieces of toast, three pancakes and a bowl of fruit to even the caloric field or at least trick yourself into thinking you did.”

“Whoa! Would you like to upgrade to a size two?”

“Apparently Caleb would like me to. He left with Amber or “Miss Hips” last night,” she wallowed.

“Are you serious Mel?” She just slightly nodded her head. “I’m sorry girl. But you know if he can walk away it

wasn't anything to begin with. This just means you're available for the perfect guy when he comes along."

"If he comes along," she corrected.

"Okay, I'm gonna need you to snap out of the sap. You know that's not true. I'm living proof of that."

"Good morning ladies. My name is Tony and I'll be your server this morning. What can I get for you today?" asked a sixty-something, white-haired gentleman with a strong southern accent.

"I'll have the Dream Breakfast, eggs sunny side up with a diet coke to drink," Mel spewed.

"And just where do you intend to put it all little lady?" he chuckled in an endearing manner.

"Oh I can hold my own, trust me."

"Good to know. And for you dear?" he turned towards me anticipating my order.

"I'll have steak and eggs. Rare steak, lots of juice and eggs over easy and extra runny with water to drink and icksnay on the toast," I requested.

"My, my you two are an interesting pair of customers," he muttered. "I'll be back with your drinks in a moment," he announced as he collected our menus.

"Since when do you eat rare steak and nearly raw eggs?" Mel asked the moment Tony walked away.

"Since when do you eat the entire football team's breakfast?" I chucked back.

"Guess we're both full of surprises," she replied.

“More than you know,” I commented, though she was oblivious to the truth weighted within my statement.

“Here are your drinks ladies. It’ll be just a few more minutes for your food,” Tony said as he set down our beverages.

We both echoed a quick, “Thanks.”

“Okay. So dish. Tell me everything I missed at school. I’m super nervous about Monday.” I took a sip of my water.

“You didn’t miss much really. And after last night I doubt anyone will talk about the old stuff. Congrats. You’ve replaced a thousand rumors with one... you!” she exclaimed with sarcasm and dread. “Seriously Lex what are you going to tell those people when you can’t even tell your bestie?”

“I don’t plan on telling them anything. It’s none of their business. Plus I guarantee every speculation will be wrong, but even if I told the truth, the pops would twist it. They always do,” I replied. I took a risk. I delved into reality with my words praying she held tight in respect for me and my vow of silence on the subject. I’d gained and lost so much these last few weeks. I wanted to be able to share with my best friend. There were so many limitations preset by vamp laws and secrecy, but, outside of the security, I wanted to be able to breeze through the loopholes with Mel. I didn’t want to lose our open relationship built on trust and honesty.

“The others may let it go, but you know after last night that Jenny will not. The witch is going to be hot on your trail for the rest of the year.”

“She’s the least of my worries. There’s not much she can do or that Kellan will let her do. I’m more worried

about Mike. Did I tell you he showed up prepared to fight me last night?”

“O.M.G. Lex! No! You sort of left that one out. Dish!” she yelled, a cross between excitement and horror choking her breath.

I detailed the night, minus the vampeen and vampire bit. Keira, the vampire radical who had been murdering vampeens during their twenty-four hour transformation, had worked with my ex, Mike, to take me down. They, nor I, expected the end results. I lost control and attacked her; gave her a solid run for her money and ended up winning. Kellan’s dad, Al, a vamp army officer, completed the job. Of course I couldn’t tell this to Mel so I stuck with the innocent parts. I told her about Keira being Kellan’s ex, her teaming up with Mike and even went as far as to detail our fist fight but on a human scale.

“Holy sugarplums Lex! I’m so mad. I totally missed all the juice! I can’t believe you actually got into a fight! You. Calm, quiet, bookworm Lex kicked butt. Amazing,” she reveled in my memory even though our outlooks differed on the events.

“You know what they say about the quiet ones,” I shrugged revealing a sly grin. We both broke into laughter at the same time as Tony delivered our food.

“Whoa Mel! Do you want the antacids now or later?”

“I’ll probably need both but it will so be worth it! This looks delish,” she squealed inhaling a bit of eggs simultaneously. “Mmm... so good...” She closed her eyes and let out a moan of pleasure clearly enjoying the meal before her.

“I will take that as my queue to leave. Let me know if you need anything,” Tony advised before stepping away.

“Cool it with the big-O Mel. It’s breakfast not a porn meal,” I scolded lightly.

“That was sad Lex. Pornmeal... as in cornmeal? I get it but... so lame,” she sighed, shaking her head in mock disapproval. “And if you were eating at all you would probably share in my ecstasy.”

“So I bit the slim Jim and didn’t retain my appetite. I’m not anorexic and am going to eat. Look.” I sliced a piece of the steak from the rarest point – the center – and started chewing.

“That’s my girl,” Mel smiled with a mouth full of food.

The rest of breakfast continued just the same. Of course we were able to squeeze a bit of talking amidst Mel’s pleasure-fest. In the end I was able to consume just under half my meal before I got away with a “stomach ache.”

“Well if you didn’t insist on eating the cow that still moos maybe your stomach wouldn’t hurt,” she pressed as we stepped into the elevator.

“Yeah, yeah. Do you really need to play mommy dearest and scold about preference?”

“Nah. I guess not. What are you and Kellan doing today?” she asked as we stepped out of the elevator onto the maroon carpet. I will never understand the drab carpet taste of hotel owners.

“Not sure yet. You?”

“I’ve got to be home by noon. My mom has a “work function”,” she stated, her fingers emulating quotation marks.

“Nice. So I take it you have babysitting duty?”

“Of course.”

“You’ve been watching Kyle a lot lately.”

“Ugh. Don’t even get me started,” she groaned. She swiped the card for her room. As we walked in, I observed the neat and tidy room overhauled by room service while we were out. Every item had a place. I smelled the lingering scent of detergent implying fresh linens on the bed and new towels had been delivered. I was surprised however to see little butter mints on the pillows. I’d only heard of such a service but never seen it at any of the swanks I’d visited.

Amidst scanning, I heard my mother speak from down the hall. “Lexi, your father and I are going out. Your aunt booked the rooms until tomorrow so don’t check out. I love you and your father loves you too.”

I said a quick, “Okay, love you too,” while Mel was gathering her toiletries from the bathroom.

I listened quickly for Kellan but didn’t hear him in our room. I decided this was the perfect time to involve Mel in my plan.

“Okay, so I’m going to need your help. I’m working on something top secret, a surprise, for Kellan.”

“Ooh. Sounds good. I’m all ears,” she perked up as she plopped down attentively on the bed.

“Okay. Well since we came back from vacation (the lie I had to tell her while I went through the change) he’s been in a bit of a funk. He won’t admit it but I know he misses his best friend Craig from Seattle. So my little plan is to surprise Kellan by bringing Craig down for a visit. Where you come in is in a few places...” I detailed topping it off with a pleading expression.

“Name it and you got it. But I have to be allowed to video K’s reaction,” she stated, squeezing her hands together in her lap.

“Deal but no YouTubing it,” I compromised. “Now I need you to distract Kellan for a bit so I can call Craig. I plan to steal his cell for a sec to extract his number. Then when Craig arrives, I have to pick him up at the airport so I’ll need you then,” though mentally I was picturing him racing on foot. “And last. You know I love you and I’ve so done this for you before so you have to say yes. You’re tied by bestie obligation.”

“Just give me my sentence,” she demanded.

“You have to go on at least one double-date with us.”

I braced myself for her adverse reaction, a phase of whining followed by a sitcom of whimpering pleas, but I received none of that. I glared at Mel taking in all of her. She appeared calm, thoughtful.

“That’s it?” she finally broke the silence with.

“Yeah...”

“Oh. Well consider it done,” she breezed. “So when are we calling this guy?”

“Well I’m here until tomorrow with my family and Kellan so I’ll try to steal his phone for a sec today. How about we plan for tomorrow afternoon? Say two-ish?” I proposed, speaking a bit fast since I heard Kellan coming our way. It amazed me how distinct he was to me though his stride was no different than another human; he had mastered it.

“Okay. I’ll have my mom drop me off.”

“Oh, speaking of. How are you getting home right now? Do you need a ride?”

“Nope. Your aunt has me covered. Now go enjoy your day!” she pushed shooing me out the door.

“Well then. I know when I’m not wanted,” I cried sarcastically.

“Oh shush!” she yelled throwing a pillow at me as I wedged through the door.

“One last thing,” I yelled.

“What now?”

“Thanks for everything. I really did love the party.”

I heard her saunter off the bed and walk towards the door. “Anything for you Lex. You know that,” she smiled.

“*Y tu tambien,*” I replied, returning the loving adoration spread on her face.

“Uh. English?”

“You too.”

“Thanks. Now go!” she ordered closing the door on me.

Okay. Something strange was going on. It was definitely like Mel to be bossy, but certainly not like her to kick me out. She either knew something or was up to something. Either way I supposed I’d find out soon enough.

—

Chapter Two

A surprise it was... for me from Kellan. It was a one-day trip to Carowinds. He claimed the rush you get on a roller coaster was simulative of the one you get from sprinting full speed and of course the invincible feeling we always carried as immortals. I hated to admit he was right. It wasn't nearly as petrifying knowing no matter what transpired while aboard the coasters I would survive with no sustained injuries, but I enjoyed it the same. I enjoy every moment with Kellan. Despite the cliché of it, he really does complete me. And the little things, like protecting me when I was mortal, teaching me how to fight vamp style, gifting me his most prized possession - his red iPod- and surprising me with little trips and outings, they are the icing; he, of course, is my cake.

Yesterday he surprised me but today it's my turn. I successfully retrieved Craig's phone number; thank God for my photographic memory. Mel was at my house "bonding" with Kellan and I was "out for a run." We coordinated it so she arrived just as I was beginning to sprint down the sidewalk.

As soon as I was a neighborhood over, I pulled out my cell and quickly punched in the phone number. I called out a silent prayer that Craig would answer. It seems luck was on my side because he did.

"Hello?" answered a slightly husky yet perky voice with an Aussie accent.

"Hello, Craig?"

"Ah. Let me guess. I'm speakin' with the infamous Lexi, the one who has my mate in a bunch," he said,

laughing a bit through.

“Well I guess there’s no need for an intro. How are you?”

“Ace! How’s my mate Kellan doing?”

“Good but well...”

“He’s in the dark about this call,” he finished my sentence before adding, “No worries love. I won’t spill your secret. My question though is to what do I owe the pleasure of this chat?”

“Not sure if Kellan has told you openly or not but he’s a bit isolated here. He doesn’t talk to many people or go out unless it’s with me. He’s in a slump and I was hoping you would be available to come for a visit. You know... for male bonding and all that fun guy stuff. I really think it would help him. And you wouldn’t have to pay for anything. Umm... so... you up for a visit to the south?” I asked on pins and needles for his response. I never thought this through before but he could say no. I suppose at that point I could book us a flight to Seattle but with school and all that would be a bit tough to work around.

“You really care about him. You know. I like you Lexi. You’re not like the other ear bashing dolls he’s been with. You’re genuine, no banter and plastic. I can tell you’re good for him,” he raved.

“Thanks but he’s done far more for me than I have him.”

“Oh no love. You didn’t know Ellan here.”

“Ellan?” I laughed.

“That’s just a poke at ‘em! We fiddle each other like that all the time. I call him Ellan and he calls me Blair.”

“Blair? You so have to tell me,” I giggled feeling as if I was talking with a friend rather than a stranger across the country. Already I could tell Craig was the type of person who made you feel warm and welcome in his circle from the first hand shake.

“Oh no. I’ll gift my mate with sharing that story,” he chuckled. “But you have done ockers more for him than you know. He’s a changed man. And you must be quite a catch for him to have taken to you like this. He’s surrendered his donger and doesn’t even miss it.”

“I think that’s a compliment...”

“Oh absolutely. If he wasn’t my best mate I’d be stealing you for myself.”

“Thanks. So are you free to come meet the infamous Lexi and spend some time with your best mate as you call him?” I asked, crossing my fingers for a good response.

“I would love to. How soon can we arrange this holiday?”

“How soon can you get here?”

“By foot? Tuesday. By plane? Tomorrow,” he replied.

“It would be by plane, and I can book you a flight tonight for tomorrow sometime,” I offered.

“No worries love. I’ve got it covered. I’ve been planning a visit to your state anyways. I just lollygagged on the date.”

“O, okay. Well let me know if you need me to cover anything. And I have two guest rooms at my house if you can’t stay at Kellan’s.”

“No worries. I could sleep outside if I had too,” he chuckled.

“Well you won’t.”

“Good to know. So shall I text you my arrival time or map my route on foot?” he asked half-jokingly.

“I will personally be your chauffeur, so text me your arrival time and I’ll be there.”

“Thanks a bunch love. My mate definitely got tinny with you. Of course if you can’t make it work I am a single man.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I acknowledged half-heartedly. “And thank you for coming. I know Kellan will be happily surprised.”

“Anything for Kellan. And thanks for the call love. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay. See you then,” I replied before closing my phone.

All I could think was wow. Craig was nothing like I thought yet so much more. And the accent... I never assumed he was Australian. Who would’ve thought? I like him though. People say the fate of a relationship lies in your connection with his/her best friend. Based off Craig and Mel, Kellan and I are solid. And after chatting with Craig, he sounded perfect for Mel. This was so exciting and I had no doubt that I would be successful in my plan, or should I say both plans... surprise Kellan and play matchmaker.

“Did you have a good run?” Mel asked calmly the moment I walked into the living room. Judging by her eyes though she was anxious for all the details.

“As a matter of fact I did. I had a very successful run. I’m thinking about going for a drive tomorrow afternoon though instead,” I smiled knowing she would catch on.

“I’m not oblivious to code,” Kellan commented.

“What code? Please detail K,” Mel requested combing Kellan with our girl language.

“Nevermind,” he mumbled. “Carry on.” He retreated to my room leaving Mel and me on the couch.

“So... don’t hold me in suspense!” she quickly whispered. “Tell me all about him. I want to know all the details. What did he say to you? Did he sound hot on the phone?”

I sliced my pointer finger across my throat signaling for her to cut it right there. Kellan could still hear everything, the same way I could hear him... Hear him leaving through my bedroom window. It’s too late. He’d heard Mel’s side of it; the very misleading verbiage she presented.

Panic set in. It set yet I was frozen. The time I actually needed to move fast I couldn’t. I was stuck; stuck sitting with a broken dumb-founded look on my face.

“Lex? Are you okay?” Mel asked, full of concern.

Nothing. I could say nothing because at that moment I knew he was gone. He left without giving me the chance to explain.

“Lex! You’re crying. Talk to me! What happened? Did I do something wrong?”

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. I took in a few deep breaths before pulling it out. “Huh. Great. Kellan is gone

and Craig is landing tomorrow at 3:42pm. Swell," I blubbered between tears.

"Lex, what happened? What's wrong? Kellan is just upstairs," she said, attempting to calm me.

"No, he's not. I can't explain this to you with the whole truth. Just trust me when I say he heard what you said, assumed I was sneaking around, and he's gone."

"That's impossible. I whispered... and... he didn't leave. The front door is still locked," she replied a bit confused by my account.

"Go look upstairs. He's gone. And while you're there whisper something, anything; when you come back down I'll repeat it."

"Lex, I think you've officially boarded the *loca* train."

"Mel, please. Just do it," I pleaded.

She gave me one last hesitant look before obliging. She pushed up off the couch and made her way to the stairs. She paused before ascending the flight. At the top I heard her turn to see if I followed her, and then begin her search. She opened doors and shuffled items in search of him. When the last door had been opened and every closet checked, she sullenly whispered, "You're right. I don't know how you did it but it's true. He's gone."

The moment she touched the bottom of the stairs I spoke aloud, "You're right. I don't know how you did it but it's true. He's gone."

She came and stood in front of me silently. One look at her expression revealed it all. "Lex. You don't have to tell me everything but how did you do that? Are... Well, I know

this will probably sound off the wall crazy but... are you a... vuh-" she stuttered.

"Mel! Don't ask. I can't tell," I quickly interjected.

That's the worst part. I knew what she was going to ask and she would be dead on. Sadly the last figure of speech would be Mel if she ever knew.

"Lex, I've been so understanding through all of this. I asked no questions and passed no judgments. But I'm also not blind or stupid. I finally know how Bella felt before she remembered Jacob was a werewolf in New Moon. I just... We've never had secrets. That's our rule. That's why we work so well. And you're holding back a huge one that I only have to look at you and know," she explained.

I could hear the desperation in her voice. And she's right. She'd made no judgments or accusations; she'd continued loving and supporting me as if nothing changed.

"I'm sorry," was all I could muster up.

"Can we compromise?" she asked.

"How?"

"Tell me everything that's changed. Obviously your hearing is one. I promise not to put a label on what or who you are. Just rid the secrets in between so all that's left in the dark is your official title."

I weighed this for a minute, a heavy, solid minute before shaking my head in agreement.

"Thank you so much Lex. I was trying to be a good friend and not be like the others will be in school, but Bible, it was killing me," she ranted with relief strewn in her voice.

“Rule number 1. If you EVER come to hate my guts, even if you’re threatened, for your own safety, not mine, you must never tell. You have to swear this on Gran’s grave,” I negotiated in a serious tone.

She settled back in her seat beside me, lifted her right hand and affirmed, “I triple double dog swear.”

“I’m being serious Mel,” I frowned.

“I know. I had to wet the tension somehow though.”

I twisted in my seat, my stomach twirling in a million ways. I began to second-guess myself. I never wanted to risk her life and though no formal titles would be spoken, deep down I knew she had the right assumption. She just didn’t know the consequences. How could I tell her without telling her; clue her in on the extreme ramifications of it all without a label or definition?

“Lex, you’ve known me since fifth grade. We’ve been through everything together. We’ve shared everything; you’ve shared everything with me and I’ve never, not once betrayed you in the slightest. You’re my best friend, my sister. I will carry it to the grave before ever risking you. You have to know that deep down,” she said, reassuring me in every way. And every word she spoke was true.

“The same way you would never risk me, I would never risk you; I don’t want to risk you. That’s the only reason I’m hesitant,” I explained. I was wringing my hands by this point contemplating my next move.

She shook her head and leaned back into the couch cushions. She released a big sigh and looked away. That’s not what broke me though. There, in the corners of her blue eyes, were tears.

This had been notably hard on me, but, until now, I never realized how stressed Mel was over it. She was suffering too. The worst part was she didn't know what her pain was for aside from simply respect for me. Whether I wanted to or not, she deserved some closure, some answers to her muted questions.

We sat in silence for another two minutes. She was frozen before me with tears rolling down her cheeks, and, given my enhanced vision; I even noted the slight tremble in her arms.

"That's it!" I yelled causing her to jump. "Sorry but I've got it."

"Okay?" she asked cautiously, the wrinkles displayed on her forehead.

"The Volturi are real. Not in the same form but the essence of them is real."

A smile broke on her face as she inched closer to me.

"Consider me a distant cousin to Edward," I continued. "We're not twins though."

"So no mind reading?" she beamed.

"Or sparkles. Actually, ding! I'm Renesmee without the gift."

"Can you tell me who?" she asked.

"No. But I'd like to buy some real estate," I riddled.

"O.M.G. Lex. Holy sugarplum! This is better than winning the lottery!" she gushed, a grin glued from ear to ear.

"The Volturi's army is just as strong. Worst part though is they're unmarked and live like the secret

service," I detailed.

She stared at me in horror and amazement. "You know I'll keep my word."

"I know."

"I don't know if this breaks a rule but I have to know... What do you eat or should I say drink?"

"You." She inched away a bit. "No need to worry. I have a broken nose. I can't smell you or blood. I'm a freak, one of a kind in that realm."

"Really?"

"Sadly, yes. Makes it harder though. I have an angel for a moral conscience so I don't kill or drain. I practice to a degree in humanity like the Cullens. And before you freak, my mom isn't like that. She eats regular food but it's usually rare and bloody."

"And Kellan?"

I shook my head. "He's a full Edward who eats carnivorously."

"Gotcha... Is it weird that I'm not freaked?"

"I would say no because it's me. Anyone else and I would hit you with the fry pan." We burst into laughter simultaneously.

"O.M.G. Lex. This is so surreal," she gasped.

"Tell me about it."

"So you run?" she winked.

"More like fly."

"Death?"

“Impossibly hard.”

“Wrinkles?”

“Never.”

“I’m so jealous of that. I need to marry a millionaire now to keep up in Botox.”

“Nah, you should embrace it.”

“So says the girl who will never need it.”

She pointed to my eyes and asked, “Microscopes?”

“Yup.”

“Nice. Okay, well. I’m going to raid your fridge in a lonely binge.”

“Go for it,” I said.

“Oh and Lex?”

“Yeah?”

“We’ll sort out Kellan tomorrow. I’m sure the moment he sees Craig with you it’ll all click. If not you can superman him down while I kryptonite him.”

“And what exactly is his kryptonite?”

“A cross?”

“Nope.”

“A wooden stake?”

“Myth.”

“Well I know it’s not the sun...” she slurred as she retrieved a coke from the fridge to wash down the hand full

of chips she just inhaled. “A little help maybe...” she prompted.

“I honestly don’t know.”

“But what about Keira?”

“Wow. I forgot how smart you are...”

“Gee, thanks,” she scowled.

“I attacked and beat her to a pulp. I’m sure there was some shredding too but Kellan’s dad... I mean the Volturi, took her somewhere to finish it.”

“Okay, so I guess I’ll have to go old school and hit him in the nut sack,” she laughed.

Freedom. I felt like a bird that lived in captivity for years yet was finally free. She knew without titles. And I think all of us can live without titles.

—

Chapter Three

It had been a bad day so far despite passing my driver's test and obtaining my license. So I was looking forward to my final class, English, as my official sign that the day was almost over.

"I know it's your Aunt Claire but I'm loving your look," Mel gushed as we arrived at the classroom.

"You're right, but I like it too," I replied peering down at my ensemble. I was wearing distressed boot cut 7-For-All-Mankind brand jeans, a slim-fit yellow tee, a tan corduroy jacket and a full, fluffy dark teal scarf with a bit of fringe on the ends all coordinated atop a pair of brown leather high heel ankle boots.

I quickly scanned the room but my heart stopped, sinking with dread. Kellan wasn't there, just like he wasn't at Spanish. I caved and called him three times last night but each time his phone went right to voicemail. I accepted that on the knowledge that I would see him today. I was wrong.

"He's not here," I announced to Mel on my way to my desk.

"Don't choke Lex. You're picking up Craig after and he'll help smooth everything over."

"I hope you're right..."

"Um, hello? Aren't I always right?" she relished with sarcasm.

"Yeah, yeah."

I took my usual seat behind Mel only to find Jason in Chris's seat, right behind me.

"Hey there sexy lady," he winked.

"What do you want?" I huffed definitely in no mood to deal with him. I sledged down in the seat and stayed facing forward in an attempt to discourage talking with him.

Today had been a nightmare for me. I was the number one gossip in the whole school; Mel was right about that. Luckily Mike didn't show, but every other guy had... and I had no Kellan to keep them away.

At lunch, half the football team fought to sit near me pushing most of my usual dining friends to another table. In the hall, random people were waving at me. Then some guy named John from the student council insisted on carrying my books with me to history, which was the worst! During the roll call Coach Thompson said, "Alexa Jackson? Word on the team is your absence was very enhancing." I could only mutter an embarrassed, "Yup."

So all this taken into account, Jason was the last person I wanted to talk to or even see since he seemed to be the ring leader of all the pandemonium over me.

"Can't a guy talk to his female friend?" he said in mock disarray over my snap.

I turned and looked over my shoulder at him. "Jason, let's be real. You never even said so much as hi to me before. And if I didn't exist to you then, I surely won't for you now."

"Good girl," Mel whispered, half twisting around to display her approval and encouragement.

“What can I say? I was blind but now I see. You’ve changed and so have I,” he grveled in an annoying way. It was annoying because he was hitting on me at the same time.

“So since you’ve obviously dumped Jason over here, care to catch a movie with me Friday night?” Jared, another popular jock, chimed in from the desk to the left of mine.

“I have a boyfriend guys. So just drop it and drop me please.” My nerves were wearing. I was beginning to stress. I hadn’t been given one moment to be myself today. I was even approached by girls in the bathroom! I felt like a celebrity amongst the paparazzi.

“Well he’s not a very good boyfriend to desert you like this. Mike is his name, right?” Jason pressed.

“That’s none of your business,” I growled, taking deeper breaths with every word he spoke.

“If I was your man I wouldn’t leave you. Every day I would be there to make you smile and every night I would do the same,” he cooed, winking on the last part.

“Thanks but no thanks.”

“Oh, come on. You’re breaking my heart,” he said adding dramatization by placing his hands on top of his heart and clutching.

“And I’m gonna break a whole lot more if you don’t leave me alone,” I turned to full-face to him as I spoke his fate to ensure he saw the fire in my eyes. I needed to calm down though. I felt the serum rising in my throat, the blazing heat surrounding my teeth as they continued to push my buttons.

I glanced at the clock just as a sub walked in the door and the final bell rang. I turned back around to a worried Mel.

I sighed, "It's okay. I'm not going to lose it, but I think I am going to leave. My parents were right. I should have waited longer."

"You sure?" she asked, a sympathetic look smeared over her.

"Yeah. I'll call you."

"Okay."

I grabbed my book bag and made my way to the tiny shriveled woman dubbed our substitute teacher. A few whistles erupted behind me from random classmates on the way.

"Yes?" she prompted.

I waited until she looked at me directly before unleashing the glamour Kellan taught me how to do. I placed my back to the class and peered directly into her eyes; a powerful glare so chilling you're cringing to look away but can't.

"I need to leave. Alexa Jackson. You can mark I was present in the book."

"Okay," she said through a small, distracted voice.

The moment I unlocked my gaze she cleared her throat and adjusted herself as if to regain control. I didn't wait around for her results. I didn't hesitate. I raced to my car and just as quickly I jetted out the parking lot towards the airport. I'd rather sit in their parking lot than this one.

The moment I reached the interstate I plugged in Kellan's iPod and hit play. The music blasted in the background as I broke down. You would think an immortal that's invincible to death would also be to stress. That is definitely not the case. I felt the tears build and stream as I reflected the last twenty-four hours.

I already felt like my heart was breaking, cracking and crumbling every second I was away from him on these terms. But when you added in the excessive harassment and speculation at school, it pushed me over. And Jason's little scene was the cherry topper. At one time I secretly coveted popularity never actually believing it to manifest. And now that it has, it's the opposite of all I envisioned.

Before I believed there were people who didn't hold to society's model standards, who accepted you as you were without favoritism or judgment. Today I discovered the only person at Cooper River High who practiced that was Mel. Everyone else looked at, spoke to and treated me different than before; even the teachers. It's not right.

But all of that was bearable, would have been bearable, if I had Kellan. I was so hurt by his attitude towards the situation. He didn't ask or give me the opportunity to explain; he assumed. Not only did he assume the worst from me but he ignored me completely, particularly by skipping school. I would have trusted him enough to provide him a chance to explain were the roles reversed. And it was because of his ignorance that I endured the terror at school today. Had he been on my arm, I never would have been hounded and treated like a piece of meat.

I was borderline angry with him for leaving the way he did but dominantly a broken mess of tears. I'd been strong, held myself together on hope of reconciliation as soon as he

saw Craig, but this was my wake up call. This was what I was to endure ongoing should he walk away forever.

Overwhelmed by it all, I tried to shut down my mind and simply drive. I ignored the road, bypassed the signs without a glance and focused solely on keeping my foot on the gas pedal. But it didn't help.

I pulled into the airport lot. I punched the meter machine for a ticket and waited for the bar to lift and grant me entry. I parked in the first available spot and placed the car in idle. I sat motionless for no set time simply listening to the commotion of giddy travelers matched equally in number of exhausted passengers. Though few whole thoughts formed properly in my head I was still conscious in a pensive state.

I attempted to ignore the world in this present time. I sunk into a solemn with no emotional inclinations whatsoever. I reached the breaking point where I wanted to either run, which would kill my family, or shut down. Obviously I chose the latter.

Ugh, listen to me. What's wrong with me? I've seen pity parties but since when do I host them? Craig would be arriving any minute now. I couldn't appear so fragile and broken the first time we met.

Seconds later my phone went off; Craig had arrived. I replied, 'I'm in the parking lot. Look for a white Mercedes coupe. See you in a few! □'

I checked my reflection and appreciated the quick rejuvenation that comes with being a vampire. Had I still been fully human I would have been a red puffball.

It appeared my timing was perfect. I glanced up just as Craig crossed the threshold into the parking lot. He looked different from the picture I saw but not in a drastic sense.

He stood about 5'11" and was a solid mass of lean surfer muscle. Despite his jeans, black skater shoes and black sweater, he still gave off the impression he'd just flown in from Down Under.

I got out of the car and popped my trunk before properly greeting him. "Hi. Did you have a nice flight?"

"Well hello gorgeous! I can certainly see why Kellan is in a twist over you. You're a stunner," he said reaching out to hug me with one arm. He eyed me thoroughly before stepping back towards the trunk to drop his two bags.

"Thank you," I smiled shyly. "But..."

"What's wrong?" I fidgeted as he studied me. I didn't want to burden him with our relationship issues, but he was a part of them temporarily. "Did you two have a roe?"

I was shocked at his accurate guess. "Something like that. Get in and I'll explain on the way."

"Sure. Nice wheels. I may have to borrow them sometime," he winked as he slid into the passenger seat. I started the car and drove towards the exit gate.

"Uh... We'll see. How long are you planning to stay?"

"Not sure. I bought a one-way."

"Well at least I know you're not a flight risk," I replied handing the ticket and cash to the exit attendant.

"No, just a runner," he smirked. "So tell me about this roe."

I detailed the entire fiasco from start to finish. Craig's an excellent listener; he didn't interrupt me even once. "So now I'm hoping your appearance will straighten him out. It's been torture without him," I concluded.

“No worries love. My mate’ll take you back. He can be a macker head but it’s a misunderstanding, a crisscross. He’ll take you back or I’ll take you,” he said.

“No offense but I only want Kellan. I love him.”

“None taken. Let’s slap this slapper!” he exclaimed as we pulled into Kellan’s driveway.

“Okay, I definitely didn’t understand that phrase.”

“It’s rubbish. Just banter to hype us.”

“Oh, okay,” I chuckled nervously.

Two seconds later I was standing frozen at Kellan’s front door. I wanted to beat it down and run into his arms, but alas, I just stood there staring at the blue door of his two story traditional home and did nothing.

“Excuse me love,” Craig said as he moved past me and opened the door.

“Hello matey!” he yelled. “I know you’re here. Get your tiddles down here and greet me.”

That snapped me out of my standoff with the door. “Tiddles?” I asked, scrunching my forehead in confusion as I stepped in. I closed the door and said a silent prayer.

“I’m random,” he shrugged.

I blinked and Kellan was standing in front of us. “What are you doing here?” he asked, eyes glaring at me.

“Isn’t it obvious mate? I’m your girl’s secret lover, the one you left her to slap jacks with,” Craig answered on my behalf giving Kellan a friendly shoulder tap at the end.

“Seriously?” he pressed.

“Yes. I wanted to surprise you. You already have everything you want materially so I had to be creative. Craig is the result of that,” I quickly explained sheepishly. “Are you still mad at me?”

“No, of course not. Wow. I feel so stupid,” he sighed. “I should have trusted you. I’m sorry.”

“That’s it mate? You’ve just wronged this stunner and you’re not even gonna kiss her? I’d be all over that one. I tried her in the car but she shot me,” Craig detailed pretending to take a bullet to his heart.

“Good. I’d hate to have to kill my best man,” Kellan laughed as he pulled me in for a hug. He gently brushed his lips to mine.

“God I missed you so much,” I cried burying my face in his chest.

“Now this is a Kodak moment,” Craig mocked.

“Cool it Blair ‘cause you’re next,” Kellan announced.

“About time. I’ve only been waiting for a proper greeting that last five minutes,” he grumbled with sarcasm.

“Damn I’ve missed you,” Kellan stated, releasing me to one-arm hug Craig.

“I’m touched mate,” he fake sobbed. “I was lost without my Ellan.”

We all settled on the sofa as if this was our routine hang out habit. “So where are you two taking me tonight?” Craig asked as he lifted his feet onto the coffee table.

“Actually I was planning to leave. I wanted to give you two time to catch up,” I offered.

“Whoa! Gorgeous and not a clinger? Don’t let this one slip mate.”

“I was stupid before. Trust me, I don’t plan to let her go,” Kellan acknowledged kissing my head. I leaned into his arms and enjoyed the moment. I didn’t want it to end.

After an hour of silently listening to Kellan and Craig catch up, of which half the time I was clueless due to unfamiliar names, locations and Craig’s semi-Aussie, semi-created lingo, I dismissed myself. Both of them hugged me good-bye and Kellan promised to call me later. Turns out Craig’s visit was perfect timing since Kellan’s parents, Beth and Al, were away for the night.

Everything worked out; Kellan was happy to see Craig again. By the time I left their session, he was practically glowing. He was in his element and, I thought, thankful for a little piece of home. As for me, all I could feel was relief and elation. Kellan and I had been restored which was sure to improve all the other aspects of my life.

—

Chapter Four

I got in my car and pulled away back onto the road. I grabbed my cell phone and called the only person I could, Mel.

“Hey Lex, you okay? You totally freaked me today!” she answered.

“I’m okay; better. I picked up Craig. You’re gonna die when you meet him.”

“Ooh! Dish!”

“How about a mid-week java run? I can spill all the nitty griddy in person.”

“Sounds delish. My mom is at practice with Kyle though.”

“Um, hello? I drive now...”

“Oh yeah. Well get your little butt over here!”

“Aw, I love you! You called my butt little.”

“And it’s going to be red if you don’t pick me up soon.”

“Enticing but so unnecessary. I’m in your driveway,” I replied feeling smug.

“Oh. Well I’ll be down in a sec,” she stumbled; I could tell I’d caught her off guard.

“I’m counting,” I taunted before closing my phone.

I heard her sloshing through the house cleaning last minute before finally setting the alarm. A few seconds later she was outside heading towards my car. The moment she opened the passenger door she blurted, “Okay. I’m here.”

Now I need details. What happened with you and Kellan? And I need an inch by inch of Craig.”

“First, buckle up. You’re riding with an immortal but you’re not one. Next breathe. And last, settle in for delivery,” I smiled as I backed out of her driveway.

“Yeah, yeah. Get to the good stuff,” she pushed anxiously fidgeting in her seat.

“Well, me and Kellan are good. When I first got there with Craig he was defensive and asked why I was even there. That’s when Craig jumped in and cracked a joke that he was my secret lover. A minute more of explanation by me and Craig and I was in Kellan’s arms again.”

“Did he apologize? I will lay the smack down if he didn’t,” she jumped in defensively.

“You can chill. He apologized, though I would pay money to watch you ring around the rosy with him.”

“Ha. Ha. At least you know I’ve got your back.”

“Always, and vice versa.”

“Enough mush. Get to Craig,” she commanded, squeezing her hands together in excitement.

“Four words: hottie with a body. You will swoon. He is so perfect for you!”

“Details Lex!” she cried in desperation as if I’d left her with the main character teetering on death.

“He’s 5’11”, golden blonde hair with a bit of brown and platinum blended; it’s long enough to slick back but short enough to look clean. He’s got a light tan; guess Seattle killed most of it. Um, he looks like he just stepped off the Aussie plane. He’s got a slim but muscular body;

think Kelly Slater minus five pounds. He has blue eyes, a model's nose, and soft lips with a bit of a pout. Basically he's perfect for you," I detailed finishing just as we arrived at Barnes and Noble.

"O.M.G. Lex. I will give up Starbucks for a year and even sacrifice my solitary pair of black Louboutin pumps for one look at him! I'm so hyperventilating! He sounds so... so... yummy!" she declared, exasperated by the mental image alone.

"Oh. Did I mention he has an accent?" I asked as we stepped out of the car.

Mel sat back down in the passenger seat and closed her door. "Take me to him," she demanded.

"What?" I laughed, leaning in to peer at her. I heard her clearly thanks to my vampments - that's what I'd decided to call my vampeen enhancements a.k.a. my heightened senses and new fit physique.

"Lex. You just swirled cookie dough in front of a diabetic. So wrong! I can't wait till whenever to meet this hunk! I need closure... now!" she said buckling up her seat belt to prove her point.

"I don't even know if they're home," I replied, settling back into the driver's seat to avoid possible eavesdroppers.

"Dial. Here," she pushed her cell phone into my hand.

"Mel. Seriously? This is Kellan's friend not Johnny Depp."

"Who sounds like a god dipped in Godiva chocolate and is waiting for me to lick it off! Let's go sister!"

"Whoa! I've never seen you so worked up before. Let me call Kellan," I chuckled silently returning her phone in

favor of my own. I flipped it open and dialed Kellan at super speed.

“Are you okay?” he answered quickly, a bit of panic through his calm tone.

“I’m okay. Where are you?”

“Home. Do you need me?”

“No. Yes. Mel has an Aussie fever if you catch my drift.”

“Ah. Well, come over. I miss you anyways.”

“You do?”

“Always. Even when I’m acting like a jerk,” he confessed.

“Okay. I’ll see you in a few.”

I turned to Mel, “You’re in -”

“Drive!” she interrupted.

“Bossy!”

“I’m a woman on a mission!” she cracked a devious smile.

“Don’t smother him please.”

“Of course I won’t,” she winked. She pulled down the visor and began primping herself. She took a moment to observe her attire. “Ugh. I probably should have worn something cuter. Should I stop and change?”

“No. You look great. Your legs are a mile long in that mini and the stockings hide your pale skin, though he’s a you know, so he might like that. And your shirt creates the illusion of boobs. I don’t think he cares about shoes though

the boots are cute," I catalogued every detail to avoid further checking on her part.

"What about my hair? Should I leave it down or put it up? Make up? I should touch up," she began fussing with her hair holding it up then letting it fall straight.

"We're just around the corner so you need to hurry. But I say hair down, a bit of blush and you're done."

"You're right. And slow down! I need more time," she pleaded.

"One minute you're rushing me, the next you're begging me to slow down. Make up your mind," I smirked. Mel tended to hype herself up when she panicked or was in boy mode. While it's entertaining she can flip flop on a lot. I'd found it's best to go on cruise control.

I took a look at Mel. She had applied fresh powder foundation, blush, and mascara and had moved on to fluffing her hair.

"You ready?" I asked turning onto Kellan's road.

"So ready!" she beamed. "I'm beyond ready to go Down Under."

"Okay, that was so lame."

"Can they hear me yet?" she whispered.

I observed my surroundings and quickly picked up Craig's voice. "Yes."

Mel bugged her eyes and performed a silent squeal as we pulled up to Kellan's. The sun was beginning to set though the time was only 6:15pm. By the time we reached the door it was already open. I walked in ahead of Mel to introduce her.

“Welcome back love. Did you miss me that much?”
Craig shot out immediately.

“Always,” I winked. “Craig this is Mel, my best friend. Mel, Craig,” I stated throwing in the appropriate hand gestures.

Mel stood frozen in the door, eyes glued on Craig. He took advantage of the moment and was at her side in half a second, though it was appropriately timed for a human to see. “Well hello gorgeous,” he smiled, kissing the back of her left hand gently.

Mel giggled like a schoolgirl, “Hi.”

I’d never seen her like this with anyone. It’s as if she’s mesmerized, in a trance of some sort all because of Craig.

“Lexi. My apologies love but I’m afraid you’ve been replaced,” Craig said escorting Mel towards the living room. “So tell me about yourself gorgeous,” he prompted Mel.

“What do you want to know?” she asked taking all of him in.

“The whole box,” he beamed.

“Okay. On that note, Kellan and I are going to go upstairs and drown you two out,” I announced.

“Sure love. You two have fun,” Craig called but he was too absorbed in Mel; they were lost in each other.

Two seconds later I was in Kellan’s room with him and being pulled onto his bed. “Wow. This is really cool,” I commented looking around at every corner and detail.

His walls and ceiling were a dark navy blue, maybe even midnight blue. Intricately and accurately painted on

his ceiling were the stars and constellations woven amongst the moon and a faint mars.

Off to the far right corner were two guitars, one acoustic and a red electric, both on their proper stands. Beside it on the wall was his dresser, black, with an LCD TV set on top. The only other items in his room was a low bookshelf beside his bed acting as a nightstand and black out drapes over the room's one double window facing the backyard. I noticed one thing missing though. "Where is the light?"

"I don't need one and just prefer not to have one."

"Oh, okay. Makes sense," I rolled over and looked at his bedding - a dark blue comforter with black trees and bare branches sprouting up from along the bottom matched with two red pillows. His headboard was simply the same barren forest painted in black upon the wall behind his bed. It was all simplistic; sleek, fashionable in a dark yet cozy way and the epitome of Kellan. "So why do you have a bed if you don't sleep?"

"I don't sleep much. Maybe an hour or two a week," he replied running his fingers through my hair.

"I guess I learned something new today," I smiled wrapping my arms around him to snuggle into him. I sighed, "I missed this; us. I know it was only a day but it felt like forever. And school was a nightmare without you..."

"I'm so sorry. I was pigheaded and impulsive," he replied.

"And then some," I added.

He chuckled, "Okay, you're right." He swiftly flipped so I was under him. "Do I get to make up for it?"

“Depends. What do you have in mind?”

“This,” he stated as he pressed his lips to mine. Every part of me tingled as we quickly melted together emotionally. Our lips clung together in an open and close rhythm. His hands slid under my shirt and heaved me toward him at the arch of my back. My hands ventured the same, slowly drifting up to entwine behind his neck, locking and pulling him towards me.

Passion flowed like a current through us until we passed the final threshold mending as one emotionally, mentally and now spiritually. I ciphered every thought he'd populated in his mind. I felt the disappointment and heartache he'd bared these last twenty-four hours.

“I'm so sorry,” he spoke mentally.

“Stop apologizing. I forgive you.”

“But I don't forgive myself, not after the replay of thoughts I saw over your day. I will be there to hold your hand and claim you tomorrow and every day after. I promise Alexa, I will never desert you.”

“I'm surprised you went looking for Mike. Do you really think he's a threat?” I internally prompted as his hands moved to gently cup my face.

“I'm not sure but I promised your parents I'd protect you.”

“I am a vampeen you know...” I chuckled in my mind.

“And I'm a vampire who doesn't want to lose the love of his forever.”

“I concur,” I acknowledged mentally, running my hands back down to his back. I could feel his muscle tone as he held himself up off of me. Despite my strength, he's

always careful and gentle with me. I pulled back to gaze into his eyes feeling the energy field snap apart between us. He leaned down and kissed the tip of my nose.

“Should we go check on Mel and Craig?” I prompted.

In that moment I heard Mel burst into laughter as Craig continued, “And my mate actually touched the critter, the stupid munger. The thing clamped his nip, right? So he goes screaming like a doll with buggers in his pants for a good ten kilos. His face burned red and the whole place fell over in rears over this bitty thing. I should have taped it; it would have been great dirt mail on ‘em.”

“Hmm... Sounds like I’m a great match maker,” I smirked.

“We’ll see. Craig is open like this with everyone,” Kellan stated kissing my forehead as he rolled to his side.

“You are a good matcher Lexi. Don’t let my mate bust your chops. I love my gift,” Craig said from downstairs.

I was pleased. Kellan and I definitely reconnected and spawned a new spark in Mel and Craig. If Mel was immortal, we could have made an awesome fantastic four. They did hit it off though; we were there until her mom called at eleven. They’d already made plans for tonight as Kellan had generously leant his car to his ‘best mate.’

Driving up into the school lot with Kellan, I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. “Do you feel that? I feel like something is off, like something bad is going to happen. I haven’t had this feeling in a long time...”

He gently tapped my thigh. “Don’t worry babe. Everything is fine. I would know if it wasn’t. You’re probably just nervous because of yesterday. But don’t be; I’m here today.”

“You’re probably right,” I sighed though the feeling didn’t subside with his comfort. We got out of the car simultaneously. He grabbed my hand the moment we began walking to first period.

Kellan kept his promise. The moment the bell rang he was at the door to walk with me from first to second and now to lunch.

“I’m feeling like a salad today,” Mel announced as we plopped down in our usual spots.

“You feel like a salad or you feel like eating a salad?” I chuckled.

“Oh posh. You know what I mean. Come in line with me,” she pleaded.

“Why? So I can watch you text Craig like you have all day? What are you two talking about anyways?”

“I can’t say with his best mate – she imitated the way he says mate – around. No offense K,” she smiled at Kellan.

“None taken,” he replied. James distracted him then by asking about the theatres in Seattle.

“Okay, let’s go. But I better be entertained,” I grumbled. We made our way to the cafeteria line. Even though it’s a fairly new school, they kept the old cafeteria-style delivery in lieu of a food court.

“O.M.G. Lex!” she squealed the moment we were in line. “Craig is just... so... wonderful and perfect and all I’ve ever wanted and more!”

“I’m glad. Now cut to the good stuff.”

“We’ve talked about everything. And when I say everything, I mean everything. I don’t think I slept even

two hours last night.”

“Are you planning to stick to generics?”

“No. O.M.G. Do you know he’s only had one serious girlfriend? And she’s a you know what. He lost his virginity to her too.”

“You told him you know?”

“No...kinda...”

“Mel! You promised! On Gran’s grave too!”

“Chill Lex. I didn’t say a title and I didn’t detail anything. I just said I know he’s not like me,” she spoke softly and quickly leaning into me to avoid eavesdroppers.

“What did he say? Do you know if he said anything to Kellan?” I spewed, worried of the possible backlash if Kellan knew I’d told her. He’s very protective of this kind of information and truth be told, I should have been more secretive.

“Hello beautiful,” a male voice from behind greeted. I knew without turning it was Jason. “Tell me, do models like yourself actually eat?”

“Give it a rest Jason. Go back to your brat pack,” I replied, still facing forward to Mel. She grabbed her salad and a package of Italian dressing.

“Agree to a date with me and I’ll leave you alone,” he attempted to bargain.

“No.”

“I’m afraid I’ll just have to keep trying until you say yes. Trust me, one yes is all it will take for you to forget the rest.”

"I'd like to forget you. Just leave me alone before I get mad," I warned. I was doing my best to remain calm and ignore him, but that was proving much harder since he's a persistently annoying pest.

"What happens when you get mad? I'm kinky; I may find it sexy," he pressed.

"Come on Lex," Mel grabbed my hand and tried to speed up the line with gentle shoves at the Goth girl in front of her.

I felt the serum begin to rise in my throat. It didn't burn but its presence was obvious now. I could drain Jason in minutes and my serum would destroy the evidence in seconds. And if he pushed me too far, I was afraid I might do just that.

I heard him stirring behind me, probably conjuring up another one-liner. ...and I was right.

"One date with me and you'll be happy." lame. He was officially lame. He grabbed my butt and slightly squeezed it. The serum surged and I began to shake slightly trying not to shred him. He leaned towards my ear and whispered, "I can definitely make you happy."

"You have two seconds to remove your hand," I stated between my teeth. Breathe in and out. Stay calm; I needed to stay calm. The serum was beginning to run warm, my blood was already boiling and my patience was dwindling with him.

He was testing me because he didn't move an inch. Through gritted teeth I asked Mel to get Kellan. I couldn't lose my cool. I couldn't out us and I knew Kellan would protect me from that. She didn't hesitate.

"I'm waiting to be punished sexy," Jason taunted.

I quickly spun around, grabbing his hand at the same time. I squeezed it within my own and held it out to the side. I glared at him and snatched his shirt with my other hand tugging him into me like every bully I knew.

“Lexi. I... uh. Ouch. Damn, you’re hurting my hand,” he struggled to free himself.

“If you ever, I mean ever...”

“Lexi, let him go,” Kellan rushed to my side. He pinched my wrists and forced me to release him. He leaned down and whispered near my ear, “You know he’s not worth it. Come with me.” I relaxed and listened to Kellan. I turned to walk back to my table of friends.

“Guess you’re not so tough after all. That’s okay. You can still punish me later,” he winked, trying to get the other students around to join in.

Kellan promptly stood right in front of him, limb to limb. “You listen to me Kelly. You ever harass or lay a finger on her again and I will break every single bone in your body. Consider this your only warning,” he defended me harshly, a dark, serious and threatening tone to his voice. I was jumping for joy inside. I could see the surprise in Jason’s eyes though he tried to maintain his cool outside.

“Whatever man. She’s not that hot anyways,” he dismissed the whole idea but was smart enough to walk away back towards the pop’s table.

I did a quick three-sixty to ensure no teachers were around; of course if there were they should have intervened by now, but that doesn’t mean they do. Most teachers have no problem looking the other way when it involves the star quarterback of the football team. There were only two lunch ladies lost in a conversation over backaches and hip replacements. And the cashier was lost in her MP3 player,

which was apparently playing yesterday's novella. I didn't even know soap operas were downloadable.

I turned back to Mel who had diligently followed Kellan. "Thanks. Grab your salad. I owe you."

"Thanks but I've definitely lost my appetite," she sighed.

"Sorry," I said as we started walking back towards the table.

"It's okay. Truth?" she asked. I shook my head. "Things were so much easier when I didn't know. I fight off a stroke every time you raise your voice a hair."

"Well don't." She glared at me. "I know, I know. Easier said than done but, seriously, I can handle myself. Obviously." I ran my hands up and down myself as if I was a game show prize. "And if not I'll summon my prince charming or walk away; no harm done," I shrugged.

"I hope you're right," she sighed, fidgeting with her hands.

I suddenly felt a pull, a tiny tug on my upper arm. I stopped to see Kellan now glaring at me. - What's up with all the intense stares today? - I stepped back as Mel continued and returned to the table. "What's wrong?" I finally asked.

"You broke the rules? You told Mel what you are?" he fumed in a low, heated voice.

I hated seeing Kellan angry but it was a million times worse when he was angry with me. I had only been the brunt of it once before when I had lied about my pallet. When you transform into a vampeen you will either eat human food, mainly raw red meat and sunny side up eggs,

with animal blood from time to time or your vampire side is a bit more prominent and you must feed off of human blood to prevent becoming a vegetable. I didn't feel comfortable feeding off humans so I lied and swallowed some steak. Two faints and a lot of sleep later, I awoke to an angry, no make that pissed, Kellan who went off on me about being irresponsible. So seeing him like this now jolted me a bit.

"I didn't tell her. She guessed. Too many accurate Hollywood portrayals. But I stopped her before she said the word. I told her everything I can do and eat, or drink I probably should say. But she knew most of them already. I did what I could to let her in but also keep her out. I know the boundary line and I protected her and us from it," I explained.

He rubbed his forehead. "This is not good Lexi. She shouldn't even be suspicious if you were doing everything right."

"What do you mean? I was doing everything right. She's my best friend, like my sister. If one thing is even slightly off with me her radar goes off ten miles away," I quietly huffed, angry that he's blaming me and angry with myself a bit for caving. I knew this was how he would react when he found out. Wait. "Did you see this when we connected?" I asked. Usually most things were unveiled and accessed when Kellan and me united in our make-out sessions.

"Surprisingly no," he replied.

"Hmm. And you didn't see about my true pallet before either. We connected on the beach the day of the shopping trip in Savannah with my Aunt Claire (who spent too much money on a new wardrobe for me after my transformation), but you didn't find out the truth until the doctor told you later," I continued.

“Right,” he nodded in agreement. I pursed my lips as I pieced together the puzzle.

“You know how the doctors said I have a gift which they said was my mind? You know, mind over matter? Because I don’t want to drink human blood, I willed my nose to block out the scent of both so I’m not tempted. I wonder if that carries over into other stuff. I wanted to protect my secret to protect my friends and dad. I was afraid to consider them food. And with Mel, I want to protect her at all cost. I don’t want anyone to be even slightly suspicious of her true IQ on us. So much so that maybe I willed it to be locked within my mind. Maybe I can lock what I don’t want revealed in my mind and alter the forces that direct or interfere with it on me. Do you think I’m completely off?” I questioned trying to work through it verbally as adrenaline slowly coursed me.

“No, that actually makes sense. You know strong vampires can hypnotize you the same way you yourself do a human. If that part of your thoughts is protected then so is Mel. If that part of your feeding hesitation is blocked, then you have no weakness to them. We’ll need to test the theory later. I would like to have my dad test you, but he’s an officer in the army, high in the ranks, so we can’t risk it. I’ll figure something out though,” he stated. He gently moved me back towards the table just in time for the bell to ring. I gathered my bag along with Mel before he escorted us to American History.

“Remind me never to invite you into the lunch line again. My stomach is going to hate me by fourth period,” Mel grumbled.

“Sorry. Do you want a soda or snack from the machine?” I really did feel bad for ruining her appetite. I suppose I was lucky in that department. I didn’t know of

any vamp that could or would turn down blood regardless of the slaughter they'd just witnessed, if that's what their pallet prescribed of course.

"No. Craig is picking me up. He's promised me a drive thru pick up on him," she detailed, beaming at the mention of his name.

"Did you tell him?" I groaned.

"Of course. You can't start a relationship with secrets and lies. Plus he knows you."

"Don't kill her. I would have told him if she didn't," Kellan jumped in.

"Gee thanks. And to think, you two are my best friends..." I sarcastically pouted.

"Suck it up. You know we love you." Mel chuckled, already back to texting Craig.

"I'll see you after class," Kellan prompted, kissing my forehead. "Mel, please make sure she doesn't kill anyone," he smirked.

"Oh, ha, ha," I grumbled, puckering my lip to show him I disapproved.

"You know I'm joking but please behave," he softened his tone before turning to rush to his third period.

As we walked into class, the bad feeling in the pit of my stomach returned, and not just because Jason was in the same room. No, it was much bigger than him. I didn't know what it was but it was close; the twinge of a defensive reaction within me confirmed this.

"Have you ever wondered why history is always taught by a football coach? Every high school, it's all the same,"

Mel commented nonchalantly as we waited for Coach Thompson to arrive.

“No. Mel, I have a bad feeling...”

She immediately turned to me in alarm. “Don’t freak. I’m not losing it. I just... I feel like something bad is about to happen.”

“Like what?” she whispered glaring at everyone as she scanned the room.

“That’s what’s irritating me. I don’t know,” I squirmed staring at her.

“Coach is coming,” I announced, turning back towards the chalkboard in the front.

History passed with no incidents, nothing out of the ordinary aside from a bad new dye job for Coach. He’d killed his greys with an unfitting almond brown. I was dismissing it as his mid-life crisis.

Kellan was promptly waiting to walk us to English. I was proud to say I’d read our book assignment, *Pride & Prejudice*, the old fashioned way, just at a much quicker pace. Apparently Kellan over exaggerated our reading ability, but the photographic memory and keen comprehension skills part was right on point.

English started out a repeat of yesterday. It turned out Chris permanently swapped seats with Jason, which meant he would be sitting between Kellan and me for the rest of the semester. After the cafeteria mishap though, I was optimistic that he wouldn’t cross me again. I was probably wrong since he had a stubborn streak and tended to chase the girls who rejected him, which, thus far, were Jenny and me. He chased her for four months solid freshman year before she caved.

I should have been flattered since no boy, girl, or thing gave me as much as an acknowledgement of existence before, but knowing what he wanted and how he really was annoyed me. It went to show - no one can get by on their looks alone.

"Hello again Lexi," Jason greeted as I reluctantly took my seat.

"We just had history together and you didn't say a word to me then. I'd like to keep it that way," I grumbled, turning slightly towards him while keeping my distance.

"I was mad. It was stupid. I'm not use to dating Super Woman yet."

I was anticipating Kellan to jump in and defend me, yet all he did was chuckle from his seat. "See, even your friend agrees to us."

"There is no us, Jason. Never has been, never will be, nor do I want there to be. So do me a favor and shut your pie hole," I said frustrated by both men now.

"I love it when you talk sergeant," he smirked leaning in as he ran his fingers through my hair.

"Okay, I've had enough," Mel sternly stated as she stood to hover over Jason. Her left hand was firmly placed on her hip and her right pointed at him which meant she's about to lay into him.

"You listen to me and you listen good. Lexi doesn't date dogs, and since you play for them, it makes you one of them. So before she smacks the crap out of you and makes you trail back with your tail between your legs and not her crotch, I suggest you lay off it. And if you can't find a way to do it, then I'll make room for you in my dog's house. And don't think I won't personally escort you to it on a leash,"

she roared. She then turned to Kellan who was oddly intrigued by her outburst. "And as for you. Grow some balls and claim your territory." She whisked back around and returned to her seat. The class broke out in a mixture of taunts and laughter with a few cheers tossed in.

"Now, now; settle down class," Mrs. Henderson ordered as she entered the room.

"Thanks," I whispered to Mel.

"Anytime. Of course I'm assuming I'll need your protection at some point," she pouted a bit before facing the board again.

"I hope not," I spoke more to myself than her.

My bad intuition subsided through most of the literature repetition but flared with a vengeance the last twenty minutes of class. The serum rose in my throat and burned my tonsils as if I was starving. The hairs on my body began to stand as fear and awareness rose within me. I'd deepened my breaths hoping to calm myself with little success. I turned to Kellan with a pleading, worried expression but was startled to see he was already snarling. This could only warn of one thing - danger.

I'd never reacted like this before. I felt as if I was panicking though I was under control. I needed my nose to work; because it wasn't, I didn't know if it was a person or vamp I should be cautious of.

The final bell rang and everything went into slow motion for me. Kellan raced to me forgetting all covers.

"Get out of here. You and Mel get to your house fast," he warned too low for humans around to hear.

I swiftly grabbed our belongings, thank God for vamp strength, and yanked Mel beside me into a death grip.

“What’s wrong Lex?” she pressed in a rushed whisper. She knew better than to not tag along but was clearly leery.

“I don’t know. Danger of some sort. Kellan left and said to go home a.s.a.p.” I explained hurriedly. I pushed through the crowds as fast as Mel could travel. I used my heightened senses to scan the area hoping to uncover where Kellan was or who he was after.

As soon as we reached the parking lot I froze. Mel passed me and tried to pull me forward, but I couldn’t move.

“He’s here...” I choked.

“Who’s here? Come on Lex! We have to go!”

“Mike.”

“Oh, shit,” Mel stopped dead in her tracks.

“He’s a... a... um...”

“Spit it out Lex! I’m totally freaking,” she blurted.

“He’s a... me,” I replied staring dead faced into Mel’s sapphire eyes. I returned my attention to what was in front of me - a glowering match between the one I hated and the one I loved.

No one seemed to take notice. Students, faculty, parents and others swarmed to their cars looking to escape school, not the war about to erupt, as quickly as possible.

“Give it up,” Kellan prompted in a low menacing voice.

“As soon as she’s mine,” Mike stated. “Do you know a vampire can claim a human or a vampeen as their own and

no one can touch them... ever?" he teased as the evil villain he was.

"Don't even think of threatening me or her," Kellan snarled.

I heard an engine blaze through the traffic and breaks squeal. I recognized the sound instantly as Kellan's car. Craig was at Kellan's side in a split second. I took the momentary distraction for a stunned Mike to whisk Mel to my car. We were inside with the doors locked in a matter of seconds.

"Ugh, I feel sick," Mel scrunched at her waist breathing deep.

"Sorry, but I had to get you to safety," I remarked. "Craig and Kellan can take it from here. We're going."

"Fine. Just take it easy Wonder Woman," she cringed.

The engine roared as we flew out of the nearly empty lot. "Call your mom. You're staying with me tonight," I ordered.

"You know she won't go for that," she replied.

"I'll make her if I have to," I warned.

—

Chapter Five

I pulled into the garage and had us inside less than three seconds after I cut the engine.

“I can walk you know,” Mel griped trying to stabilize herself.

“Sorry, I’m just a little freaked,” I replied pacing the living room.

“Lexi, tell me you didn’t,” my mother stood at the edge of the kitchen in horror. I looked at her face, into her eyes unsure what to say.

“Umm... Mrs. Jackson. I umm... I guessed. I’ve watched too many movies that had similarities. Lex stopped me from saying it out loud. That’s how she said she could protect me. I have an idea but not a title. So I don’t truly know for sure. Please don’t be mad at her though. It’s not that she’s careless or flaunts it, but... well... she’s my best friend and I know her too well. If she breathed a second too long I would pick up on it,” Mel spewed in my defense.

She stood for a solid minute passing between the two of us unsure of what’s appropriate I was assuming. This was the moment I’d dreaded. I knew I couldn’t keep Mel’s knowledge a secret forever, but I assumed I’d have more time. When she finally spoke, I wished she hadn’t.

“They arrested Kellan’s father.”

“What? Why?”

“They’re looking for Kellan too,” she added.

I felt my throat close up, the serum swell into my mouth and tears, silent but deadly, filled my eyes. “I don’t

suppose you know why, do you?" I choked. My eyes drifted to the floor. I couldn't imagine what they'd done.

"Beth called. She's a wreck. Al compromised his position in the army and Kellan assisted."

"That... this... it doesn't make any sense!" I screamed.

"I need you to calm down Alexa," she soothed.

"It's going to be okay Lex," Mel said as she pulled me into a hug. Either she's naïve or just didn't care because an angry or upset vamp can turn on anyone.

"The night of your party both Kellan and Al allowed your human friend Mike to leave despite the fact that he knows about us. That is a felony in our world Lexi," she detailed pulling me to sit on the sectional.

"Wait," I stopped abruptly. "Are they arresting them because Mike is human and knows?"

"Yes," she sighed.

"But, Mom, Mike is a..." I glanced at Mel for a moment before continuing. "Mom, he's one of us, an Al, now. That's why I dashed here with Mel. Kellan and his friend Craig are fighting or doing something with him in the school parking lot. He's after me."

"Oh my!" she exclaimed. "I have to call Beth. Oh, and one more thing Lexi."

"Yeah?"

"I'm not a fan of their request but we must honor it."

"Honor what with who?" I pressed.

"The High Authorities have requested a meeting with you."

“With me? What for?”

“I’m not sure sweetie. It’s been set for this Thursday at 11pm. I’ll be accompanying you,” she answered.

“Where at?” I asked hesitantly. I couldn’t think of where they would be located around here. I wasn’t even sure who the High Authorities were truly. I was assuming they were a part of the vamp army or our secret rulers.

“The Underground Station. It’s a secret underground passage in downtown which acts as their camp control office and army headquarters here,” she replied.

“Oh... umm... okay. I guess that makes sense since sunlight weakens them,” I whispered in acknowledgement.

“I’m going to call Beth. Hopefully this will be enough to prompt for a bail option.”

“Sure,” I replied as she walked toward her bedroom, cell phone in hand.

“Lex I know it’s not the best time but I didn’t eat. You know... the whole lunch thing and then Craig was supposed to take me out but that’s down the crapper,” Mel said.

“I’ll order you a pizza. Pepperoni and peppers?” I checked.

“Duh,” she smiled.

I chuckled. “Let’s go upstairs. I’ll order it online.”

“My stomach loves you,” she grinned.

“And mine loves you,” I smirked.

“Don’t remind me. It’s creepy.”

The pizza arrived a few minutes before the guys and my dad. We all crowded on the sectional. Kellan began as

Craig and my dad grabbed a slice of pizza.

“You can eat pizza?” Mel asked Craig wrinkling her forehead in confusion.

“She knows?” my dad chimed in with panic.

“No titles or confirmation just skills and abilities,” my mother replied. He nodded and bit into his slice.

“Yes love. Unlike my mate I can eat anything my pitter desires,” Craig answered patting his chest where his heart is. “But enough banter. Tell ‘em the juicy bits mate.”

And Kellan did. From my intuition this morning to the parking lot incident and further to their forty-mile chase. “He headed into the Southside Forest which means only one thing,” he concluded.

“The Bladangs changed him,” my mother finished.

“The who? Is that how it sounds? Like a blood gang?” I had never heard the name or word before.

“The Bladangs are sort of the fang bangers of your region,” Craig explained grabbing another slice of pizza.

“Like a gang? Like the Bloods or Cripps; a mafia type thing?” Mel pressed stuffing the last of her third slice in her mouth. She was fully engaged in the story.

“Sort of. They are a solid, strong cult of you-know-what’s made up of a lot of humans seeking immortality. They provide immortality free of charge as long as you sign your life away,” Kellan explained.

“And by signing your life away you mean...” I prompted.

“Agreeing to fighting any and all battles the gang warrants. They are a savage group, second strongest in the

world due to numbers, who hate your kind and despise the order and composition of the army. Mike got his battle with us approved by their leaders because you're a..." he looked at Mel before continuing, "well, you and my dad is in the army," he added.

"So what happens if he catches me?" I was beginning to worry all over again.

"He won't," Kellan stated firmly, locking his eyes with mine.

"But... it could," I insisted.

"Don't worry about tid bits love," Craig assured me. It didn't help though. The insecurity was lying low in the pit of my stomach. Mike was not alone anymore. He's part of a larger enemy. I wasn't just running from him, I was running from an entire gang called the Bladangs.

"Please tell me what will happen," I pleaded, looking deep into Kellan's green eyes trying to search his soul for some sort of answer.

"He will make you choose between enslavement and death," Kellan responded between locked teeth and an angry growl.

"Enslavement?" I pushed, swallowing a bout of serum rising.

"Marriage," my mother stated.

"Marriage is a tiddle different for us love. No divorce and mackers are killed," Craig explained.

"Mackers?" Mel cut in.

"You know, mackers? Mack daddies? The cheaters," he defined.

I silently sunk. In less than two weeks I'd had a vamp out to kill me and now another out to capture me. Oh, and he's being supported by a whole gang of fang bangers... whatever those were. I'd have been borderline stroked if I was still human.

"Kellan, I know now is not the best time but are you aware of your father's situation?" my mother asked delicately.

"Yeah. I talked to my mom before I got here. They released him and the High Authorities are meeting with him later. He may lose his job."

I gasped in shock. Guilt was surging through me. "But... he... he helped me. He..." I struggled to speak, overwhelmed by the entire situation.

"Calm down Lexi. It's going to be okay," Kellan said pulling me into his arms. He carefully kissed my forehead like he always did.

"It's... it's just not fair," I whimpered. Al and Kellan were there defending me, there to help me that night. It was Al who finished off Keira for me and Kellan pulled me back together afterwards when my nerves mixed with my adrenaline.

"Umm, I'll give you guys some time," Mel interjected. She got up to head upstairs.

"Want to catch a flick love? You do owe me a date," Craig propositioned.

Mel smiled. "Sure. Do you mind Lex? If you need me I can stay," she offered.

"No, I'll be fine. Go have fun," I replied.

“Yay! Just give me a sec to freshen up,” she squealed. Craig got up as well.

“Craig. Cop a squat!” I commanded.

“Cop a what?” he cracked.

“Sit. I have questions for you,” I ordered sternly.

“Yes ma’am,” he mocked. “Never cross her mate,” he whispered to Kellan.

“I can hear you,” I frowned.

“I know,” he winked. “Now go on love. What tickles your curiosity?”

“How many girls have you been with?”

“Seriously?” he leaned back wearily.

“Mel’s my best friend; actually more like my sister. So if you plan on taking her for a ride, I need to know how many you’ve ridden already and what kind stat,” I exclaimed coming across as an army general on purpose.

“You’re not fiddlin’ with me, are you?”

One second later he was pinned to the wall with me in his face. “Did it sound like I was fiddling with you Craigy?” He was trying to escape.

My dad and Kellan burst into laughter. To my surprise, I even heard a chuckle from my reserved mother.

“Ugh... matey? Kellan?” Craig stuttered unable to push me off of him.

“For your own safety mate, I suggest you just answer her,” Kellan said, amused by the whole thing.

I grinned my best evil villain expression and gave a final bump of pressure on him.

"I've sucked a lot of bells but done the bed brawl with one, a vampeen," he spewed.

I released him and beamed approvingly. "See, that wasn't so hard," I teased.

"Damn mate, you're doll has an iron grip and bullocks the size of Russia," Craig commented.

"Or maybe you're just a wimp Blair," Kellan burst into laughter again.

"I'm ready," Mel announced as she skipped down the stairs. She had changed into her dark skinny jeans, a pair of Uggs and a light pink hoodie. She always seemed to have a backup outfit with her.

"You look cute... and cozy," I smiled.

"Definitely. Don't wait up," she joked. Craig scurried towards her.

"Craig!" I called as they headed for the front door.

"Yes master?"

"Guard her with your life or else you'll lose yours," I warned.

"You're sexy when you're bossy," Kellan smirked leaning in to kiss me.

"She is not sexy! Lips off vuh... mister!" my dad demanded, almost slipping while Mel was still able to hear.

"Dad," I whined. I know every father hates to hear their daughter called certain things but sexy is not on the bad side of the list.

“Lexi, why don’t you and Kellan go upstairs or for a walk so your father and I can talk,” my mother requested shifting uncomfortably in her seat. I hadn’t seen her like that in a while so I knew it was serious.

“We’ll be in my room,” I replied standing to walk towards the stairs.

“Door open young lady,” Dad added.

“Actually, I’d prefer it closed to add a bit more padding between our conversation and her sensitive ears,” my mother explained to my father. He sighed and nodded.

“Got it.” I said.

Near the top of the stairs Kellan lifted me into his arms and tossed me on my bed. Before I could blink his lips were on mine and his hands exploring over my clothes.

“Hey, hey. Don’t get sassy,” I chuckled between kisses as I lightly smacked his arm.

“There you go getting bossy again. Sexy,” he purred like a cat before sliding to kiss my neck.

“Umm, Kellan?”

He pulled back to look into my eyes. “Yeah?”

“In the parking lot, Mike said that vampires could claim humans and vampeens as their own. How, uh, how do you do that exactly?” I stumbled unsure of how he would react.

He rolled onto the bed beside me. I nuzzled into his arms. “It’s different with vampeens and humans,” he answered.

“With a vampeen, like say me... how does it work?” I fidgeted with my hands.

“You exchange blood. It can be as little as one drop as long as you both take from each other. It changes your scent to complement each other; the perfect his and her fragrance.”

“But how do you tell the difference?” I propped myself up on my elbow to face him.

“Well, you can’t, but every human and vamp has their own unique scent. To a human it’s faint if they can even smell it at all, but to a vamp it’s like everyone is a different bottle of perfume or cologne. A vampire tends to smell musky like the earth; vampeens smell more like a speck of blood on the tip of a rose. So you smell earthlike in floral but with a hint of blood for your humanity. And humans smell entirely of mouthwatering blood. When a vamp claims a human, the human has consumed a few drops of the vamp’s blood without the serum. It changes the human’s pheromones so they smell like the vampire or vampeen that claimed them. They no longer smell entirely of blood; they smell like they’ve been half drained and rolled around the forest.”

“Interesting. And if say... we... were to exchange blood... what would I smell like?” I pondered, gazing into his eyes awaiting my fate.

“Like a field of flowers in the middle of the forest with no enticement of blood. When you drink from a vampire, it uh... well it feeds your vampiric DNA and nearly converts you. You become attuned to each other. It’s even rumored that certain vamps that exchange can hear each other’s thoughts,” he explained, brushing his fingers thoughtfully through my hair.

“Does my dad smell... different?” I asked flipping to face the ceiling.

“Yes,” he stated. That single response took me back down to the conversation my parents were having.

“You’ll be safer to leave Stewart. I’d feel better knowing you’re safe. I’ll need to focus on protecting Lexi,” my mother argued.

“I don’t have time left at work. I’d have to quit,” he replied sounding a bit annoyed.

“Then quit. We have plenty of money in the bank plus my mother’s stock worth much more. Your life is worth more than seventy thousand a year,” she reasoned.

“Damn it Sharon. I’m tired of being a liability to you. Do you know how humiliated I feel to know I can’t protect my family, especially Alexa?” he exclaimed. I could hear him pacing and felt the dreaded silence of my mother’s soul. “That’s all I want is to be a part of this family; to be the man of this family.”

“But you are,” she pressed.

“I’m not able to attend half the vamp meetings because I’m human. I feel like an outcast in that world. And now that Alexa is one, I feel like an outsider in my own family. I can’t go everywhere with you, I can’t do anything close to amazing like you, but, most important, I can’t protect you or Lex should a vamp attack.” He sat down before continuing. “If either of you was hurt or destroyed, I would feel responsible because had I been a vampire I could have possibly prevented it. I stand by my earlier request Sharon. I want to be made into a vampire,” he stated solemnly.

“But we’ll never... I’ll never... we can’t be together intimately if you do Stewart. I’ll be beside you but could never be with you for all of eternity,” my mother broke

down. I heard the tears falling though she tried to be quiet, to hide her desperation.

My heart snapped and lungs collapsed, or so it felt. I let out a light gasp as silent tears began rolling freely down my cheeks. I was frozen in the moment, stuck on the words I'd never imagined my father saying and the concern I'd never pictured my mother having.

Kellan lifted me into his arms and ran downstairs. "She heard," he whispered to my mother as we flew past. Seconds later we were in the car and Kellan pulled out of the garage and sped down the road.

"You can't always pull me out of the fire," I stated staring ahead at the dark road. The sun had set about twenty minutes before.

"Maybe not, but I'll always try," he replied taking my hand and entwining our fingers.

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I know. That's why..."

"Why what?" he asked, slightly breathless as if he knew what was coming.

"Umm... that's why I'm your girlfriend."

"Oh. Of course," he said, disappointment clear in his tone. I felt bad, but just couldn't say those words yet. It was too soon.

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Chapter Six

“What a week!” Mel exclaimed as we entered our Thursday night hangout – Barnes & Noble. “I’m so in need of a macchiato!”

“Can I... I mean am I able to drink this stuff?” I whispered to Kellan as we all headed towards the café. Typically this was girl’s night, but due to the week’s events, and my date with the vamp leaders later, the guys tagged along but promised not to hover.

“You can drink anything without sugar and carbonation,” he replied with a chuckle.

“Hey, we’re not bringing that up mate,” Craig chimed in with a quick defensive tone.

“Now pay attention to what I order Craig. This is a life or death memory. Ask Lex, you never want to bring me the wrong drink!”

“Uh, yeah. Even now I think she would kick me all the way to Europe if I dared to bring her the wrong sip,” I confirmed. I turned to Kellan who had played the part of the doting boyfriend since the Mike incident. Even Jason backed off. “So... I can drink water, coffee, and tea with no sugar? Ugh.”

“Nothing really tastes the same. I doubt you’ll like anything but water and the red stuff,” he replied running his hands up and down my back.

Mel ordered her drink and immediately quizzed Craig. He was smart; he recited it verbatim.

“Hey Lexi. The usual?” Sam asked as I stepped up to the counter.

“Actually, I feel like experimenting. I want a tall coffee with cream,” I began.

“Unh-unh. Cream has sugar,” Kellan interrupted.

“Ugh. Fine. Icksnay the cream Sam and also give me a tall black tea hot with no sugar and a tall iced green tea with no sugar. And throw in a bottle of water, I’ll need to cleanse my palate somehow,” I commented. I turned to Kellan who stood smirking at my side. “Do you want anything?”

“Only you,” he winked.

“Okay, that’s it Sam,” I said swiping my member card then my debit card. Once the drinks were done we joined Craig and Mel at our usual table.

“Ugh, thirsty Lex?” Mel asked taking a sip of her drink.

“I’m experimenting with the approved liquids. Hopefully I’ll like one,” I replied taking the green tea first. “Hmm. Not bad. Tastes like water dipped with a citrus leaf. It doesn’t wow me though.” I shrugged already picking up the black tea. “Ok, off subject a bit, but can I burn my tongue?”

Craig broke into hysterics. “Ah mate! Don’t drop her! She tickles my rocks!” Mel elbowed him but it didn’t seem to faze him.

“Uh,” Kellan chuckled a bit, “You can burn your tongue; it’ll hurt but heal quickly.” I gave both Craig and Kellan my death glare, which brought them to an abrupt halt.

“Try the hot tea Lex and ignore these puff balls,” Mel encouraged.

I took a sip of the hot tea. “Totally out! This tastes like hot water with a swill of dirt,” I grumbled immediately chugging half the water bottle. Craig lost it again, even snickered in a feminine way.

I ran my tongue around my mouth ensuring nothing lingered. “Well, my last hope is the coffee,” I announced bringing the steaming cup to my lips with hesitation. I longed for variety despite being a new vamp. I drank a small amount; all eyes were on me awaiting my response. “Well, this is the best of the three but so not what I want.” Okay, so I pouted a bit. “What would happen if I drank a frap? It’s not like I’d be sent to *el baño*...”

“Don’t ask but your belly rebels. It feels like a snake widdled its way in and bullied your insides,” Craig explained.

“Wait. You guys don’t go to the bathroom?” Mel interjected. I shook my head ‘no’. “Like at all?”

“Not at all. Nothing we take in is wasted,” I reiterated.

“Wow. You’re gonna hate me on a road trip,” she gloomed. “Umm, touchy subject I know, but what happened with your dad K?”

I instantly tensed and peered at Kellan. His expression told nothing, but I knew he was upset. I grabbed his hand under the table and gave him a tiny squeeze of support. Even Craig appeared instantly mellow with the subject change.

“He was involuntarily discharged,” he finally answered.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I know you must be upset about it,” she offered. I could tell she felt bad for bringing it up given the outcome. No one spoke for several minutes.

I finally broke the silence. "I'm super happy it's a teacher work day tomorrow. I'll probably need an extra day to recoup depending on what happens tonight. I'm a little scared. Don't really know what they could want," I sighed. I began fiddling with my hands to distract myself from the impending, and of course trying to redirect my nerves.

"Wow. That was a bi-polar moment if I ever saw one. You're happy about school and then a nano-second later depressed about tonight," Mel chuckled, taking another sip of her drink.

"So I'm flawed; sue me. I think the whole emotional roller coaster proves that I'm still human despite everything," I defended, despite the smile that broke out near the end.

"Uh huh. You keep telling yourself that. Just know a pig's a pig until turned into bacon. Once it's changed, it's never a pig again," she rolled her eyes mid-response.

"Yeah, yeah. Can we move to a more upbeat, positive topic?" I requested before taking another long drink of water. I briefly walked away to discard my epic failure of an experiment. Looked like I'd be drinking water and blood for all of eternity; at least the blood types offer variety.

When I returned to the table there was a whisper-fest finishing up between Craig and Kellan. Mel didn't even realize they were speaking. "So...what did I miss?" I asked pointing my finger between the guys as I sat down.

Mel appeared confused by my remark; she scrunched her forehead and furrowed her perfectly plucked brows. "Did I miss something? If so, that's so unfair. I'm calling an injustice to humans on that one," she asserted with disapproval stamped all over her.

“Weasels, aren’t they? They were talking behind our backs but I missed it,” I said.

I retrieved my cell from my pocket and made it a point to check the time - 8:37pm. “I’ve gotta go guys. Mom wants to debrief me before we go and I have to find a suitable outfit.”

Mel suddenly looked shaken. Craig instantly took to consoling her. “Please be careful Lex. I... I can’t live without you,” she stumbled, a tear flowing down her left cheek.

“I promise I’ll be careful, but give me a hug just in case.” I stood to meet her halfway.

“I’m going with Lexi. Make sure Mel gets home safe,” Kellan advised.

“Always mate. Lexi, love, don’t fuddle this up. I don’t want to be cuddlin’ my best mate forever. That’s how long it’d take him to stop boohoo-in over you love. You’re a champ doll to lose,” Craig added stepping up to hug me now that Mel pulled away in a full on cry-fest. I embraced Craig as if he were my brother. After only a few days I felt like I’d known him all my life. We’d become a tight bunch, which was why no one killed him when he slid his hands down to coddle my butt for a moment. He about lost a finger or two courtesy of Kellan but nothing fatal was threatened.

After a silent ride home we arrived at my house in business mode. My mother was pacing the kitchen and living room in a full blown business suit - grey pencil skirt, black button up shirt, matching grey blazer and powerful pointed toe black stilettos. She was the epitome of a female vixen.

“Alexa, quickly shower and select your best business attire. No jeans and I expect heels,” she ordered the moment I closed the front door. “Kellan, if you go up, don’t distract. Tonight is a major event and I don’t know yet if it’s positive or negative,” she added checking her watch anxiously.

We both nodded and flew up the stairs. I hit my closet first. I flipped through my clothes and selected the first thing that popped out. I pulled out my grey wool wide-legged dress pants – they’re more comfortable than they sound – with a plain baby blue slim fit tee. I figured if I put on a nice necklace she wouldn’t complain about the tee. I picked up the shoebox with my patent grey pumps. I kicked off my shoes – made a mental note to schedule a pedicure with Mel – and dropped the lot on my bed before scurrying to the bathroom.

I quickly turned on the shower and yanked off my clothes; I was in business mode – extremely focused.

“Lexi,” Kellan called.

I halfway scaled the tile wall; I’d forgotten Kellan was there. He immediately threw up his hands in surrender and looked away since he had entered the bathroom already. “Sorry babe. I didn’t mean to scare you, but you’re a vamp so I figured you heard me coming,” he quickly explained.

I wrapped myself in the towel at vamp speed. “It’s okay. I just... I’m really nervous and just focused on getting downstairs. The sooner I get downstairs, the sooner we leave and the sooner this, whatever this is, is over with.”

Without notice I was wrapped in his arms. “Lexi, I know I don’t say much and I haven’t said it but,” he took a deep breath and pulled me away to look directly into my eyes. “I love you. I’ve never felt this way, this strong for

anyone, even my family. You have to swear that no matter what you'll come back to me," he pleaded.

I stared into his beautiful emerald eyes, lost in the moment. He said he loves me. No man but my dad has ever spoken those words to me.

I wasn't sure how long I'd stood there. Nonetheless I stood still, absorbing all that was spoken to me. My mind was still racing, trying to comprehend whether I'd imagined it or not.

"Lexi... please say something," Kellan prompted, he had both hands on my upper arms and shook me a bit.

"I, umm... I love you too," I replied a bit dazed. I was praying inside. I was hoping he didn't break my heart now that I'd opened myself up to acknowledge I cared this deeply. It's one thing to know I did inside, but to verbalize it directly to him was another. It helped that he said it first though.

He leaned down and planted a kiss on my lips. It was a strong, deeply emotional one. I knew this because I felt us instantly connect as one; no layers had to be peeled through.

"Promise me you'll be careful. You have to come back to me."

"I promise."

"I really do love you. I've never felt like this. You are one of a kind Alexa Lorryne Jackson, and you've stolen my heart."

"I concur. I love you just the same Kellan Alejandro Phoenix Bancroft," I giggled a bit purely out of bliss, for the moment anyways.

I pulled back, still clinging tightly to my towel. Kellan's hands moved to cradle my face. He gently pecked my lips softly a few more times before pulling me into his arms.

"Alexa! Get moving! You can make out with your boyfriend another time," my mother yelled from downstairs. That showed how stressed she was; I could have heard a whisper the same as her scream.

"Well, that's one way to kill the moment," I commented. "I better shower before she kills me. At least I wouldn't have to face tonight then..."

"Get showered," he said, a bit of sadness in his tone. Though he didn't outright say it, I knew he was just as worried about tonight.

I showered and changed in less than five minutes. It was blow-drying my hair that took twenty - too bad vamp speed couldn't help me there - but I couldn't have it soaked straight or looking like a rat's nest. I threw on the jewelry Aunt Claire bought me on our shopping spree and headed downstairs where Kellan was situated with my mom.

She gave me the full once over. "I suppose that'll do."

"I like it," Kellan winked.

"Let's get down to business," she commanded. My mother in work mode was intimidating. She's the best real estate negotiator in the southeast saving her clients an average twelve percent off the list price. "When we get there, let me do the talking unless they address you directly. Do not admit to or confirm anything incriminating or that could contribute to condemning anyone. When spoken to or replying, look the person in the eye for three seconds then look away; any more than three and they could glamour you into answering anything. Which brings me to my next point. You have rights. You do not have to

answer any question you're not comfortable answering. And when you're answering, don't stutter or hesitate; it makes you appear guilty regardless of the subject matter," she disgorged all while pacing.

"When we get there, do not speak to anyone unless they speak first. No smiling either, some vamps consider that a sexual invitation. Walk behind me, not in front of me or beside me; that's strictly for your protection. We will go through several forms of security; the final may be invasive so be prepared. Also you cannot use your powers when in there; no vamp speed or strength allowed. And there are cameras everywhere so don't do or say anything you wouldn't want them to see or hear. And lastly," she paused, inhaling deep before continuing, "If for any reason they separate us, do as I've instructed so far and know that I will not willingly leave without you. They will never take my only child from me. I will fight anyone, anywhere with anything if they do so. Please don't worry Lexi."

All I could do was nod and try to swallow the lump in my throat. "Now go say goodbye to your father. Be prepared. He's a wreck right now. When you're done meet me in the car," she instructed.

Saying goodbye to my father was almost unbearable. He nearly cried half a dozen times, but told me multiple times to be strong. He played the part of a dutiful dad and loving hypocrite. I said one more quick farewell to Kellan. I felt a strong pull at my heart the moment I saw the beginning of a tear in the well of his eye. I was constantly being reminded of the true severity of my meeting given everyone's cumulative reactions.

The drive was painfully tense and empty. I was almost relieved when we pulled up to a downtown garage.

"We're going on foot from here," she announced.

“How far?” I asked, glancing around at our surroundings.

“Two miles,” she replied. Thank God I was graceful and not significantly slower in heels.

We headed out at vamp speed through several dark alleys and deserted one-way streets. It was strange sprinting so quick next to my mother. Thus far I’d only run alongside Kellan and his dad. And maybe until now I never truly accepted her as a vampeen since she’d blended with humans so well. My mother was anything but flashy - aside from her car and fancy touch screen blackberry - so she never displayed the title of vamp to me.

What felt like seconds later we stopped in front of a downtown high-rise of part business offices and part loft-style apartments with a garage on the bottom two floors. It appeared upscale from the outside though no security officers were patrolling.

“Why didn’t we just park here?” I asked in a whisper despite no one being in sight or hearing range for blocks away.

“This is restricted parking. Follow me and get into business mode Alexa. Once we’re in, there is no way out unescorted,” she warned.

I followed diligently towards the garage side entry. We slid through the gap of the entrance bar, which acted as the gate. It was decently lit considering it was a garage. We walked between cars to an oversized cement beam in the center of the lot. I didn’t notice it at first, which was rare given my enhanced vision, but there was a well-blended door on the north facing side of the column. The handle was cleverly disguised as a deep diagonal chip in the cement.

My mother opened the door and we stepped immediately into an old school wrought iron walled elevator. I felt slightly claustrophobic stepping in given the grey cement on all four walls around me, and there was barely an inch between the open elevator walls and the slabs surrounding us. She pulled the cement door shut and then closed the hinge door. She pressed the only button on the display panel that was simply a square button with a strange symbol I'd never seen before engraved on it.

The elevator drudged down a good three stories before hitting the bottom. Looking forward, all that was visible, was a long sterile white hallway with a dark grey metal door at the end, obviously bullet proof. My mother slid the door open. As soon as we stepped out the door closed itself behind us and the lift started back up to its higher docking station. She was serious about the no way out alone.

She knocked three quick taps on the metal door. A well-built man standing at least 6'3" with long dark brown hair, all black attire and piercing pale blue eyes that startled me opened it. He pulled us into an all-white 8x8 room with only a desk, chair and a small 7" black and white rabbit-eared TV.

"Stand against the wall arms spread out like an eagle," he instructed, his voice a rustic baritone. "You first," he pointed towards my mother.

I was expecting a police type pat down but he didn't touch her. Rather a small blue beam shot from his blue eyes and scanned her from top to bottom.

"You're cleared. You now," he swished his finger directing me to stand where my mother just was. I assumed the proper position and was shortly being scanned. I felt a flurry of warmth where the ray drifted that left once he moved down. When he finished he didn't say anything; he

walked to a door, a straight shot from the one we'd entered, and placed his hand on the grey scan-pad. I heard the click of the lock.

I followed my mother into the next room, which was again white, but set up like the airport security centers. There was a belt with plastic bins on our left and an upright metal detector straight ahead, or so it appeared to be. Two obviously armed guards were standing on the other side of the scanners.

"Step through one at a time. Place all weapons and cell phones in the bin," the short blonde haired guy advised. He looked young, my guess twenty, but was clearly vamp.

We placed our cell phones in the bins. My mother stepped through first as agreed and I followed. I turned to retrieve my phone but nothing came out of the other end of the belt. Our bin seemed to banish within the draped scan box it slid through.

Taking notice, the other guard promptly said, "Your phones will be returned when you're approved to leave."

The blonde guard led us through the grey metal door - another straight shot - down a short hallway. He scanned his hand and opened another door, this one black metal, out into what looked like a business lobby. He walked up to the reception desk and provided another security officer with our names, though we never gave them. The officer, a thin African-American, nodded and the blonde one returned and exited the door we entered from.

"Follow me," the officer stated. We entered yet another room, this one a pale blue. The common theme I was noticing was absolutely nothing on the walls. They were all bare, and most of them stark white, aside from this room.

A female officer with cropped red hair and thigh-high black boots greeted us. "Hello Sharon. Hello Alexa. Please strip down to your panties and bra. Place your clothes in the metal boxes on the tables on the far wall. You may leave socks and stockings on but shoes should be removed. I'll return in approximately thirty seconds."

With that she left and we began undressing. There were two fold out particleboard-topped tables with folding metal legs on the north wall. A medium sized grey (they love that color) colored metal bin was placed in the center of each table.

By the time she returned we were undressed with our shoes and clothes in the bin.

"Do they do this to everyone?" I whispered to my mother.

"Just those seeing the High Authorities," the guard answered. She took the metal bins and exited the room again.

"Don't ask questions Alexa," my mother reprimanded, her voice a low tense projection.

I awkwardly stood with my arms crossed, anxiously waiting to be released from this embarrassment. So far I was realizing my mother was accurate in every warning she gave.

The red haired officer returned with our items but no containers in sight. "Here you are ladies. You've both been cleared. James will print you a security certificate. When you're dressed, come out and have a seat in the lobby. And good luck little lady," she said giving me a quick nod.

"Thank you Gloria," my mother replied. Gloria left and we started dressing at vamp speed.

“You know her?” I asked as soon as I finished.

“Used to,” she stated, no inclination or emotional ties present.

Out in the lobby we sat in the black leather chairs that created an L-shape to face the reception desk. Despite the layout, the stand out factor was again the white walls, no pictures, and no windows. It made sense though considering we were three stories underground. There was sufficient lighting despite the lack of outside contributions.

The security officer, James, handed us our security certificates. They weren't actually certificates; instead we received white badges with the same symbol as printed on the lone elevator button. On the bottom left my name was displayed in block lettering 'Jackson, Alexa L'. We both clipped our tags on our shirt collars - I was thankful I'd worn a V-neck tee.

The minutes ticked by with nothing but silence in the waiting room; this was what I was now referring to it as. We both sat side by side without the flex of even one muscle. Vamps could remain motionless indefinitely if they wanted to, but boredom and hunger were sure to make us move at some point.

Finally, seven minutes and forty-three seconds after my mental connotations, a tall, middle-aged, blonde woman in a black pantsuit came through the door across from where we sat. “Hello Alexa. My name is Roxy. I'll be your escort to the High Authorities. Please follow me,” she stated before turning on her heels toward the same door.

My mother stood and I followed, but we were immediately stopped in our tracks. Roxy spun around to face my mother. “I apologize Mrs. Jackson, but the

authorities wish to meet with Alexa alone. You have not been permitted to attend this session.”

Hearing those words coerced my subdued fear to the surface. I faced my mother with a panicked expression plastered on my face. She simply nodded and returned to her seat. She didn't speak even one word or give me a reassuring glance. I swallowed hard feeling a small amount of serum in the bottom of my throat due to my new stress.

“Come along Alexa. The authorities wait for no one,” she prompted.

I reluctantly followed silently behind Roxy. We exited the door and walked down a short widening hall. It broadened from the width of one door to the span of two. At the end of the hall stood two solid oak, four paneled double doors. Roxy placed her hand on the far right top door panel. Within seconds a red light flashed beneath her palm and we were granted access.

Beyond the doors I expected more halls or another small white room. Surprisingly, we entered a large business office hustling and bustling with commotion. Offices and conference rooms lined the walls; desks, filing cabinets and office machines covered the large open floor. In the center of the room stood a thick column. It housed a flat screen monitor inset on each side displaying and rotating every few seconds with live security footage.

Roxy led me to a large conference room at the end of the left wing stretch. There were again white walls and no windows, aside from one looking onto the floor.

“Gentlemen, this is Alexa Jackson. Alexa, this is Laurence, Auggy, and Felipe. They will be taking over from here,” she advised. She promptly closed the blinds and left

the room leaving me in front of three very intimidating leaders.

“Take a seat Alexa,” Felipe prompted. He carried a bit of an old European accent and the looks of a young Don Juan. He had sleek black hair, a body of defined muscle complimenting his tan skin and brown eyes; a strong jaw and perfectly pout pink lips complimented his sultry image.

I sat obediently, trying to recall all my mother had instructed. All I could feel though were my fingers shaking, my knees buckling, and my heart racing because all I could see was three authoritative judges sitting in front of me ready to determine my worth and freedom.

“This shouldn’t take long Alexa; we simply have a few questions, matters if you say, to ask of you,” Laurence announced. He looked to be the youngest of the group but was clearly the oldest in the room based on his verbiage and approach. He was taller than Felipe and was a stark pale ivory complexion with light blonde hair and soft green eyes. I acknowledged him with three seconds of eye contact and a nod of my head.

“Enough chit chat. We have questions about the attack you launched on Keira,” Auggy roared. His voice was a gruff military-esk style, which fit his army attire, crew cut and bulging steroid dipped muscles. Of the group, he was the most intimidating.

“Despite my partner’s intimidation tactics, I want to assure you you are in no trouble Alexa,” Felipe smiled entwining his fingers in a relaxed outward manner. Again, I only shook my head.

“Let’s start with the basics. Did you know Keira?” Laurence questioned shifting to grab his legal pad and pen

from the chair beside him. Despite being a conference room, there were only chairs, no table.

“No, not personally,” I replied sitting back in my chair.

“You say not personally, so you admit she was an acquaintance?” Felipe attempted to confirm.

“No,” I said trying hard not to fidget and shake. Surprisingly my nerves didn’t hit my voice.

“Do explain what you are implying then Alexa,” Laurence stated.

“Umm,” - darn it, I hesitated. I quickly tried to make up for it. “I’m not sure if this is acceptable or not so I will ask. Am I allowed to tell you the story, provide all the details from my first run-in to my final confrontation with Keira? I promise not to omit or delude the information. I just feel it may be easier than grasping at straws and details one by one for merely a small picture of the issue when I can provide the full in less time and of course answer your questions after,” I offered hoping I didn’t just condemn myself or overstep any invisible boundaries.

“You are a smart young vampeen. It took courage to assert yourself as you did. While that is far from our standard practice, we will grant acceptance this time,” Laurence stated writing a few more lines on his pad.

And so I began. I told everything from the day before my transformation when Kellan woke me up that morning to the final walk out Al made with Keira. I left no conversation out, no embarrassing emotions understated. I even backtracked and explained the details of my brief fling with Mike so they had a back-story.

Upon finishing, the three men sat motionless glaring at me. No sway in a positive way displayed in their stances,

which allowed my nerves to electrify me. The serum rose in my throat to the point where my gums ached and oozed. I wanted to scream, tell them to make a decision already, but I didn't. I knew better.

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Chapter Seven

I contemplated speaking, breaking the silent growls set to hurl my way, but, again, I knew better. So I sat and awaited my fate. Five minutes, ten minutes... I started fiddling with my hands in my lap to keep from cracking. There was no break in their stares, no movement on their part in any form. Ten became fifteen minutes, which drifted to sixteen. By this point I was screaming inside. I wanted my mother, needed her confidence and assurance, simply her security like I needed blood to survive.

Seventeen minutes and fifty-two seconds after I spoke my last word, Laurence relieved me.

“We have discussed your actions and have concluded a final proclamation,” he announced, all three shifting slightly. He must have read the puzzled expression on my face because he added, “You’re not the only one with a gift Alexa. Auggy, Felipe and I can communicate mentally as well as read the minds of others, including you.”

So they can read all my thoughts...

“We can and have,” Felipe confirmed.

“You’re not like others Alexa. You have a kind heart and a strong preservation for humanity, yet you’re protective of us equally. You have no quarrel or premeditated opinions over people or vampires alike. You haven’t judged once since you entered. You appear subdued but we see the fierce warrior inside you,” Laurence detailed.

“You would be extremely valuable in our ranks. You are exactly who I need for infiltration with our enemies. No one would cast you out. You look too innocent. Plus you’re

loyal to a fault and would never betray those who count on you," Auggy relished, desire saturating his pores.

"Indeed you are right my friend however Alexa has made it clear to us that she wants no such placement or privilege currently," Felipe spoke on my behalf. I was relieved to not have to deliver a refusal, though they could contract me against my will if they wanted.

"We do not force application, only to those criminals we deem an asset, which is just. No man has ever chosen death over the ranks with us," Auggy said narrowing his eyes in my direction as if I'd offended them.

"Relax my friend. It seems we owe Alexa. She, shall we say, completed our mission for us. It was not her responsibility but rather our officer's duty. Obviously you are aware of Alejandro Bancroft's failure to comply with safety and regulation in this scenario," Laurence stated touching his fingertips together contemplatively in front of his chest.

"Yes, I suppose I do," I replied, uneasy with the subject. I didn't agree with their punishment, with their dismissal of my mentor. He was and is a brave vampire with equal balance of preservation, strategy, and tactics.

"Hmm, I believe we view Senor Bancroft differently. Nonetheless, let's get on with this. Alexa we have decided to grant you one wish as our form of repayment for your assistance. So name it, anything you'd like and it shall be awarded," Felipe prompted.

"Alexa, amuse me while you ponder your reward," Laurence requested. "Tell me, what drives you to preserve humanity when they refuse to do it themselves?"

"Many things contribute to my attitude towards humanity. The biggest though is my connection to that

race. My dad is human; my best friend who is like a sister to me is too. Vampires, from what I've seen, don't have the same ties of love. They either forfeit their connection and close off their heart or they outlive their relatives. Regardless when a human owns a part of your heart, you carry a protective instinct and a mother's fear. It's easy for me to picture every male as a father like my own, every woman a sister and best friend. I couldn't bear to lose those two staples in my life.

"With that in mind, I would and will always fight to keep from inflicting that sort of painful loss on another. My nose issue helps keep me in line and away from my primal vampire instincts, but even if it worked properly, my beliefs would remain. Humans may act stupid, irresponsible and be vulnerable in more ways than vamps, but that doesn't justify cruelty. And those that deserve it are the weak links every species has. Even vampeens and vampires are subject to the ingrates. I would never punish or view an entire group or population based off bad examples. We all strive to stand as strong individuals above all else. So I will never judge all vampires based off Keira's behavior; the same as I wouldn't judge humans based off Hitler. Even if I see a group of people acting out, I will never carry over their ideas or disputable expressions onto their like kind. It's all these things combined that compile my outlook basis," I explained. I was surprised to have opened up to that degree in front of such officers. If they didn't agree with my expression or felt that I'd crossed a boundary in protection of secrecy, I could be in trouble. But I refused to lie or downplay my opinion on the matter. This was my outlook alone, nothing I forced on anyone; plus they asked.

"My, oh my. I believe we have a future peace ambassador in front of us gentlemen. It seems the doctor

may have been correct in his predictions,” Laurence commented.

“Dr. Zhan?” I checked recalling the doctor’s tale from two prophets of Kellan and me bringing peace among our kind.

“But of course. He tends to the medical needs of our entire staff here,” Felipe confirmed.

“I admit I’m starting to believe the quack. It’s not every day that I meet a noble warrior. Even I fail in that definition at times,” Auggy chimed in. I took that as a great compliment given his hardcore military management and Vietnam mentality. “It is a compliment. I’m not easily impressed,” he stated having read my thoughts again.

“Which brings us back to your reward. What have you decided upon?” Felipe asked. Laurence retrieved his paper and pen again to document my answer I assumed.

I sat silently for a moment contemplating the options. When you’re offered anything and yet have everything you need, what is left to choose? And that’s when I knew. I was to choose the reason I was here, the only person I’d continually thought of throughout this meeting – Alejandro.

“I would like Alejandro Bancroft to be reinstated in his previous position with no negative remarks tied to his employee file or family name,” I stated without hesitation. The moment I said it, I felt deep down that it was the right choice.

“I’m curious Alexa. Would you be willing to work for us, with pay of course, on certain special assignments? Nothing full time or obligatory. You would be allowed to accept or reject each project we consider you for,” Laurence asked. Auggy’s eyes lit up at the idea and Felipe smiled coyly.

“I’m sorry to question you, but am I really that valuable to you?” I still saw myself as an overweight, insecure teenager with little importance or influence in this world.

“You see our security?” Auggy asked. I nodded. “That’s because bribery and betrayal are common. They’re common because many vamps don’t have a strong moral foundation. They are selfish and sway with the team that will give them the most. That’s why we pay high salaries. Let me ask you Alexa. Would you kill a vamp for a million dollars?”

“No,” I whispered finally understanding their view.

“Sadly almost everyone else would. You didn’t even hesitate or think otherwise internally,” he concluded.

“So will you consider assisting us at times?” Felipe asked.

“Under one condition,” I replied.

“My, my. You are attempting to bargain with the High Authorities? Don’t erase our good impression Alexa,” Felipe said cupping his hands.

“Every future leader should know the basics of negotiation though I assure you I won’t change your opinions of me. My condition is that my reward be fulfilled to the extent of my terms. I don’t want Alejandro or his family looked down upon please,” I reiterated.

“More to admire from you Alexa,” Laurence commented. “Roxy,” he called. Two seconds later she was in the room.

“Yes sir?”

“Bring me a phone,” he commanded.

“Use mine sir,” she offered, handing him a slim-lined, high tech cell phone.

“Get Alejandro Bancroft on the line for me immediately,” he directed. Without hesitation her fingers flew over the number keys. She handed it to him as soon as I heard the first ring.

“Hello?” Alejandro answered.

“Bancroft, report for duty at oh-seven hundred. You are required to resume your position with no negative remarks immediately,” Laurence demanded. This was the

first time I'd heard a truly authoritative exclamation from him.

"Sir, yes sir," Alejandro chanted in response.

"You have Miss Alexa Jackson to thank for your reinstatement. You shall be granted no other reprieves in the event of another mistake. Anthony will have your badge upon arrival. You will have to clear security so don't be late," he directed remaining strong toned.

"Yes sir. Thank you sir," he replied.

Laurence returned the phone to Roxy. "Don't confuse my delicate demeanor with you for weakness Alexa. I command respect because I am to be feared. You are favored by us but by no means privileged," he explained.

"I understand and am grateful," I smiled.

"Roxy, escort Sharon Jackson in," Felipe stated. With a quick nod she was off.

"Here Alexa, take my card. My personal line is on there should you ever need anything," Felipe said extending a small white business card.

"Here, take mine as well," Auggy offered. He handed me an identical card. Laurence volunteered his right after Auggy.

"Thank you," I replied. Looking down I saw each card contained a first name and phone number in black print in the center. No titles or a company name was shown; the remainder was as stark as the walls.

A moment later my mother entered the room.

"Mrs. Jackson, I don't have time to discuss anything. I simply wanted to confirm that your daughter is safe and

free to leave. She has agreed to work on special assignments for us yet has no obligation to us beyond what she agrees to. You are to discuss this agreement with no one outside this agency and your spouse. Alexa, you are permitted with Kellan as we know your relationship with Alejandro's son is protected," Felipe rattled off in a commanding tone, far from the one used with me prior.

"Yes sir. Thank you," my mother replied.

All three men stood at once; I quickly copied moving next to my mother. "One last thing Mrs. Jackson," Laurence spoke having taken a few steps toward the door.

"Yes sir?"

"Your daughter has found favor in our eyes. No other has attained such a status before so I want no confusion or manipulation. She has our favor; not you or your family," Laurence confirmed.

"Yes sir. I understand," she stated. My mother seemed so rigid, nervous yet on her toes. I could tell she was flustered underneath.

"Good bye Alexa. It was a pleasure meeting you. Again, please call should you need anything," Felipe said.

"Thank you for everything. I truly appreciate it," I acknowledged with a smile.

"Good bye Alexa," Laurence stated before leaving.

"I believe I have a few projects in mind for you. I'll be in touch soon," Auggy added before following the others.

Once they'd left I realized that they never properly said good-bye to my mother. They only acknowledged me. I used that as my final confirmation that they weren't exaggerating when they said I was favored.

Roxy escorted us out a back way. We stopped at a final security desk where we received our cell phones and surrendered our badges.

“Octavio will escort you the rest of the way ladies. Have a good night,” Roxy said turning on her heels to backtrack.

“Call me Rocky,” he advised.

“Rocky?” I questioned.

“Cause I’m solid as a rock. No one’s gotten past me... and I hate my name,” he chuckled at the end. He embodied a laid back yet gangster Hispanic. His head was shaved and his body solid muscle and tan with a tribal tattoo swallowing his left arm.

“Follow me,” he prompted. We ushered behind him and were led down another hall to a utility room and back door. “When you exit you’ll be on King Street. You should be able to find your way.”

“Thank you,” my mother stated seeming anxious to be officially free again.

“No prob. Have a good night Mrs. Jackson and I’ll see you round Lex,” he said with a quick wave. How did he know my nickname? This place knows too much about me.

“Good night,” I replied. Rocky swiped a badge and pressed his hand against a wall scanner. One second later the door unlocked. My mother pushed it open and we were outside.

The moment the door closed I was in her arms. She squeezed me so hard I felt a sharp pain near my lungs. I gasped and heard a tiny snap. She jumped back. I saw she had shed silent tears in our embrace.

“Mom,” I breathed through my teeth. “I think you broke my rib. How long will I take to heal?”

“When was the last time you fed?” she pressed in a cross between mother and business mode.

“A week and a half ago,” I answered waiting for the pain to subside.

“That’s too long, especially with all that happened. You should feed once a week,” she scolded. “Can you make it back to the car? We’re about a mile and a half away.”

“Mom, I’m a vampeen, not a human. I’ll be fine,” I replied. She nodded and took off. I trailed close behind her. We were nearly flying to get back as soon as possible. That alone pushed me onwards despite the throbbing inside. I found mid-way that not breathing helped.

The drive home seemed to take longer than normal. My mother insisted I tell her every detail. By the time we arrived home I was ready to lie in bed for a while, but we had company. Kellan’s parent’s SUV was in the driveway as was Kellan’s beamer, which automatically upped our household by three plus my dad and Kellan. Looked like I would be entertaining for a bit.

The second we walked in the door Kellan enveloped me in his arms tightly. I didn’t resist, only returned his enthusiasm and relief despite my pain still lingering.

“Kellan, pull back. Lexi, are you healing yet?” my mother insisted in her mother bear protecting her cub voice.

“Heal? What the hell happened? What did they do to you?” Kellan broke into an angered panic instantly checking me.

“Relax. Mom hugged me too tight and broke my rib. I haven’t fed lately so it didn’t start healing immediately, but I’m fine. I’ll be okay,” I explained.

I heard a sniff as if someone was crying. I looked over to the kitchen and saw a tearful Beth. A second later she gently hugged me. “Thank you so much,” she stuttered through heaves as the tears continued to stream.

Next thing I knew Al was hugging me. He didn’t linger. “Thank you Lexi. I don’t know what you did but I will be eternally grateful,” he stated pulling Beth into his arms. “In all honesty, we weren’t sure what we were going to do,” he added.

“You’re welcome,” I smiled; I felt the joy inside. I knew I’d made the right choice and regardless of a thank-you receipt I would do it again. Had it been my parents or me in the same position, I would pray that someone would do the same. It’s hard to find work in the human world when you’re a vamp. You are constantly concerned with aging and secrecy; you’re forced to move on more often as well. Someone like Al would be forced to get papers due to his age and to top it off they pay much less. It’s all more of a hassle than it’s worth.

Remembering human jobs though, I quickly scanned the room and listened. “Where’s Dad?” I asked.

“He took off Lexi. I sent him away just in case. I didn’t want any harm to come to him,” my mother answered.

“O, okay. He’ll be back soon though, right?” I frowned, disappointment sinking in. Out of everyone, I looked forward to seeing him the most. I knew he was torn and I knew he felt like a failure because he couldn’t protect us so I wanted to show him he didn’t have to. I would have to wait though.

“I plan to call him in a bit,” she replied.

“Okay. My turn. Come here love,” Craig burst through the crowd and took me in his arms. “If the nerves are still ticklin’ you or those aches killin’ you, I can kiss ‘em away,” he grinned. Leave it to him to break the tension.

“Thanks but I’m okay. Just ready to change and lay around for a while,” I chuckled. I felt a tiny sting of pain in doing so, but I was healing already so it wasn’t unbearable.

“Lucky for you then that I’m available to lay around with for a few hours. Unfortunately you can’t have me forever; my doll gets a tad jealous. But what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, ay?” he said. I knew he was joking and I was glad to get a laugh in after tonight.

“Al, Beth, if you’d like to stay I can give you the details of Lexi’s experience. You’re a part of the ranks again so you’re allowed,” my mother offered.

“We would like that,” Al confirmed.

“Craig, you want to watch a movie with me upstairs? You can come too if you want Ellen,” I winked, a smirk on my face.

“Sounds good love. Lead the way,” he prompted linking my arm and walking toward the stairs.

“Funny guys. Don’t think you’re gonna be alone together. I don’t trust you mate,” Kellan said speeding up behind us.

“How can you not trust your best mate?” Craig argued unlinking his hand to grab my butt.

“That’s why,” Kellan iterated. He snatched Craig’s arm and yanked him back away from me.

I changed into my pajamas, which consisted of my favorite VS capris and a white cotton tee. We all cuddled side by side in my bed and watched a James Bond movie. It was the most relaxing thing I'd done all week. I didn't have to worry for the moment. Al got his job back, my meeting went well, Mike wasn't around and I had two strong vamps ready to defend me on each side. For once I could let go of all the stress and enjoy this time, and it was rejuvenating and blissful.

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Chapter Eight

I must have fallen asleep. I awoke just before sunrise to Kellan running his fingers through his hair.

“How long was I out?”

“Only about two hours. Your body needed it though. You should be healed. Are you?” he asked pulling away so I could check.

I was off the bed in two seconds stretching every which way. No pain; I wasn't even sore. “I'm good,” I announced. “I think Mom was right though. I need to feed today.”

“Do you want me to go with you? I fed Monday,” he offered. He had moved to stand next to me.

“Umm...” I hesitated. I knew he fed the same as me, except that he tended to kill his victims, but I was almost embarrassed by the idea of him watching me. My only guess was that being overweight before, I always felt like people judged me when I ate in front of them. If I had a slice of pizza, I envisioned them saying I ought to eat a salad. If I was eating a salad, I heard them say I should be using vinaigrette instead of my ranch dressing. Though I was thin now and wouldn't be eating human food again, I was still self-conscious eating around anyone but my family and Mel.

“You're not obligated to say yes. I won't be offended,” he stated, eyeing me closely observing my reaction.

“Thanks. I think I should go by myself this time.” I glanced at my nightstand for my trusty alarm clock, not

that I used it anymore. It displayed the time prominently in red blocks: 5:42AM.

“I should get ready. If I’m lucky I can catch an early morning jogger.” From what I’d been told, they’re the best since exercising increases the blood flow, and the faster it pumps, the quicker I could feed and run.

An hour later I returned. Kellan had taken the opportunity to go home, shower and change.

“Did you eat?” he asked.

“No, but I drank,” I smirked.

“Then what did you drink?” he pressed with a charming smile.

“A rail thin blonde. She was all I found. It was enough to tide me over.” I made the rule to never look at my victim’s face. If it turned out to be someone I knew, I would die inside. And even if I didn’t, given my moral compass, I would be haunted by their face forever.

I looked at the clock and decided it was a decent time to call Mel. She wouldn’t voluntarily be awake, but wouldn’t kill me for waking her. I grabbed my cell phone that Kellan had charged for me while I slept. I punched in Mel’s number and waited for her to answer.

“Lex? Please tell me it’s you,” she checked anxiously. She was far from groggy.

“It’s me. I thought I was waking you up...”

“Are you crazy? My sister goes off to see the Volturri for an unknown reason, could possibly be killed, or I don’t know what, and I’m supposed to sleep peacefully? You are officially a white cracker whack! Now tell me what happened. You survived obviously because I shouldn’t be

your one and only bail me out of jail call," she blurted, somewhat reprimanding, a bit sarcastic, but mostly relieved.

"I can't tell you. Just... umm... remember what the Volturri wanted Edward to do when they declined him?"

"Join," she instantly shot back.

"Part time help, no contract, I decide the terms," I spewed.

"Okay. Well, it could be worse I suppose," she replied.

"What are you doing today?" I asked. I sped downstairs and retrieved a bottle of water from the fridge.

"Now that I know you're okay, I'm so going to sleep," she said promptly yawning.

"Where are your Mom and Kyle?"

"Mom is on a weekend trip with her boy toy and Kyle is staying with my Aunt Janice this weekend. It's my cousin Jake's birthday so they're doing some big weekend trip to Carowinds," she explained, yawning again.

"So you're home alone?" I took a long sip of my water.

"Yes, thank God. I've needed a break from them."

"Yeah, I agree. Call Craig if you get too lonely," I reminded her.

"I already did. He'll be here in about an hour."

"Awesome. Now go sleep!"

"Night Lex."

"Morning Mel," I replied.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll talk to you later," she chuckled.

I hung up and finished my water. "So what are we doing today?" I asked Kellan, who had made his way down to the kitchen shortly after me.

"Nothing jumps out," he replied tousling my hair.

"You are always touching my hair. Ever notice that?" I questioned a tad snobbish in my tone.

"I love your hair. Do you not like me touching it?" he asked, never removing a finger from my strands.

"I don't mind. Just making sure you're aware of yourself," I grinned.

"I'm very aware when it comes to me with you."

"Uh huh..."

"Are you ready to tell me what happened last night?"

"I really don't want to repeat it," I fidgeted. He looked disappointed. His expression quickly turned hard, unreadable. Despite loving me, he was still quick in covering his emotions. He tended to close people off easily. It's when he did that that I wanted to pull him in closer, tighter. I feel like I'm about to lose him forever when he does that.

"Kiss me," he demanded.

"Why?" I asked, caught off guard by his cold, angry tone.

"Damn it Lex. If you won't tell me what happened, at least let me see what happened."

I stared blankly at him for a minute before nodding my head in agreement. I knew he's doing it out of concern, not curiosity. And when you love someone, no matter how angry you are, you always want to accept their affection.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, leaned up and pressed my lips to his. He gently pulled me in tighter. We'd obviously reached and passed a critical point in our relationship since we instantly connected again, no barriers present.

"Favor? They found favor with you?" he asked within my head, still kissing me. His right hand lifted to cradle my neck.

"Yes. Everyone says it's a big deal, but I don't see why."

"These are the feared leaders of our world. They are Hitler, Castro and Stalin. Maybe they didn't show you that side of themselves but just ask my father, or even your mother, these are rulers that control with an iron fist and demolish in seconds those begging for mercy. Even I am afraid of them and what they would do to me. Just looking at them wrong can get you penitentiary time."

"Penitentiary time?"

"It's like prison but more like a slave camp where you're fed once a month but required to work every night. Then when you're useless to them, they destroy you," he explained. I heard the fear in his words. Kellan hadn't shown the slightest of weakness with anyone or anything... until now. He slightly trembled as he added, "That's where they sent my dad."

I was silent. Words couldn't erase his emotions. I simply continued to embrace him with a bit more strength. Inside I was shaking at the vision in my mind. It all sounded awful; like a demented form of the Holocaust but for vamps.

He pulled away. "Lexi, I really don't want to see your idea of what happened," he pleaded softly.

“Oh. My mind! You see it all... I’m... I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. Well I was but obviously I wasn’t thinking straight,” I replied. I felt horrible. We’d both had a hell week and I’d just manifested the cake topper.

“Calm down babe. I know you didn’t mean to.”

“So what do you want to do today?” I asked wanting to change the subject as soon as possible. No sooner had I spoke the words that my phone rang. I quickly answered without checking the caller ID; I was too busy carefully and closely observing Kellan. For once he seemed fragile.

“Hello?”

“Alexa Jackson. It’s Auggy. I trust you made it home safely,” he stated more than asked. Kellan’s eyes sprung open when he heard the caller.

“Of course, thanks,” I replied moving away from Kellan. I felt his eyes boring into my back as I made my way to the sectional to sit.

“Good. I was right yesterday; I have the perfect assignment that I could use you on,” he announced.

“What kind?” I asked. I didn’t want to cross lines but I wanted to know more about the assignment I was being offered.

“Infiltration. Listen, we don’t discuss details over the phone. Lines can be tapped by anyone. When can you get down here to be briefed?”

I turned to look at a statue still glaring at me. Kellan was clearly not a fan of the whole concept. “Is an hour okay?”

“Great. I love the effort Alexa. A guard will meet you in the garage and lead you through the officers’ entrance,” he

stated. Though his voice was always raw, I heard a slight inflection of appreciation and approval.

“Okay. Thank you,” I said. He hung up and I closed my phone. My stomach twisted knowing I now had to turn and face Kellan.

He sighed and though it was one gesture, I heard his apprehension, disapproval, worry, fear, everything bundled in. “Are you sure you want to do this Lexi?”

“No, but I’ll decide that when I get there.”

I wasn’t an idiot. I was aware there were risks to certain ventures and working for the ranks as a vumper, as they were called, was a big one. At the same time, how do you say no to someone who places you on a mini pedestal? No one else was favored by the High Authorities, only me. How could I strain that relationship with an outright refusal? They assured me I wasn’t obligated yet I still felt obligated in some way.

“Please don’t do this,” he pressed softly. He was at my side in an instant, took my hands in his and was luring me in with his beautiful emerald eyes.

I broke away and walked toward the kitchen. “What happened to I’ll support you no matter what you choose? When your dad asked me at my party, those were your words.” I was upset that he was putting me in this situation.

“Because if you joined with my dad you’d be under him. He wouldn’t endanger you with high security operations. He’d put you on small projects like a vamp showing off to humans. The High Authorities, anything that involves them in a project is huge and extremely dangerous Lexi. Favor or not, they won’t mourn losing you. But me,

Mel, your family, we would be devastated,” he explained. Of course he had to throw my family in there.

“I’m still going. I gave him my word. If I think it’s too dangerous, then I’ll decline. I love you,” I added. I gave him a kiss on the cheek and left. I couldn’t stand to argue this way. He had my best interest at heart, but didn’t understand my point of view. And having my family’s concern hanging overhead wasn’t something I wanted in the forefront right now.

Given the time, it took me a bit longer to get there than with my mother. I parked in the same garage my mom had hours ago and ran carefully and secretly to the headquarters. I called my mom on my way since she’d left to be with my father. She was just as leery as Kellan. My dad couldn’t even pull himself together to talk to me when he heard. Talk about feeling crappy. Imagine being the sole cause of your dad’s breakdown.

I walked into the garage on high alert. I scanned the area but found no guard. I made my way to the cement column and waited. Forty-three seconds elapsed when I saw a man in all black flag me down from the alley on the left side. I instantly knew he was a vampire.

“Alexa?” he whispered. I nodded, looked around briefly and then flew to his side at vamp speed.

“Name’s Rico. Follow me,” he stated. Rico stood about 5’9”, dark brown hair falling a little past his shoulders, the dark brown eyes and a gorgeous tan on a semi-buff bod. All these tan vampires were making me jealous that I didn’t visit the beach more before I transformed; I was also noticing a pattern. Almost all the guards I’d seen had muscles to flash. The subtle detail that stood out on Rico was a scar that ran diagonal from his left temple across half his forehead up to his hairline.

He led me down the alley to a door that was labeled 'Stairs - Fire Exit Only.' He placed his hand on the vertical door handle. A green light flashed and the door unlocked. It was a clever disguise. Humans who tried to enter would assume it's locked or an exit from the inside only type door when it didn't open.

We immediately entered a stairwell with only an option to go down. We raced down the three flights, through a grey metal door and into a white room. (I was shocked... not) A short Asian woman greeted Rico.

"Hey Rico. What's happenin', *Papi*?" she giggled and batted her eyes, which were pale blue. - Could she come on any stronger?

"Gotta newbie here," he announced pointing back at me. She gave me the once over.

"Stand against the wall and spread your arms," she directed, her tone hard compared to moments ago. Nonetheless I listened. She scanned me as the other blue-eyed guy did hours before.

"She's clear," she said. "Call me later, *Papi*." she winked at Rico.

"Sure," he replied. It was obvious he wasn't into the girl. We walked through the other door and were in a subway station type replication with a turn style and mirror, clearly a looking window. Rico swiped his card, scanned his hand and went through the turn style. "Wait a sec. I have to enter a code for you."

I decided to make small talk. "The girl back there, it's obvious you don't feel the same way she does. Why didn't you just tell her?" I asked.

“Cause outside the puppy love, she’s a good lay,” he answered bluntly. “Scan your hand on the pad, count to three and walk through,” he commanded.

I obeyed and we exited another grey door straight onto the crazy business floor.

“Auggy is in the Battle Room,” Roxy advised on her way to another office.

“It’s this way,” Rico prompted, leading me across the floor to a conference room that actually had a table, but now there were no chairs. Inside Auggy was talking to another officer.

Abruptly he threw up a hand to silence the officer. He turned to Rico and glared so strongly that I thought fire was going to flare from him. Auggy got right up in his face. “Get your head out of the gutter and your mind off sleeping with Alexa! She’s a minor! I catch you thinking like that you’re off to camp. Now get back to work!” he yelled. Rico quickly left.

He turned back to the officer who stood at attention. “Sarz you’re dismissed. Close the door,” he ordered. The vamp was gone in half a second.

“Let’s get down to business,” he prompted. “What do you know or have you heard about the Bladangs?”

“Basics. Not a lot but definitely enough.”

“We need several people on the inside. This gang of slums has launched an attack on our Florida force. They’ve converted a quarter of our ranks with cash and flash. We’ve had to lock out all officers and guards on our special high security task force. It’s a disgrace, an utter disgrace,” he briefed, anger and frustration clear in his expressions.

“I don’t know if this helps but Mike, my ex who’s obsessed with me, was recently turned by the Bladangs. He’s working with them,” I offered.

“That’s an excellent in. You can rekindle a romance with this new vampire and have him present you to the Bladang leaders. It quickly gives you an alibi and a way inside. Once in, ideally, try to learn their plans and codes. Try to penetrate the higher circles and uncover their strategies. Your primary goal is to find their weak spot. With this info, we can launch a counter attack when they least expect it and over throw the Palace,” he rambled eyes sparkling with hope.

“What or who is the Palace?” I asked.

“It’s their version of the White House. It’s where he would present you to the leaders. Look,” he pressed a button and suddenly the table glowed of a 4-D live map of the forest. He zoomed in to show me what looked like a log cabin.

“That’s it?” I was far from impressed.

“Don’t be fooled by appearances Alexa. There’s more artillery in the cellar of that shack than in half the world. And they have advanced technology even we can’t pay to obtain. Think smart. There’s always a reason why a gang hasn’t been erased, usually it’s because the loss risk outweighs their potential threat. It’s only because they attacked us that we’re fighting them,” he challenged. It made sense. I assumed it was the same as in the human world.

“Do you have men inside already?” I checked. It would be great to know I wasn’t alone.

“Two. Stacia has been on assignment for three months, but can’t get close enough. She hasn’t reported anything

new in weeks. And Caesar has been on the project a year. He's in one of the higher circles but they still don't trust him. That's why I need you. You're new enough to pass the smell test, have this Mike guy to get you in, and with your gift you can pass any mind test they have," he detailed.

"My gift, as you like to call it, is only that I can't smell humans, vamps or blood."

"I think you know it's more. You even optioned this idea to Kellan. You can protect certain things within your mind," he countered, squaring off with me.

"I'm not even sure it works like that." I was worried about being wrong.

"It does. I know because this entire conversation hasn't passed through your thoughts once yet you've answered my questions and obviously considered the project, correct?"

"Yes," I acknowledged, caught off guard by the verification.

"You're worried about protecting yourself in case they can do as we have in mind probing. It has prompted your gift into motion. I must admit, it's fascinating," he marveled while staring at my head.

I stood motionless staring at the image in front of me. I noticed guards in the trees and a few on foot. I thought about the concept of it all of course, but mainly I was calculating the danger involved. Kellan and my parents were lingering in my consideration.

"How long would I be on assignment if I agree?"

"Depends how long it takes for us to gather a weak spot. As soon as you give word, the officers and guards will

take over and your job is done,” he answered, his eyes directly on me waiting for the green light.

I hesitated. This was like deciding whether you’re willing to go to war to protect your family. I respected the military a lot more after this.

“Okay. Give me twenty-four hours before I start. I need to gather and prepare myself.”

“Great. We appreciate it Alexa. Now listen to my instructions. In seventy-two hours I expect a report. How you report is silently. I will meet you in the garage; make sure no one follows you. Regardless I will not speak and neither will you. I will retrieve the info from your thoughts. Any responses or updates I will write out and quickly destroy. If you’re in trouble, you will press the panic button on this ring,” he instructed. He handed me a yellow gold ring with a large emerald stone. It looked like an actual antique fashion ring from the fifties. I placed it on my right middle finger.

“If you press it, we’re coming and your cover’s blown. So only do it as a last resort. Caesar and Stacia will be advised of your arrival and your alliance with us. Go along with whatever they say. Once you’ve gone out there, when you come back to see your family and Bancroft, you cannot speak. They will most likely bug you without your knowledge. Write on paper and nothing else. They will also tap your cell so no texts or calls you don’t want them to hear. Any questions?”

“Will I be updated with Stacia and Caesar’s finds?”

“Only if I feel it’s important or will help you in any way.”

“If I find a weak point the first day, will you act on it?”

“Most likely, but only if it’s penetrable.”

“Well, F.Y.I., I’ll be looking for a weak point a.s.a.p. I want this to be over with quickly. How do I contact you if I need to?”

“Text ‘call me’ to my phone. That ring has a tracker inside so I’ll meet you anywhere in five minutes. If I’m away Rico will be there.”

“Okay,” I stated, the nerves kicking into overdrive.

“You’re protected Alexa. I won’t let anything happen to my best weapon,” he assured me. “Rico!” he called. He was in the room in a second ready for his orders.

“Yes sir?”

“Escort Alexa out and report back here in five minutes.”

“Yes sir.”

“Good-bye for now Alexa,” Auggy said with a slight nod.

“Good-bye.”

I couldn’t believe this was happening, that it’s real. I just signed myself up for mission impossible...

—

Chapter Nine

Rico escorted me out the same way I had left before. I was relieved and overwhelmed when I reached my car. It hit me that I'd agreed to infiltrate the camp of a known enemy beside Mike of all people, but it didn't sink in all the way. The obvious thoughts of fear and possibility ran through my mind, but emotionally I was numb. I knew what I had to do, had my strategy mapped out already. And while it was dangerous, I was more afraid of telling Kellan, Mel and my parents than following my plan of action.

I picked up my cell phone and dialed Kellan.

"Lexi?" he answered on edge. I could tell he had been stressing.

"It's me. Are you at my house or yours?" I asked trying to determine where I was headed.

"Actually I'm at Mel's with Craig," he replied. "I didn't, couldn't," he corrected, "Be alone while you were gone..."

"I understand. I'll be there in a few." I closed my phone.

He sounded miserable. His voice was full of depression and nerves. He wasn't himself and I was the one to blame. Did I really make the right decision? First my dad, now Kellan and I was sure my mom and Mel would feel bad, they just wouldn't be as... severe I guessed.

I pulled into Mel's driveway. Kellan was sitting alone on the porch steps. He looked so lonely and cold. Without stepping out or speaking one word, I knew his walls of defense were up.

I sat in the car for a minute. We looked into each other's eyes from afar, neither one of us moved. It was this long, silent moment of desire, understanding, and finally compromise. I now realized how my mom and Kellan spoke with their eyes alone the day he told me he was a vampire.

In the old black and white movies it was common to see a tearful good-bye with few words spoken. I believe those to be more passionate than all the adoring words one person can speak. And the highest intensity farewells are the ones where they stare at each other for a good while before running together to embrace one final time.

I blinked and Kellan was in the passenger seat of my car.

"I can't do this any longer. Just tell me," he pleaded looking at my dashboard, then the floor, everywhere but at me.

"Are you sure you want to hear this now?" I started to object but he cut me off.

"Just tell me."

"Infiltration of the Bladangs. My mission is to get into the higher circles and locate a weak point for Auggy's team to attack. My get in free ticket lies with Mike. Auggy thinks I should make up with him and have him present me to the Leaders. It gives me an alibi." I sat silently waiting for him to respond. I couldn't look at him. I was too afraid of what I'd see. I guessed his reaction ahead of time but given the silence I wasn't sure anymore.

After five minutes of nothing I peered over at him. He had a solid blank stare straight through my windshield to the back of his car. He was motionless and sat still as a statue.

“Kellan?” I whispered.

Nothing.

“Please say something, anything...”

Nothing.

“At least move a finger or take a breath so I know you’re hearing me,” I pleaded, slightly worried by his reaction or lack thereof.

He finally turned to face me. The expression on his face was clearly one of pain.

“If you’re going to do this, at least let me claim you,” he spoke calmly.

“I’m not sure that would help me...”

“Are you saying you don’t want to be with me?”

“Kellan, stop. You know that’s not true. But I do have to pass as Mike’s girlfriend in front of the Leaders. It won’t help me to smell of another vampire,” I tried to rationalize with him, but his look prompted doubt.

“So you’re saying you don’t want to be with me, to reek of me?” he asked enraged.

“Kellan calm down. You know that’s not true. You know I love you.”

“Then prove it,” he demanded.

“How?”

“Have sex with me.”

“Kellan, my first time is not going to be to prove some irrational proclamation,” I argued. “I love you but I also love myself enough to demand respect on that subject.”

He was quiet before speaking again. "If you won't give or share some part of yourself with me then what guarantee do I have that you'll come back to me?"

"You have my word and my love," I replied. For that one moment I understood how he felt. I imagined myself the pudgy teen from a few weeks back. In that form I would have grasped for the same confirmation as Kellan was given my insecurities, but he shouldn't have any. He's perfect, to me anyways.

Suddenly he was laughing.

"Um... what did I miss?" I studied him cautiously.

"I'm sorry babe. I know I'm being irrational and possibly delusional but," he stopped laughing and got serious. "I know how dangerous these people are. And I especially know how deranged your ex is. Maybe this makes me crazy or maybe it shows I really do love you but should something happen to you, I want more than just this to remember you by. I want you to be a part of me and me a part of you forever."

"Can we finish this conversation at my house?" He nodded. "I should tell Mel something."

"Craig just did. Weren't you listening?"

"No. I guess I was focused on you. I blocked everything else out..."

He didn't say anything. I turned on the car and drove two neighborhoods down to my house. My parents still weren't back. Given the subject of our discussion though I was glad we were alone.

Out of habit I went straight up to my bedroom. Kellan was right behind me. I settled down on my bed lying on my

back face up. I saw him staring at me by the door.

“What do you want from me?” I whispered, focused on the slight indentation on my otherwise smooth ceiling.

“Whatever you’re willing to give,” he answered.

“What if I have nothing?”

“But you do.”

I didn’t say anything. I knew he was right. I did have something to offer but did I really want to give that up at this point? I’d known Kellan for about a month. Regardless of my certainty on how I felt, a girl who moved that quick with a guy was easy. I didn’t want the slut nametag... but exchanging blood could ruin my cover with the Bladangs.

I just realized that in my consideration, saying ‘no’ never popped up. Why do girls feel inclined to always please the guy? Why do our fears and plain hesitation always get covered? And why do we allow them to be?

It’s a one-word answer – love, or the idea of love. To have sex in our view is to give of oneself to the other. We would only do that if we cared a lot for the other person so naturally we pass that same reasoning onto the male. He must care a lot about me to give me part of him like this. But I’ve seen plenty of times over that our rationalizations are wrong and lead us to heartbreak and disappointment most of the time. That had me asking: was Kellan part of the majority?

“Lexi,” he was hovering over me so I had to look into his mesmerizing eyes. “Do you love me?”

“You know I do.”

“Do you believe me when I say I love you?”

I replayed the last few weeks with him at my side. He was a constant friend, protector, boyfriend and so much more. I knew I was more to him too given how truly emotional he was last night. "Yes."

"Then what's holding you back?" He brushed my cheek with the back of his fingers. He leaned in and kissed me. Instantly we melded together. I allowed him to see all my fears.

"I wouldn't think any less of you. I love you Lex, unconditionally. And there's no standard, no expectations, and no title to be attached to you. But this, this is what I want; only you can decide if this is what you want."

"You make it sound so easy."

"Because it is for me. I know anything I do with you I won't regret."

"Wow, that hit home." I pulled back to look at him. "I wouldn't regret anything with you," I whispered as I looked into his eyes.

"That's good," he said, the corners of his mouth turned up. I couldn't help but smile. He kissed my cheek. He continued down my jaw and up to my lips. All my reservations went out the window. I really wouldn't regret anything I did with him, so why hold back, especially with my upcoming mission?

I stopped thinking and pulled Kellan to me. I held him tight and kissed him passionately. I let him see what I wanted and finally decided I was ready to do.

"I love it when you think dirty," he giggled.

Just as his hand slid up my shirt, I heard it; what every teen dreads: my parents pulled in the driveway. I gave

Kellan one last kiss. He grunted and sighed before rolling over. I turned on my side and kissed his cheek.

“Sorry babe,” I whispered near his ear.

“You have no idea just how bad I want you,” he replied, desire sparkled in his eyes.

I gave him my best ‘I’m sorry and I pity you’ face. He was breathing heavily with deep breaths that occasionally came out as a sigh. He closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose and scrunched his forehead. I glanced down to see his legs crossed and hand carefully placed. He obviously was frustrated and possibly in a bit of pain. I felt bad, but parents do tend to have impeccable timing...

“I’ll be back. I’ve got to include them in my plans,” I announced. “I love you.” I gave him a quick kiss on his lips; he remained in the same controlled position.

I ran downstairs and right into my dad’s arms. Forgetting my own strength, I knocked him over. I didn’t care though; I was just happy to be in my father’s arms.

“A... Alex... Lex... I can’t... breathe,” he huffed breathlessly.

“Oh! Sorry.” I was off him and helped him to his feet within two seconds.

“Okay. Now let’s sit down and discuss this as adults,” he prompted.

My mother had taken their luggage to the bedroom and returned to sit beside my dad on the sectional. I took a deep breath and followed.

“Is Kellan going to join us?” my mother asked as though I was trying to hide him.

“Probably not. He already knows,” I replied. Somehow I thought she knew what we almost did upstairs but she didn’t say anything. That’s almost worse at times because it leaves you with a guilty conscience. If I’d asked if she heard or knew, then I’d have had to tell her even if she didn’t. And if I didn’t ask, every odd or scolding or parental look period would send me into paranoid mode.

“So tell us how this is going to work. I assume Auggy gave you a mission and a plan,” she said crossing her legs in a reserved manner. She’s in business mode. I guess it’s easier for her to deal with things that way.

I explained my assignment to them. I advised of my precautions: act as if I was always bugged because I probably would be and all calls were monitored and recorded.

“I can’t say I like this or even approve of it, but I will support you because you’re my little girl and I love you,” my dad said peering at my mother. He had sat relatively motionless the entire time I spoke. He listened intently.

“What sort of back up is he providing? Surely he’s not sending a new vampeen like you in alone,” my mother asked, crossing her arms.

“There are two officers in already. They will be there and this ring is a tracker and a panic button,” I revealed as I extended my hand for inspection. My mother glanced at it. Her face was hard; she visibly was angry and upset.

After a minute of awkward silence she spoke. “Alexa, I need to be alone with your father. I do not want to lose control in front of you,” she calmly stated as if I hadn’t told her I was risking my life.

“I’ll, uh, I’ll go somewhere for a few hours,” I stated. My dad nodded and quickly began soothing my mother. I’d

never seen her like that. She reminded me of the Hulk before he lost control, the calm before the storm. I was seeing a lot of firsts from my mother in the form of reactions. Kellan met me outside. I didn't bother telling him because I knew he'd heard everything.

"Can I go to your house?" I asked as we got in the car.

"I already planned to," he winked from the driver's seat. He revved the engine on cue.

"Uh huh... Did I unleash a monster?" I smirked.

"Maybe. You'll have to wait and find out."

"Is your mom home?"

"Nope. It'll be just you and me," he grinned from ear to ear with vivid excitement and anticipation. As we pulled around the corner to his house his smile quickly disappeared. I looked straight ahead to his driveway and saw the car.

"I really need to get my own place," he sulked.

"Stop. It's not that bad. We can still spend time together," I said.

"Hey Kellan. Hey Lexi," Beth greeted as we pulled in.

"Hi," I replied with a wave of my hand.

"I'm going to Gretchen's. Call me if you need me," she advised with a nod to Kellan.

The moment she pulled out onto the street I was whisked over Kellan's shoulder and traveling at the speed of light. He threw me down onto his bed with such force that the rails broke. I burst into laughter.

"Chill Romeo!" I exclaimed.

“Romeo doth not wait by the window for a kiss,” he joked. He was on top of me before I realized it. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he kissed me with force. Within moments he switched from playful to sensual; I felt a chill sprinkled over my body.

“We’re really doing this...”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“No, just nervous...”

“Stop me if you don’t feel comfortable.”

He trailed his lips from my ear down to my neck and down to my stomach he bared by lifting my shirt. He was gentle and soft. His lips touched my skin enough to feel good but light enough to tickle slightly too.

“Wait a sec,” he stopped abruptly as he sprung off the mattress. He pulled out the iPod he had given me and plugged it into his TV. I heard him scroll to the song he wanted. I anxiously waited to hear what he chose. “This is my song for you,” he said. He tossed his shirt on the floor and pulled me onto my feet and into his arms.

The music started... a smile grew.

“This is my favorite song off your list,” I announced, swaying with him to Red Jumpsuit Apparatus’ Your Guardian Angel.

Midway through he scooped me up and laid me back on the bed. He pressed his lips to mine again, this time in a way that melted my fears. It felt right; this all felt right in the moment. I ran my fingers through his hair and trailed down towards his chest. His hands slid under my shirt and upwards to my bra. And, as if right on cue, I heard the truck pull into the driveway. He froze his hands and lifted

back onto his knees. He sighed and closed his eyes, as if to calm himself. I heard Al come in the door.

“Hello Lexi. Kellan I hope you’re not compromising Alexa,” he greeted from downstairs.

Kellan rolled over to lie beside me. “Of course not Dad,” he sighed yet again; he sounded like he finally surrendered defeat.

“Want to watch a movie?” I offered, remote in hand. I was trying to cut his tension. I was upset too. He’d set it up beautifully this time; played the perfect song and danced with me. He was playful and fun in the beginning but loving and attentive. I felt at ease with him to a degree I’d never experienced before. I knew if anything happened, I could trust him before, during and after.

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Chapter Ten

Twenty-four hours passed by fast. I was happy that I got to spend time with everyone I wanted at some point. The hardest to say good-bye to was Kellan. Sure I'd see him at school, but we weren't allowed near each other. It, no doubt, would be torture. I'd spent almost every moment with him. I was definitely using him as motivation to complete my mission as soon as possible. The sooner I finished, the sooner I got to embrace him again and maybe finally share all of me with him, or at least let him claim me.

I knew my first step, part one of my plan. I had to call him; would probably even have to kiss him. GAG! I pulled my phone out and scrolled down to his name and hit send.

"The number you are trying to reach is no longer in service. Please check the number and try your call again."

I felt a ton of bricks smash down on me. I never thought his number would be disconnected. I hadn't even started my mission truly and I was already behind. There were only two things I could do. I could go by his house or go into the forest alone. If I was caught in the forest, I had to pray that Mike would vouch for me.

I left on foot. I was smart in my attire, practical with stretch jeans that hugged my curves to attract but were dark to blend in with the forest. They were also comfortable and pliable for quick movement. I wore a green tank top below with a brown zip-up hoodie over. The cleavage would entice Mike, if I found him, and the hoodie covered me in the conditions.

When I arrived at Mike's house, I instantly knew he wasn't there despite his car in the driveway. That's it. Now I had to enter the woods unprotected. I looked down at my ring and made the mental correction: not directly protected.

Now I had one problem: How do I get to the South Forest?

I had to call someone, but thinking in soldier mode, who could I call that wouldn't raise brows should they search my phone? I already erased all my contacts, messages, and call history, not that they probably couldn't restore it somehow. There was only one person I could call who would know and wouldn't be questioned: my mom. So I dialed.

"Alexa? What's wrong?" she answered hastily.

"Nothing. Just a new curve in my plan. I need you to tell me how to get to the South Forest..."

I heard felt her hesitation in the silence that followed my request. She's not stupid. If I needed directions, that meant I was going in alone and without an alibi.

"Mom? Are you going to tell me or should I call someone else?" I prompted hoping she would cave. She knew I'd get the information somehow.

"Travel south twenty miles towards the lake house we rented two years back. The forest on the other side is South Forest," she detailed. Her tone carried no inflection; she bared no emotion in her response.

"Thanks. I love you."

"Alexa?"

"Yeah?"

“Please be careful.”

“I will.”

I put my phone on silent and took off. I stayed on the back roads and in the woods parallel to the highway as much as possible. Twenty-five minutes later I was looking at the lake. On my left side it was lined with gorgeous houses and docks and a few cabins. On my other side, the forest. Looking at it like this, I realized why the Bladangs chose this location: the food came to them.

I took a deep breath, though I didn't need much air, it helped to calm me. I made my way towards the center of the forest to the small cabin shack Auggy had shown me. The sun peaked through the treetops as I ran between the pine trees and the occasional spruce and heavy old oaks. There were others mixed in but I wasn't good with tree types aside from the common ones.

I heard a rustle of leaves that didn't come from me. I abruptly stopped and looked overhead in the limbs and branches remembering what I saw on the 4D image. Nothing. I walked slowly on the forest floor listening intently for another brush. Strangely I heard birds far off but no other animals in the woods with me.

Treading lightly I suddenly felt a gust of wind rush past me. I froze glaring in the direction the breeze carried, but saw nothing. Regardless of what I saw or didn't see, someone knew I was here. I needed to be on high alert.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw movement overhead. Now I had confirmation I wasn't alone. I had two choices, admit it and call them out or play ignorant and innocent. The choice was made for me when one jumped in front of me.

“Can I help you little lady?” he asked with a mix of charm and sarcasm. He stood about 5’10” with dirty blonde hair and green eyes that pierced me. He crossed his buff arms and stood legs shoulder width apart.

“I was looking for a guy named Mike. He’s a new vamp that your group changed,” I replied directly. I took the tone my mother did in business mode. Another guy dropped down beside him taking the same stance though this one was actually pudgy.

“What’s he to you?”

“How is that your business?” I shot back. Maybe not the smartest move... Another vamp dropped down. This time, a stringy girl with fiery red hair and freckles.

The second male answered my question. “Anyone on our turf is our business. You’re on our turf and this Mike is too. So talk little lady.”

“Fine. He’s my ex-boyfriend,” I offered.

“Not good enough,” the blonde said.

“What more is there?” I asked.

He turned to the girl, “Glenda, go,” he ordered.

Within two seconds I had three vamps running around me and wrapping me in a net. I rapidly broke through the first few layers but my strength was no match for their speed. My feet were bound; arms glued to my side. The only free part of me was my head.

“Thanks guys. Get back to your spots and I’ll take her in,” the blonde advised.

“Sure thing Connor,” the other guy replied.

Connor carried me tucked under his arm like a football. I suppose I did look like one the way I was tied up.

“You don’t have to treat me like a hoodlum you know,” I spewed. Regardless of how I fidgeted, kicked or fought I couldn’t break free.

“Actually I do if I want to keep my job,” he said. He sped up and within moments we were in front of my destination: the Palace. A funny name considering it was more like a shack than a palace.

It was larger in person but gave no hint at its contents. I scanned the area. I noticed several cameras hidden within wooden planks on the roof and the stacked log corners.

Connor pressed the railing and the stairs that led up to the door dropped down and made a path to the cellar or basement below. He carried me down. At the bottom it looked like an abandoned basement, spider webs, dust and all. He opened a door and walked into the cedar wine cellar. He closed the door behind us and stood there. Though in the dark, I noticed tiny red stains on the wood.

“It’s a pity I have to turn you in. You’re actually cute,” he commented.

“Then don’t. We can run away together,” I optioned.

“Nice try,” he smirked.

“Well can you at least turn me upright?” I asked grumpily. I was tired of seeing everything sideways.

“Sure. But only because I like you.” He shifted me.

“Thanks. Any chance you can undo me? Obviously I can’t go anywhere...”

“Not a chance.”

“Figures,” I groaned. I looked up but saw nothing but the floor to ceiling wine racks that mysteriously were filled with red wine. I inhaled the scent much to my dislike of it.

I heard a quick beep.

“Finally,” he sighed. “We’ve been cleared.”

The cellar started moving. We turned until the doorframe was on the opposite wall revealing a pocket door with a scanner. Connor placed his hand in the center of the door; a red light flashed and the door slid open.

“Don’t talk,” he warned. He carried me down a long hall lined with spears.

“Why?” I whispered. As quick as I spoke a spear jolted down and shot at me on my left. Connor pulled me to the floor in time to avoid the hit.

“That’s why. Only I can talk in here unless you want to be injured and then fried,” he scolded.

There was something about Connor that attracted me to him, and not in a sexual way. I could tell he had a good heart. He didn’t want vamps to die; otherwise he wouldn’t have saved me a second ago. Of course I guessed he could also be telling the truth that he thought I was cute and that’s why he saved me. In that case he’s a typical guy.

“They’re hearing your thoughts,” he announced as he picked me up off the floor. “The spear heads are receptors. And I saved you because I think Kai will like you,” he explained.

“Who?” I thought.

“He’s one of our leaders.” I nodded in recognition. At the end of the hall, Connor scanned his hand again. Beyond the door was a large green marble floored room that had

curved walls. The one piece that stood out here was the room had stone statue lion's feet all around the room about a foot apart along the floor. He set me in the center of the floor and backed away.

"You're seriously leaving me here?" I scoffed.

"No, he's giving you over to me," a voice said. A second later I was able to put a face to the male's voice. I walked a tall, tanned male with large tribal tattoos on his arms. He wore board shorts, no shoes and a tank top. His thick, dark brown, wavy hair lay a little past his shoulders but was pulled into a low ponytail. He walked around me for a minute looking me up and down, no expression on his face.

"Listen, I don't know who you are but I would love you nonetheless if you could at least cut half this stuff of me so I can sit rather than lay," I pleaded. Patience escaped me at the worst times. And I was beginning to feel claustrophobic within this cocoon.

"I suppose," he sighed. "Cut her loose," he ordered. Connor took out a solid gold dagger and rather than ripping or slicing the material, the knife melted it.

"Thank you," I stated as I stood to my feet.

"Connor, return to your post," he commanded.

"Yes Kai," he replied. I knew he spoke his name so I would know who I was being left with.

"How adorable. I believe our Con-man has a crush on you," he chuckled amused by the idea. He swiftly moved to stand in front of me. He stared for a solid minute before he began pacing.

The door charged open and slapped the wall with a boom. All the lion's feet shot out tiny darts with a purple liquid on the tips. I sprung to a gap on the floor. Kai landed a few feet over.

Standing in the doorway was a very plump young woman with curly dark brown hair. Judging by the measurements, she looked to be at least a size twenty. She had a pretty face despite her weight.

"What the heck were you thinking Gabi? You could have killed us!" Kai yelled.

"Well I didn't. Now will you please hurry up! Are you keeping her, dumping her, or humping her?"

"I was trying to decide before you almost killed us!"

"Whatever. Get on with the show will you." she stomped out, slamming the door again on her way.

"Testy isn't she?" I commented.

"I heard that pale rail!" she screamed from down the hall.

Kai laughed. "She really is. But back to business. Why are you here, Alexa Lorryne Jackson?"

"How..." I began.

"I just do. Now talk," he cut in.

"I was looking for my ex-boyfriend. I heard that your group changed him," I explained.

"Name?"

"Mike Hawthorne."

"Doesn't ring a bell. This ex, are you really attached to him?"

“Not really. I just wanted to talk to him.”

“You’ve come a long way and have gotten into a lot of trouble just to talk.”

“Your point?”

“Don’t have one.”

“Clearly. Now will I see him or are you going to kill me?” I bluntly questioned. It was risky, but I hated the game of cat and mouse.

“Do you realize who you’re talking to?” he asked stepping right in front of me. He leaned down in hope of intimidating me.

“I probably should be scared, but I’m not. I don’t know you and sorry if this offends you but I can’t take a barefoot, half-dressed vamp seriously on the threat radar,” I stated without hesitation. Despite their weapons, I felt comfortable with these vampires. I didn’t feel at risk though I knew I was. They had weapons and spyware all over.

In walked another vamp. He looked as if he could be Kai’s brother. He had the same tattoos on his arms but was wearing khaki pants, loafers and a white button up shirt. He was laughing as he entered. “I told you bro. You got to look business to do business.”

He pushed Kai off to the side and extended his hand. “I’m Kalel, Kai’s older, smarter brother.”

“I’m Lexi. Nice to meet you,” I said shaking his hand.

“I like her,” he said turning to Kai. “I don’t pick up on a threat and she’s the only one honest enough to tell you about your horrible attire.”

"I guess," he mumbled.

Gabi returned. "You two nit-wits need to make a decision. I took care of the spy next door."

"You killed Stacia already?" Kalel whined.

"What the hell was I supposed to do? Wait for her to call for back up? I'm already behind on reports. That's the problem with men. They get side tracked. You two can never stick to a schedule. I do everything around here! I handle a million things yet you two struggle with the one or two I give you. If you weren't such good muscle I would toss you both," she growled.

"Rafique!" she called. "Bring me a drink!"

"Yes ma'am," a male replied from a distance. His voice carried and echoed loudly so he wasn't far, but nowhere in sight for me to see.

"Did he just call me ma'am again? He is done! He's fired!" she nearly yelled as she stormed out the room again, probably after the servant with manners.

"Is it me or is she always cranky these days?" Kalel asked and stated.

"What do you think Alexa?" Kai asked.

"Honestly?" I checked not wanting to dig my own grave.

"Of course," Kalel answered.

"So far, first impressions, she's a temperamental terror. She's moody, always yells and stomps instead of walking everywhere. On the flip side though, I think she's just frustrated. She feels like she has to do everything on her own. If she wasn't afraid of being alone, I think she

would have cut ties by now. Every woman, vamp or not, wants to feel appreciated. She clearly doesn't," I explained.

"Huh. That was actually enlightening," Kalel said.

"Brains and beauty. I've decided I'm keeping her," Kai announced. He put his arm around me and led me to the door. "Come with me Alexa. I'll give you a tour of my home."

"Kai, think with your head. She needs to be scanned first," Kalel cut in.

"I was getting there," he said.

Out in the hall all that was visible were doors lining the walls all with alarm stations on them, almost like the home keypads that are installed in residences. They led me down to the last door on the right. The inside reminded me of the vamp army headquarters since it was an 8x8 white room.

Suddenly I was tossed to the corner and had two gold daggers pointed at me. Kalel got right in my face and pressed the tip of the blade to my jacket. It evaporated and sizzled as if it was dipped in acid.

"Why were you in the Vamp Army's building?" Kalel demanded. I remained calm but was shaken. Whatever was on or in those weapons would fry me like Connor said. Luckily I thought quickly.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch. I sort of destroyed a vamp that they were after so the High Authorities summoned me. They interrogated me over it, threatened to send me to some camp and then shuffled me out," I detailed. I stuck to the truth as much as possible.

“That sounds like them,” Kai said, his expression said he believed me which allowed me to calm down.

“Indeed. Our apologies. We can never be too safe,” Kalel offered. They put away their weapons. “We still need to scan you.”

“Sure,” I shrugged as if I wasn’t worried. “Where do I stand?”

“You’re fine where you are.”

“Art!” Kalel called.

“Yes sir?” a thin, balding man appeared. He somehow reminded me of Skinner from the Simpsons.

“Scan her,” Kai ordered.

He pulled out a pair of glasses and put them on over his grey eyes. The laser spread over me all at once, unlike with the ranks.

“She has a cell phone in her left pocket, but no other tech equipment or devices,” he confirmed.

“You’re dismissed,” Kalel said.

“Come with me sexy lady,” Kai smiled. “You’ve passed the test. You’re the first in fifty years.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-six,” he winked.

“Do you know how old I am?” I pressed.

“Of course. But what is the saying? Oh yeah! Age is just a number.”

“Um, okay. I can go along with that,” I shrugged. He pulled me into his arm and led me to the door at the end of

the hall.

“I have a few sinners to kill brother. I’ll catch up with you later.” With that Kalel punched in a code and entered another room.

Kai punched in a code and the door opened in front of us. It opened to stairs going up.

“How do you remember all those codes?” I asked.

“I don’t. We each have our own and it allows us access to the entire place,” he explained. I was guessing he trusted me to have given me that information. “Not one-hundred percent, but I trust you enough to show you around,” he added in response to my thought.

“So you, Kalel and Gabi read thoughts?”

“Only me and Kalel.”

At the top of the stairs I looked around and was shocked to realize we were in a house across the lake. If memory served me right, we were in the biggest home in the middle of all the others. It was fenced off of course but still visible to everyone.

“It’s what we call hiding in plain sight. People and vamps tend to over think everything. The vamp army has never found us here and never will. They forever search the forest in ignorance. And we are smart. You are the second vamp aside from us and a few staff members to enter,” he boasted.

“You seem to dislike the vamp army. Did they do something to you?” I asked.

We began walking through the living room, which was open and airy with the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the lake. There were several chaise lounges and a sofa

flanked to take advantage of the view. He led me through a swinging door into a wide galley style kitchen. It was modern and everything still appeared brand new.

Kai opened the French door stainless steel fridge to display rows and rows of glass bottles. Each one listed a blood type. "What's your flavor?" he asked as he picked up an AB negative.

"Umm... I'm still new to all this. I don't even know what I've tasted."

"It comes with age. You have to spice things up after a hundred and twenty-eight years," he said handing me the same kind as him.

"Is this synthetic or real?"

"Real," he laughed. "Not even we have come up with a synthetic. We're close to replicating blood in mass quantities though."

"So you have a factory then?"

"Yes. It's underground, around where you were."

He chugged the blood and dumped the empty container in the trash. I mimicked feeling stronger immediately. We trailed through a formal dining room. I noticed the side of the house facing the road outside was covered in black out drapes while the other side displayed bare windows. The first floor was rounded out with a large library stocked up to the ceiling with books of varying ages and wear. He stepped in and picked up a dusty photo book.

"I do have a past with the ranks. They killed my father, Kalohn, because I told him what happened to me. My father was a noble man. He loved me and helped me through those first few months even though I could have killed him

at any moment if I lost control. He stood by me because in Hawaii, *ohana* is everything. Regardless of who they are, what they do or don't do and how they treat you, you stand by your blood. And those bastards killed him for doing so.

"I told my brother Kalel when he returned from a visit with my mother. He had me change him so we could fight together in honor of my father. We vowed to destroy the entity that rules our world with an iron fist; no one shall ever steal from my family again. My father was an innocent man. He told no one, threatened no one and yet they treated him as a common criminal and executed him. I will never forgive them for that," he explained. He clutched the album to his chest and mumbled in a language I didn't know.

"I'm so sorry Kai. I can only imagine how terrible that was for you and your family." I ping-ponged with the idea of comforting him in the human way, like a pat on his shoulder or a hug; I opted against it given his age. Older vamps consider touch invasive rather than endearing.

"Kai!" Kalel called.

"Come with me."

I followed him back down to the hall of rooms. We entered one toward the middle to find Kalel and another captured vamp. Inside the room looked exactly like the one I was in before.

"He's a spy from Sparrow's Edge," Kalel announced.

"Why have they sent you?" Kai demanded.

"To...to..." the man stuttered.

"Spit it out!" Kalel ordered.

“To steal a gold dagger,” his voice cracked. He was wrapped in the same netting as me and was lying on the floor.

“What was your reward?” Kalel pressed.

“Two million,” he answered, this time his voice was steady.

“Where is your panic button?” Kai asked.

“My... I... Um...” Both brothers withdrew their weapons, which pressured him to speak or die sooner. “My ring! My ring! The stone of my ring!” he cried. “Please don’t kill me. Take pity on my lost soul,” he pleaded.

My throat tightened and serum rose up. I couldn’t think about it; couldn’t think it.

Kalel squatted down beside the captured vamp now weeping blood. “Which hand?”

“L...Le...Left.”

Kalel seared through the wrap on the left side. He pulled the man’s hand through the slit to reveal a class ring with a ruby stone set as the button. “Does it track?” he asked through a tightened jaw visibly angry and frustrated. The man sniveled. “Does it?” he yelled.

“Y...yes.”

“Damn it!” Kalel screamed. “Errgh!” He took his gold dagger and cut off the vamp’s hand. The sound was of acid burning though the knife sliced as if his wrist was butter. The vamp cried in agony and writhed about on the floor.

I cringed and squirmed by the door. I wanted to bolt but had no place to go. My serum filled my mouth and despite being a vampeen, I wanted to faint at the sight of

the man's blood squirting from the severed hand. His skin already began to heal at the wrist but it looked like he'd forever lost his hand.

"We will not be made fools! Our weapons are our weapons! Any vamp that tries to touch them will suffer your fate," Kai proclaimed, his voice echoed off the walls.

"Alexa," Kalel called. I had been standing but frozen with my eyes glued on the tortured vamp.

"Yes?" I replied shaking myself a bit to move past the shock.

"What do you think? Should we kill our spy or send him back as a warning to others?"

"Please miss. Please spare me. I promise," he groveled.

"Shut up!" Kalel scolded kicking at him.

I swallowed hard and clutched my own wrist with my ring a few inches down. Pull yourself together Lex! I took a deep breath. Think business, be business. I needed to be my mom in this moment.

"It makes business sense to release him. Send him out without his hand and let him be a warning label to every vamp to never cross the Leaders of the Bladangs. This benefits him in that he is allowed to live but hurts him in that he will never have two hands again. This helps you because his word of mouth advertisement should cut down on the number of trespassers you have. It also significantly boosts your reputation in the fear factor. More of your enemies should back down and run when they hear of your wrath. So it's a win, win to release this vamp," I concluded. I remained standing in the same spot. I couldn't push

myself into moving closer. I waited on pins and needles to see if the man would live or die.

The door opened behind me. "I will admit she makes sense," Gabi commented.

"She's wise for her age," Kai agreed moving to stand beside me.

"Connor!" Kalel summoned my capturer. He was in the room within a second ready for his orders. I think he was surprised to see me because he did a quick double take with his eyes. I smiled at him.

"Carry him to the edge of the property and release him. If he steps foot on the grounds again, kill him immediately," he directed. Connor nodded, lifted the vamp and left as he was instructed.

"Well, now that we've handled our business, let's get acquainted with our new guest," Kalel said turning towards all of us by the door.

"Indeed. I have a few questions for Alexa," Gabi added, her tone not inviting in any way.

We all retreated to the living room. It was after sunset now and all the stars were visible in the night sky. Kai pulled me beside him on the sofa while Gabi and Kalel lounged on two chaises.

"So Alexa," Gabi began.

"Please call me Lexi," I requested shuffling in the seat.

"Fine, Lexi. Tell me about yourself."

"What do you want to know?"

"Stats. Basics. Parents, siblings, dating status etcetera," she prompted.

“Dad’s human, Mom’s vampeen, only child, single, sophomore in high school,” I spewed quickly and factually.

“Hmm. Interesting mix. What do you know about our little family here?”

“Not much. I know you’re called the Bladangs and live in the South Forest, or so I thought. The log cabin thing is called the Palace and supposedly you have enough weapons and ammo in or under it to destroy the world. But I don’t care about that. I came originally to find my ex because I heard you changed him,” I detailed.

“Kalel, is she telling the truth?” Gabi pressed.

I didn’t think she liked me being here. The boys laughed.

“What are you two cackling about?” she asked, her forehead crinkled and hands in fists.

“She’s telling the truth, but she thinks you don’t like her being here,” Kalel relayed.

“I think you’re jealous Gab,” Kai teased.

“Oh just stop. I don’t like her being here but I’m certainly not jealous,” she huffed defensively. “I’m done socializing. I’ll be in my room.” She stomped up the stairs and slammed the door. A frame fell off the wall and smashed onto the floor.

“How did you meet Gabi?” I asked.

“Now that is the million dollar question, right bro?” Kalel winked. Kai moved uncomfortably beside me, clearly uneasy with the subject.

“What am I missing?” I looked between the two of them; Kalel was smirking and Kai cringing.

“They were engaged. She came over to our island on a boat with her mother, a queen, and their royal servants. Kai and Gabi had a quick romance. He popped the question, she said yes,” Kalel explained.

“But what happened? You’re obviously not engaged or married anymore,” I prompted him.

“She caught me with her uh... with her favorite chamber maid,” he said.

“Oh. Well. That explains a lot. Not only does she feel unappreciated, she is a scorned woman who must relive some part of the past when she looks at you sometimes,” I expressed my thoughts out loud to save them time in reading them or whatever it was they did to know my secrets.

“We read. It’s as if your thoughts are spoken as a script within our minds,” Kai explained.

“Interesting.”

We sat there talking for hours. I found the brothers endearing. They were animated together but very much a unit. And everything that they did had a motive behind it, most of the time redemption for their father. They don’t allow anyone to disgrace their family name. They consider successful theft, even trespassing on their property a form of disrespect and will not tolerate it. I’d learned that while they were crude and strict in how they handled business; they also never killed without reason. The most telling of them all was when I opened them up and discovered their reason for launching an attack in Florida.

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Chapter Eleven

“So the general threatened your empire?” I confirmed.

“Yes. We are not savages. We don’t attack ruthlessly without just cause,” Kalel explained.

“I bet the High Authorities don’t even realize how corrupt their union is,” Kai added. I was beginning to wonder myself...

Coming into this, I was clearly instructed that the Bladangs were the enemy. Now that I’d met them, heard their side, and spent time with them, though it’s a brief bit, I’d seen enough to know they were telling the truth. They only defended their ‘family,’ all they’d built. I believed them when they said they didn’t attack without cause, aside from murdering the three High Authorities who had killed their father. But even that was initiated due to cause.

I could find no fault with them. They ruled with an iron fist when it came to sinners on their land, but that was no different than the justice system to humans. Well, except that the punishment was issued immediately and was severe in comparison. Sometimes I think the human criminals ought to have harsher punishments. I guarantee if you start chopping off the hands of thieves and robbers the number of them would take a swift nosedive. But alas, humans would never agree to that form of ‘cruelty’ and therefore crime would continue to rise.

“What time is it?” I asked searching for a clock. I was afraid to pull out my cell and have a ton of missed calls.

“Just past midnight,” Kalel answered.

“You’re not thinking of leaving me babe, are you?” Kai pouted a bit and pulled me into his arms. “You have no idea how long it’s been since I held a woman.”

“My parents will be worried...”

“So call them,” he suggested.

“They will want to see me...”

“I’m afraid they can’t. You can’t leave until I trust you. I need to know you won’t betray my family and me. I know without a doubt that you mean us no harm, but I need to know you won’t divulge our location, that your loyalty extends out those doors before you can leave. We live without protection around this home. I cannot and will not risk us,” he stood his ground. Sadly, I understood where he was coming from and didn’t blame him for being so careful.

I softly sighed. “Let me call them. I need to go home at some point to get clothes and my phone charger though.”

“I will personally escort you later,” he offered.

I shook my head in agreement and got up off the sofa. I walked toward the picturesque window and stared out at the peaceful water. The thing was, I knew I was safe here. Now I was worried about Auggy’s plans. Listening to the brothers, understanding their stand in all this, I realized an attack, though possible now that I affirmatively knew their weak point, was not what I wanted to bring upon them. I didn’t want to lead two armies further into war. Ideally I would like to initiate and barter peace between them. And now I also had to worry about my parents. If Kai went with me and they’re home, he’d be able to read their thoughts. He’d uncover my mission for sure. I glanced over my shoulder at the brothers to ensure my thoughts were really protected. If they read any part of them, they weren’t bothered.

I pulled out my cell phone from my pocket where it had sat silently for hours. Sure enough I had seven missed calls and two texts. Three calls were from my mother, two from Mel and two from Craig. One text was from Mel 'checking in' and one text was from Craig asking 'what's up.' I didn't doubt Kellan was with them and set them up to reach me although Mel probably added a tank of fuel to the fire.

I called my mom first; her nerves would be the worst.

"Lexi?" she answered.

"It's me Mom," I replied. She sighed in relief.

"Where are you? Are you okay? Please tell me you're coming home..." she rambled, which wasn't like her. She must be distraught. I turned to Kai and thought, I know I can't tell her where I am but can I at least tell her who I'm with? He and Kalel exchanged looks before they nodded once in agreement.

"Calm down Mom. I'm safe. I'm really okay. I'm with the Leaders of the Bladangs. Kai, his brother Kalel and Gabi have been very hospitable. They've asked me to stay a while and, well, I really like it here so I said yes," I detailed as much as possible and tagged a story with it. I knew she'd pick up on it. "I'll be by tomorrow with Kai to get some clothes and my charger," I announced hoping she would arrange to be away.

"I can't talk about this Alexa," she snapped and hung up.

I was in shock by how she reacted. I was frozen with the phone still to my ear. My mother had never hung up on me before. I had an idea as to why she did it, but was caught off guard nonetheless. I turned to Kai. "I think she's mad at me..."

“She’ll get over it,” he shrugged.

“I know that but I’ve never made her mad before. I... She... She’s never done that to me before,” I fumbled to convey my thoughts correctly and the restrictions were beginning to frustrate me. I hadn’t even been there a full twenty-four hours and my thought constraints were irritating me.

“It’s okay babe. She will get over it. And in the meantime, I have no problem distracting you.” Kai was suddenly embracing me from behind. He sensually yet playfully kissed my neck where my blood pulsed. Then he did something I’d never felt before. He ran his teeth gently over the skin of my neck in the same spot he kissed moments before. I squirmed. I was embarrassed because it turned me on. It sent a ripple of warmth throughout my body. He of course noticed my reaction and chuckled lightly before doing it again. The second time was more intense. He made me want to rip off my clothes right there. I never knew I could feel this way. It was an overwhelming reaction I’d never experienced in the deepest connections with Kellan. My fear was though that he would continue and so would I...

I pulled away taking a deep breath. “I have... um... I uh... I need to call two more people back,” I stuttered to regain control; I was blushing like the schoolgirl I was.

“Sure. I’ll be waiting when you’re done,” he whispered beside my ear. He kissed my neck and returned to the couch.

A shudder worked through me as tingles vibrated beneath my skin where he’d kissed me. It took me a minute to recover. I’d never reached such a dangerous point of desire before. Every teen goes through puberty and gets their hormones sent into overdrive.

I peered over at him. He was gloating with a smirk on his face. He gave me a flirtatious wink. Still, I was caught up in him for a brief moment; I felt myself smile back at him.

Oh gosh. What am I doing? I can't hurt Kellan... No matter how tempted I am.

I dialed Mel and moved back towards the windows.

"Hello?"

"Hey Mel, it's me."

"Oh thank God! I was worried sick. I'm so glad you called even though it's late. I couldn't sleep. All sorts of crazies were in my head over you. You know I worry if we don't talk for a day," she blurted. I looked at the clock on my phone.

"Oh, it is late. I wasn't thinking. Don't worry though, I'm okay. I'm going to be away for a while. I'll fill you in when we meet up again."

"Lex, this so does not sound like you. What's going on? Are you really okay?" she pressed. I cringed internally worried that she would say too much. I wasn't beside them but I knew Kai and Kalel were listening to my entire conversation.

"Relax, I'm fine. Is Craig there or did your boyfriend leave?" I threw in the word boyfriend so the brothers wouldn't get suspicious of my loyalty or truth telling when I called him. I did tell them I was single.

"He's at Kellan's," she replied. I could tell she was upset with me for being so vague.

"Okay, thanks. I've gotta call him back so I'll talk to you later. Don't worry. Love you," I said trying to get her off

the phone.

“I love you too. I guess I’ll talk to you whenever then,” she stated. Her tone went from stressed to relieved to worried to finally dreary throughout the course of the call. I felt bad but couldn’t offer her any comfort or information. Her response made me even more anxious to finish what I’d started here as soon as possible. I closed my phone and immediately returned Craig’s calls.

“Lexi?” It wasn’t Craig on the other end; it was Kellan. He sounded slightly frazzled.

“Hey... Is Craig there?” I asked hesitantly. I hated doing that to him, but I had no choice. I had to cover myself.

He sighed in defeat, “Yeah.”

“Hello love. What’s crackin’ with you?”

“Nothing. I was just returning your call,” I answered. I was talking to Craig but now longing for Kellan. I wished I was in his arms and that all of this was over with.

“Well, I was checking to see if you were free tonight. Care to scamper around with a mate or two?” Craig was smarter than I thought originally. He knew just what to ask to skirt around my situation.

“Sorry mate but I’m going to be hanging out with the Bladang leaders for a good while. They invited me to stay with them. I like it here so I said yes. But I’ll definitely call you when I’m back in town,” I replied. I heard glass shatter in the background, no doubt from Kellan.

“Well love, it seems I have a bit of a mess to clean. Stay in touch or else I’ll send the hounds,” he chuckled. I

thought he was partially serious, but I didn't plan on testing him.

"I will. Talk to you later." I hung up. I clung to the phone and held it tightly to my chest. I was trying to hold back tears but failed. Of all the times I needed strength for some reason I stood there weak.

I looked out the window until I had my emotions under control. As I turned around I bumped right into Kai's arms. I didn't hear him approach. And glancing around I didn't hear Kalel leave either.

"He went to deal with a few trespassers," Kai explained having read my thoughts.

"Oh, of course."

"I hate when women cry. Tell me Leka, why are you upset?" he pushed sincerely. I felt like he really did care.

"Lay-kuh?"

"That's your Hawaiian name, well your nickname. Your full Hawaiian name is Aleka, but I will call you Leka for short. It reminds me of a beautiful flower," he smiled. Kai's charm surprised me. I envisioned the Leaders to be ruthless bastards with little emotion aside from rage under their solid exteriors. They'd proven to be the opposite though. Kai felt more human to me than Kellan. Though he's older, I think it was our vivid, accessible emotions that allowed us to connect on a certain level.

"Do you sleep?" he asked running his fingers through my ponytail.

"Yeah. Two or three hours is fine," I answered.

"May I?" he checked, his eyes pointing towards my hair band. I nodded with approval. He gently released my

hair and continued to play with it.

There was silence surrounding us; something I had to adjust to losing. His fingers entwined throughout my strands. I was instantly reminded of Kellan doing the same. It was like receiving a gentle massage. Though we were quiet, I felt us getting closer. I looked up into his eyes. I saw him drawing nearer but made no effort to move away. Then finally his lips touched mine. His lips were soft. Kai pressed delicately against my own. There was a sensuality to it, something deeper than on the surface. Dare I say he's a better kisser than Kellan?

Oh God! What am I doing? I'm cheating on Kellan. I'm enjoying the kiss of another man and comparing the two...

"Relax Leka. Allow your mind to drift away and..."

I yanked back startled. "Holy sugar plums! I... you... in my thoughts... in my- in my head?" I stumbled to make sense of it. I thought you could only connect like that with one person, your soul mate, when you kissed. How was it that Kai did it with me just now? Kellan and I were meant to be... weren't we?

"Don't overthink. You have all of eternity to figure that stuff out. When you get older you'll learn to live in the moment," he chuckled amused by my analyzation.

"You're probably right," I sighed. I knew I'd re-evaluate the situation again, but for now I just needed a few hours of reconditioning sleep.

"Let's go to bed," Kai prompted. He led me upstairs to the last bedroom on the right.

I wasn't sure what I expected but the room fit Kai perfectly. The décor brought you to a beachfront resort on the Hawaiian Islands. The walls were a beautiful ocean

blue with large framed photos of the mountains, shark caves, flowers, beaches, shops; he had a photo for everything to love on the islands. The furniture was a mixture of dark and light wood and there was a balcony complete with a hammock. Though in some ways the room was borderline cheesy a.k.a. the floral comforter; other aspects added authenticity like the used surfboard in the corner and the large conch shells on display.

“It takes me home,” he said. He stood by the door watching me look around.

“It’s nice. Even though it’s night, I feel like the sun is shining down on me,” I smiled.

“That’s nothing. Come watch the sunset in Waikiki with me.” He was suddenly on the bed patting the spot beside him. I joined him. He pressed a button on a remote and a large flat screen TV lifted from the foot of his bed. It spanned the entire width of the mattress. With another button the TV was on and showed the beach. There were men, women and children walking around on the sandy shores; a time stamp in the bottom right showed 7:12PM.

“This is live?” I checked.

“Yes. Isn’t it beautiful? The water there is from a picture, a brilliant blue that glimmers in the sun. It’s very different from the muddy waters here.” He sounded homesick and miserable.

“Why don’t you go back?” I asked the obvious.

“It’s not that simple Leka. I cannot desert my responsibilities here.” I understood what he meant. I wished I could desert my mission, but alas, I wasn’t able to.

“Somehow, I knew you understood,” he confirmed my thoughts. “You are young, but you have an old soul. Do you

know what your name means?”

“No,” I shook my head.

“It’s Greek. It means defender of mankind, protector. It says you are noble. You live up to it based off your thoughts and actions here,” he explained taking my hand in his.

This wasn’t supposed to be happening. I felt so comfortable with Kai. He’s fearless and strong yet humble and romantic. He carried depth but he didn’t need to since his emotions lay on his sleeve at all times. He fascinated me; he intrigued me. What scared me the most was I could easily see myself falling in love with him. But I loved Kellan. We connected on a level unreachable by most couples. We’re supposed to be together forever... right?

Being here had only made me question what I had with Kellan more. Being with Kai was confusing my certainty and blurring my future.

“Leka, stop thinking. Don’t tie yourself down so quickly. You have forever to choose a mate. And trust me, love at sixteen is very different from love at twenty-six,” he chuckled lightly.

“But I only have nine years to have children or a child...”

“Is that what you want?”

“I think so...”

“Nine years ago you were seven. Have your wants and needs changed since then?”

“Of course,” I replied. “Oh, I see where you are going.”

“You’re a smart girl,” he winked. He held out his arms. “Now come watch the sunset with me.”

I scooted within reach and he pulled me into his arms. I relaxed to the sound of the waves crashing and the birds singing in a land far away. The sun was nearly invisible with only its rainbow glow reflecting on the clouds and sea.

I focused in on a little girl about five years old. She wore a pink ruffled one-piece swimsuit and wet pigtails dripped down her sides. Her dad diligently scooped sand into her plastic molds and they patted the sand in tightly together. What drew me to them was her dad always let her flip over the molds even though half of them fell into a pile of nothing since the little girl wasn’t coordinated; she didn’t move fast enough. The other half were far from perfect with crumbled chunks and only parts of the shape visible.

Despite her consistent failure to deliver a perfect replica of the mold, her father never lost his patience. He laughed with her, encouraged her and praised all of her failures simply because she tried. You have to really love someone to stay by their side failure after failure without an inkling of frustration. That sort of love is truly unconditional. Had I reached that level of love with Kellan? Was I even close? He was quick to reprimand me when I lied about my diet needs and in the cafeteria when he discovered I’d told Mel. But he just did that because was worried and wanted to protect me... right?

“Go to sleep Leka. Your thoughts are giving me a headache,” Kai said, lying back on the pillows with me.

“Sorry,” I blushed. Out of habit I curled up in Kai’s arms the way I did in Kellan’s. Kai was bigger, thicker. His muscles bulged whereas Kellan’s were just there. Size

meant nothing in the vamp world. A thin Tim could destroy a steroid Sam in the blink of an eye and vice versa. You never know with us.

“Leka,” he sighed.

“Sorry,” I giggled. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him smile and laugh silently.

—

Chapter Twelve

“Good morning, sunshine,” Kalel knocked on the door, which was halfway open. I shot up and looked around. “He’s downstairs.”

“Of course,” I replied. “What time is it?”

“About 5:30,” he answered. “You slept like a baby. You must have had either a good evening or a good dream,” he smirked.

“Ha ha,” I mocked. “I can’t believe I slept that long. Usually two hours is fine.” I was still in shock over my rest. I never slept that long or that good. Did that mean I truly did feel comfortable here? That I could let my guard down for an extended time here but not at home?

“Alexa...”

“Yeah? Sorry...” How easy I forgot to not over think around them.

“Come down for breakfast,” Kalel invited.

“Breakfast?”

“You’ll see,” he smiled.

I followed him, and the scent, downstairs. It smelled like a full southern breakfast was cooking away. Kalel led me into the dining room, which had a full buffet of food on the table.

Gabi was serving up the food onto plates for the two men who were already seated, one of which I recognized from yesterday.

“Alexa, this is Art. You should remember him,” Kalel introduced.

“Yes, of course. Hello again,” I waved.

“And this dashing gent is Rafique,” he announced. “He’s Gabi’s fiancé,” he whispered.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he smiled. He was tan like the brothers with black hair slicked back. Though he wasn’t old, my guess thirty, he had a few lines of wisdom on his face – that’s what my dad called them anyways.

“You too,” I replied.

At that exact moment Kai walked in with a large bowl of berries – strawberries, cherries, raspberries, blackberries and blueberries – all tossed in a red liquid acting as a dressing.

“Good morning sleepy head,” he greeted. He set the bowl on the table. “Take a seat.” He motioned to a chair. I sat down, a bit confused by the idea. Kai sat at one side of me, and Kalel at the other; they both took one of my hands and the others joined until we linked in a circle. They bowed their heads and closed their eyes. It was then I realized they were going to pray; for some reason that hit me in the heart. I copied their moves as Kai spoke.

“*Ke Akua, Makua Kane, mahalo.* Thank you for all you provide and all you protect. ‘*Amene.*”

“*Gracias,*” Gabi added. “*Bueno. Comen, mi amores,*” she prompted.

It became a madhouse of hands flying over the table as food quickly disappeared. Chatter filled the air as everyone talked and occasionally bickered with each other. I sat

quietly and motionless. I wasn't able to eat this food like them.

"Sure you can," Kai interrupted my thought. He placed two pancakes and a large scoop of berries on my plate. He lifted a gravy bowl of steaming hot red syrup and poured it over the pancakes. "This is O-positive. And before you argue with me, the berries are sitting in B-positive and you can eat any human food you'd like as long as it's soaked in their blood," he explained.

I looked at it apprehensively. I'd longed for this before but that left me wondering if this was too good to be true.

"It's not Leka. Don't you trust me?" he asked.

Ugh! The good old trust card. Now I had to eat it. I lifted my fork and cut off a piece of pancake covered in the hot blood. I stabbed it and stuffed it quickly in my mouth. - Better to die fast than slow. I chewed and swallowed. I waited for my serum to bubble in my throat, but it didn't.

"Hmm." I forked a juicy strawberry and repeated the test. Again, nothing. "Amazing."

Kai chuckled and stuffed a big bite in his mouth. The feeling, the atmosphere was one of family and togetherness. If I had to compare it, it felt like an Italian family's Sunday brunch. Laughter, stories and love surrounded me. No one was excluded, even me as the newbie. Gabi even chatted with me over books and plays.

By the end of the meal, I had eaten two pancakes, scrambled eggs in blood instead of ketchup, two blood cooked sausages, a ton of fruit and the ultimate Carolina delicacy - shrimp in blood with grits. I know it sounds disgusting, but I guarantee every vamp would devour it like a human would cheesecake.

I helped Gabi with the dishes since the men deemed it “woman’s work.”

“I hate to admit it because you’re a skinny Minnie next to me but it is nice having another woman around,” Gabi said as we towel dried the dishes.

“I haven’t been this size forever. I was pleasantly plump, and that’s being nice to myself, up until my transformation,” I shared putting away the plates. Wow, vamp speed makes doing dishes a breeze.

“Either way I’m envious. This is the downside of being a vampire instead of a vampeen. Whatever size you are when you’re turned, well, you’re stuck that way forever. I partially blame Kai of course. I gained four stone when we dated. He was obsessed with watching me eat because he couldn’t, back then anyways,” she explained.

“How much is four stone?” I asked.

“Nearly sixty pounds,” she groaned. “I shouldn’t have let him turn me at this weight, but he claimed to love me and said it was the only way we could be together forever. What a bunch of crock! Three weeks later I caught him with my favorite maid. She was the opposite of me too - a skinny, blonde haired, blue eyed French beauty. Ugh! I get mad all over again just thinking about it,” she huffed.

“But you forgave him. I mean you live with him here...”

“Eventually. When my parents passed and I inherited the throne, I returned to Spain. I lost my rule to democracy but retained my wealth and status. I spent a decade in Basque Country and learned all I could of my new life. I then set sail and ported here in Charleston. Kai and Kalel had created this army empire of protection in honor of their father and I, coming from royalty... Well, it only seemed fitting that we collaborate. My money, negotiating skills,

and connections plus their manpower and gifts, shall we say, got us all this." She lifted her arms as if to show off their assets within the room.

"Wow." I just stood there in awe. Gabi was a savvy businesswoman it seemed. And she certainly knew how to handle men.

"Well, I guess we're done," she announced. I scanned the kitchen before agreeing. Kai walked in sporting board shorts and nothing else. I could see he still flustered Gabi. I noticed she was still attracted to him by the way her eyes glistened and opened just a bit wider when he walked in, but I would never say anything. No woman wants to be called out... oops. Kai, you better keep your mouth shut! He laughed.

"Come ladies. Change into your swimsuits. Let's go jet skiing." He put an arm around each of us and motioned us toward the living room.

"Uh, I don't have a bathing suit..."

"Ah, but you do. Art was kind enough to purchase one for you while you slept. It's cheap. Comes from that twenty-four hour supercenter, but I'm sure you can make it work," he winked.

Gabi raced upstairs leaving only a gust of wind - like I said, size means nothing with vamps.

"Where is the swim suit?"

"In my room. I will meet you outside," he said. He kissed my cheek and left like an overly excited child.

Upstairs the suit was on the bed. I sighed. Of course he had Art buy the skimpiest one available. Well... skimpy

to me anyways. I'd never worn a bikini in my life, as no fat girl should.

The two-piece was solid red. The bottom tied on the sides at my hips and the top tied in the back and as a halter around my neck. The triangle pieces of clothe covered more of my boobs that I thought they would, but far less than I was used to or comfortable with. Thank God I wore a tank top, even if it was green. I didn't mind looking like Christmas early. I put it on over the suit and went down to the dock.

"Hello sexy. You know I'm going to get that wet," Kai greeted me with a smug smirk.

"I kinda figured." I looked around and saw Art and Kalel pulling out into the water. Gabi was just getting on to hug Rafique's waist. She wore a black one piece with a sarong. It fit her like a glove and whittled a good twenty pounds off her.

"She'd love that comment," Kai interrupted.

"Would you stop reading my thoughts?" I laughed smacking his arm lightly.

"Only if you promise I can read dirty ones later," he winked.

"Don't be an arrogant pig," I reprimanded sarcastically.

"I like her!" Gabi chimed in after overhearing my remark.

"Quick question. How do you keep your location a secret playing out in the open like this?"

"Easy. These aren't your everyday jet skis. They have a built in mirage feature. I press this blue button and the

person we appear to be is far different from who we are. It genetically calculates and reflects the image of your exact opposite,” Rafique explained.

“Wow. Very... techy?” The High Authorities were right about the technology these vamps had.

“Come on. I’m ready to soak that shirt,” Kai said. Before I knew what happened he had me behind him. He started the motor and pressed the blue button located near the center of the dash. A small blue light flashed and he took off. We flew across the water at an alarming speed.

“You tweaked the engine, didn’t you?”

“No. I paid someone else to tweak the engine.”

“Figures,” I sighed. I squeezed my arms around his waist tightly and leaned into his back.

“You can lose the death grip. You’re immortal you know,” he laughed.

Suddenly Kalel came racing past us and did an abrupt right turn splashing us with water.

“Thanks bro!” Kai yelled.

Gabi and Rafique did the same on our left officially soaking my shirt as Kai had wanted. He sped after Kalel and repeated his move soaking him.

I was shocked to see Art doing jump shots with the watercraft as if it were a motorcycle and the water a ramp.

“Hold on tight Leka,” Kai warned.

“No way... You’re not...” Too late. Kai revved the engine and leapt forward. When the speedometer nearly reached its max he jerked the handles upward, stood halfway and propelled us in a full loop. I didn’t move a

muscled, only felt the breeze and saw the water upside down below. We finally circled around and landed with a mega splash that created a mini tidal wave in both directions.

“You’re immortal Leka. Take advantage of it. Forever isn’t fun without risks,” he said.

“Don’t you hate being right?”

“Never.”

We roughed it on the water for several hours. After a few more loops, I loosened up and let go of Kai mid-air... Okay so I quickly wrapped myself around him again. Today I saw something and felt something I’d never imagined I would here. My family, Kellan, Mel... none of them did this. I don’t think I’d ever had that much fun. I realized that I was uptight. Comparing who I was out on the water and at breakfast to who I usually was – it’s like night and day. In twenty-four hours Kai broke down all my barriers, ripped apart my insecurities and changed me from an uptight, reserved republican into a carefree yet loving democrat.

This felt like paradise compared to my home... And these people embodied the kind of family I’d always wanted. They’re loose and fun yet responsible and never neglected their business. They supported each other regardless of whether or not they agreed; they never worked without a united front. That’s what protected them long before their advanced techno weapons and systems.

I felt guilty for comparing them to the people who had raised me and been there for me the past sixteen years; I felt worse that they outshined them in my eyes. My parents, Kellan and Mel, they all would have been devastated if they ever heard this view of mine...

I suppose I was just shocked. I never imagined the Leaders to be so... well... welcoming. I felt like I was at home, the home I should have always had...

—

Chapter Thirteen

“Are you ready, Leka?” Kai called.

I had been passing the time in the library before we left for my house. They asked me to join them in their rounds, which consisted of dealing with attempting criminals, getting a report from all their “workers”, and then receiving updates on their Florida battle; I graciously declined. I was able to claim exhaustion since I was a vampeen and needed sleep while they’re all vampires and well... don’t. I wasn’t tired, but certainly didn’t want to participate in ‘punishing the sinners.’

“Yes,” I replied. I set the book back on the shelf and went to meet him in the living room.

I followed him through a door and down a set of stairs to an underground hallway. We raced down a good mile to the dead end, which was a garage. Though it was below ground, it was surprisingly bright. There were five cars, all expensive luxury ones built for speed or bulletproof excavating lined up. The two that stood out stood out only because of their size. A black Hummer and a black Escalade were parked between the cars. All the vehicles had blacked out windows even I could barely see through.

He pressed a remote access button and the lights of the Maserati on the end flashed. He sped ahead, opened my door and was in his seat within a nano second. I vamped forward and slid into the leather passenger seat. Stitched into the upholstery was the same symbol I saw in the elevator at the vamp army headquarters.

He started the engine, which purred with vengeance, and headed up a ramp and through a remote controlled

door leading to the street above.

“What does this symbol mean?” I asked nudging towards the seat.

“It is the universal symbol for our kind. See, most believe we first appeared in Transylvania, they are going off the Romanian myths, but we actually originated out of Egypt. The hieroglyphics showed this symbol as far back as AD, which proves we’ve existed far longer than most cultures. It was easier to hide back then though. The land was not developed and over populated as it is today. We could feed on the lone traveler that no one missed,” he explained.

“Then why is it that Romania is always associated with vamps?” I was really interested in our history, as I was never offered this foundation of facts.

“Because it was where we first were exposed to humans as anything other than one of them back in the 1200’s. Coincidentally, the first vampeen was created at the same time,” he answered.

“So this symbol stands for vampire?” I checked.

“Not exactly,” he smirked.

“Okay? Help me please...” I prompted.

“We’re here.”

“Huh?”

“You’re house,” he stated.

I looked around and realized we were, but I didn’t give him directions.

“Didn’t need them. You’re in the vampeen database.” I knew of the master record in Spain that listed names and

birthdates but knew nothing of locations being given.

“What database?”

“The official one. Enough questions, let’s go.” He opened his door and was at my side in half a blink.

“You can chill. I’m not going to run off,” I huffed independently pushing past him to the front door. Luckily I didn’t see or hear my parents. I retrieved the spare key from under the doormat and opened the door. I ushered Kai in from behind me so I could close the door. I stopped in front of the stairs when I heard a noise.

“Hello?” I called. I looked back at Kai just as he sprung.

“No!” I yelled. It was too late, Kellan attacked Kai from behind. Kai whipped him off and had him pinned to the wall as if he’d surrendered and never fought. I could see Kellan struggling. He broke free and they warped through the room; over, under, a punch, a kick. I heard bones crack and impact of smacks and crushes.

“Stop! Just stop you two!” I screamed.

Nothing. They acted as if they didn’t hear me.

I panicked at the sight of gold. I knew instantly it was Kai’s gold dagger. Remembering what it did to the vamp before I didn’t think, I reacted. My reaction, my instincts drove me right between them just as Kai pinned Kellan again.

“No! Don’t! Stop!” I cried. I positioned myself fully to cover Kellan.

“Don’t Lexi. I can handle him,” Kellan insisted.

“Shut up Kellan. You’re not helping,” I scolded.

With my back firmly against Kellan's chest, I looked up at Kai. He was angry and looked ready to off us both at any moment. "Kai," I spoke calmly, "Please listen to me. Put away your knife."

"No. Who is this moron?" he demanded pointing the dagger at Kellan.

"Kellan. He's my ex," I answered.

"Ex? Is that what I am to you? Just your ex?" Kellan questioned angrily. I ignored him.

"Just let him go Kai. Please..." I pleaded. "For me?" I added in desperation.

"For you?" Kellan spit the words at me.

"He's clearly a bitter ex," Kai stated. "And you obviously still love him to step in front of my dagger."

"Yes," I whispered.

Kai grabbed my arm and jerked me to his side stepping away from Kellan. "Go," Kai ordered to Kellan.

"No," he replied, standing his ground.

"She has saved your life. Don't be an idiot and waste her humility. Go!"

"Lexi." He looked at me with intense eyes shining desperation. I quickly looked away.

"Just go Kellan," I sighed in defeat. There was no way Kellan could destroy Kai as long as he held the dagger. And I loved Kellan too much to risk permanent injury or death to him.

Without another word or opposition, he left.

“That’s strange,” Kai commented, his forehead scrunched in confusion.

“What?”

He narrowed his eyes at me. Uh oh... I wondered if Kellan slipped. Did he give me away? I told him about pretending to be broken up but I never briefed him on protecting his thoughts...

“Why would he need to protect his thoughts?” Kai asked. Crap.

Thinking quickly I answered, “Because no offense but I don’t want you seeing or hearing or whatever you do with my past relationships. It’s bad enough I have no secrets from you in the present.”

“Well you don’t have to worry. Oddly when you’re with him I can’t read your thoughts. And either his brain is empty or his thoughts are protected somehow too,” he explained.

There was so much I wanted to think and ask but couldn’t. Alas I just sped upstairs to my room. Kai was right beside me though I had a head start.

“Cute,” he said scanning my room. “Not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?” I asked pulling a few items from my closet.

“Not this,” he answered vaguely. I let it go.

“How long should I pack for?”

He approached me slowly and wrapped his arms around me but didn’t pull me into him. “You can stay with

me as long as you want, Leka," he offered, but never answered my question. I guessed he wasn't going to.

I broke away and grabbed some items from my drawers. His avoidance sent my mind spiraling. I was set to meet Auggy tomorrow but it looked like that would be next to impossible. Oddly, as upset as I was about being a prisoner, I still somehow understood his logic and precaution so I wasn't mad at him. We left with no more disturbances.

The next few days flew by. I was able to observe the Bladangs more and felt bonded to them. Each morning we did breakfast followed by some sort of extreme, fun sport. We climbed trees and leapt between them one day daring each other with a larger gap; the next we water-skied but naturally the boat was at max speed. Then, of course, came business. They included me on several outings to the separate sites and requested my opinion on several criminals. Each day brought me out of my shell a bit more but further complicated my mission. I had bonded with these people. They brought out a side of me, a lighter part of me, I didn't even know existed all while instilling a harder work ethic than I'd known.

I was able to get a text to Auggy but kept it generic. 'I'm out of town so I have 2 cancel our plans. Look forward to catching up next time you're here.' If they read it, it wouldn't send up red flags.

By the ninth day I was sulking. Maybe I was being petty, perhaps I was overwhelmed by my emotions in the moment but I went from loving it here to not hating but resenting my time here now. I'd briefly spoken with my outside friends and found out Kellan was struggling, my parents were upset, Mel was distraught and it was all because of me agreeing to this mission. And even though I

had their weakness, I was here where they could track me to the spot of attack, yet I guessed I'd grown to like these vamps more than I ought to have. Even worse, I respected them and saw them as a potential extension of my family. I had to do something though. At some point fate would present itself; I couldn't protect or prevent it all. How long could I truly go on like this in neutral? Think, think, think Lexi...

"What is there to think so hard about?" Kalel asked as he entered the library.

"Life, choices..." I replied shifting in the chair to a more upright position; somehow it felt disrespectful to slouch.

"Kai is right. You over think." I shrugged. That's just me; it's how I'd always been.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. You just don't have as much fun."

"Yeah. I can see that being true," I smiled giving in to his blunt charm. "Kalel," I began.

"Uh oh. You switched to serious," he said taking a seat in the chair angled beside me.

"Have you ever thought about signing a peace treaty with the High Authorities?" I asked cautious not to word it wrong.

"What for?"

"To protect yourselves and your land from any threats from the vamp army. Think about it. That would give you less to deal with and a tiny sense of security," I conveyed a view hoping to entice him or hit a ping.

“There is no such thing as security in our world,” he bucked defensively.

“Okay, wrong angle. Wouldn’t you like to have a strong ally? One where when you band together, it truly is world domination...” I felt his mood change.

“Hmm...”

“Less work, less stress. You’ll have access to all your men and all of theirs. You’ll be able to safely share strategies. If you need a weapon, they can lend it. They would be like an extended family, an extension of you, Kai, and Gabi and all you’ve fought to protect and accomplish.” I painted the picture for him. I knew Kalel was the one to convince. He would be the best at coercing the others if he liked my idea.

“Bonds are not strong in our community. There is no such thing as a loyal vamp; they can always be bribed or threatened. There is no guarantee that we will not be used or exposed,” he reasoned.

“What is binding to our kind?”

“Very little. The only thing acknowledged and honored is the exchange of blood,” he answered.

“So draw up a document, a copy for each party; sign and seal the document with blood. Should one party break the contract, then you could easily expose them as untrustworthy and recruit many of their ranks. And new wanderers will side with you since you proved loyal to your word. Vamps will roll over from side to side but only if they believe you will follow through on your promises.” I was speaking from no experience making it up as I went along hoping that I made business sense.

“You do make business sense Leka; it’s just whether we can get past our own insecurities and trust another,” he explained. “You have contacts with the vamp army, don’t you?” He said it almost accusingly, which sent me on alert.

“Yes...” I whispered hesitantly unsure where he was headed.

“How high up?” he pressed.

I sat frozen unable to think or speak a response. I was suddenly panicked. How did this conversation go so wrong?

“I don’t say much but I’m not stupid. Your thoughts are too gapped and spacey for your intelligence level which means you know how to protect them from us.”

“Actually I don’t know how I do it; it just sort of happens. Same way I don’t know how to fix my nose. I don’t smell humans, vamps or blood...” I offered hoping to ease any concerns on his part.

“I know you’re working for them,” he bluntly stated. I swallowed hard, the serum rising in my throat.

“How do you know that?” I tried to stay calm but my voice quivered a bit.

“Several ways. I tracked down and spoke with Mike. He sung like a canary on certain interesting situations surrounding you. The other day when we were hang-gliding out on the water, your ring blinked red. It was quick; I barely caught it. It’s a tracker and emergency device isn’t it?”

Well, there’s no use in lying. I was cornered. Either way I was dead whether I lied or told the truth. “Yes.”

“I’m not going to kill you because you didn’t kill us. You knew we had no protection here and didn’t call in

anyone. That was your mission, right? To find a weak spot for an attack..."

"Sounds like you know it all..."

"But I don't. You've been here nearly two weeks. Why did you protect us?" I heard the subtle surprise and genuine wonderment in his tone. He sounded almost grateful.

"When I came into this, I thought I would be dealing with power hungry heathens; horrible war bent vamps with little emotion. What I found took me by surprise... You only protected, never intentionally tortured. The whole hand thing was borderline, but I understood why you did what you did. I understand why you do everything you do partially from what you've all shared and the rest from spending time here. It was a short time but I felt so much during that span. I felt like I was accepted with open arms into this perfect, slightly dysfunctional family. You embraced me as one of you, though I hadn't proven myself yet, which means you all have good hearts.

"The High Authorities favor me because they see my loyalty and my morals only compliment it. But that lies in more than one field. You have done nothing to me to morally allow your home to become an uneven battlefield. I respect all of you and would rather negotiate peace than initiate a gang fight. You all mean something to me. I've learned from everyone. The biggest thing I value from you and Kai is to protect your family regardless of whether you support them. I view you as my extended family because that's how you've treated me even with your suspicions. I can't and won't throw that away regardless of what you do with me now..." I explained. I took a deep breath and waited. I wasn't sure if he was going to lock me up, kick me out or feed me to the wolves.

“Thank you.”

I jerked my head and looked at him with sheer shock. “What?”

“Thank you,” he repeated.

“For what?” I stuttered still in amazement.

“Leka, regardless of why you are here I appreciate that you protected us while you were here. Anyone else would have pressed that button the moment they found out. You didn’t. You spared my family because had they come, we would have been unprepared. We would have survived but not without a great loss, even possibly my only brother. Speaking of him, he hasn’t been this happy in decades. The truth is going to kill him...”

“I’m sorry. I really didn’t plan on this,” I said. I felt horrible. Now I had more people to add to my list of people I’d hurt.

“I am shocked that they favor you. They don’t like anyone usually but I see your appeal. If I’m honest, I’ve thought about a truce for a while now. I’ve been doing this for over a hundred years with not one vacation. I’m ready for change and I believe you can initiate all this,” he continued. I didn’t want to say much. I felt like he needed to talk through and develop his own conclusions. He stood and began pacing.

“Kalel!” Gabi called. I could tell she was at the stairs, which meant another catch.

“Come,” he ordered walking towards her voice. I followed silently.

Going down the stairs Gabi briefed us. It was another spy who was in their higher circles. My gut told me it was

Caesar... The serum rose in my throat.

I stepped in the room with them. I saw the vamp wrapped tighter than a sausage in casing on the floor as I'd been delivered. Kai was pacing angrily around him.

"What's your name?" Gabi demanded.

Nothing. He didn't say a word or move a muscle.

"What is your name?" Kai yelled. Gabi joined him in pacing the marble floor. Kalel stood beside me, his chin pursed on his thumb, his fingers moving in a thoughtful motion.

"Caesar?" I asked softly. Out of habit his eyes looked at me in acknowledgement. That's all I needed. "Release him please," I requested directly to Kalel. He's the only one who knew at this point.

"You can't be serious!" Gabi exclaimed.

"Are you vouching for him?" Kalel asked.

"I don't know him to vouch for him but I know who he works for so please release him. Please..." I was praying for trust. And if not trust, at least allowance this one time.

After a minute of Gabi refusing the suggestion and Kai yelling objections, Kalel withdrew his dagger and cut Caesar free. He jumped up and settled against the back wall on the opposite side of the room. His nerves were shot, but I was surprised and respected him for keeping quiet; he didn't grovel.

Kalel called for Connor who promptly appeared. He turned to me. "What would you like me to do with him?"

"Seriously, Kalel?" Gabi was furious. "Why don't you give her the key to our weapons room while you're at it!"

She must have been a great fucking lay because she still has your balls!" She stormed out. Kai looked between the two of us in dismay. He seemed vulnerable as if Gabi's words planted an idea that hurt him.

"Escort him off the property," I answered in defeat, my tone held no inflections.

"You heard the orders Connor," Kalel iterated.

"Caesar," I called. He looked directly at me. "Tell Auggy to prepare for my call. We want to negotiate." His lips lifted slightly in the corners as he gave me a quick nod. Connor looked stunned but swiftly pulled himself together. He opened the door and rushed Caesar through it.

"What the hell was all that about?" Kai demanded. He was so upset that he was visibly trembling in an attempt to control himself. His eyes pierced me.

"Calm down brother," Kalel said patting Kai's shoulder; his voice a sooth tone when he spoke. "Come. We need to talk."

—

Chapter Fourteen

Kai took it better than I'd thought he would. He was embarrassed that I had slipped through their many radars. They prided themselves on their defense yet I, far less than an experienced assassin, reached them easily.

"Starting immediately, all posts will be tightened and every interrogation scrutinized more," Kai declared. "I'm angry. You got through!" He was beating himself up as he paced the floor with heavy feet.

"We got lucky brother," Kalel said calmly. We sat on the loungers as Kai circled the room in front of us.

"Lucky? How the hell is a security breach lucky?" he yelled. He irritably ran his fingers through his hair tugging roughly on his strands.

I stood and slowly approached him. I looked up at him until he made eye contact. I closed the gap once he stopped moving and wrapped my arms around him. "You're lucky because I like you. And of course because I have morals; I'm a good, loyal vamp," I smiled. It must have been contagious because he gave in. His wall of bitterness crumbled and gave way to a grin that grew every second longer he held my gaze.

"I guess I did luck out with you," he admitted shyly. He pulled me into a tight hug. He gently kissed me but didn't linger. He straightened up and became all business. "Kalel, go tell Gabi and Rafique. She listens better with you. I'm going to the library with Leka to draw up our terms. She will set a meeting up for us in a neutral location. Once Gabi is done with the insults, join us so we can finalize the details," he ordered. Kalel nodded and sped upstairs

without speaking a word. They had to be able to communicate mentally. “We can,” Kai confirmed aloud.

“I said to stop doing that,” I scolded lightly.

“Old habits die hard,” he smirked. I trailed him into the library.

“Where do you want the meeting and for when?” I asked settling into a chair. He pulled a few old journals off the shelves and sat at the antique mahogany desk in the room. He retrieved several sheets of paper and a pen from the drawer. He began flipping through the worn notebooks like a mad man.

“Um... hello? Date, time... location?” I prompted again. He looked up at me from his work.

“Twenty four hours from now. Make it some place neutral like your house or book a conference room somewhere secluded. Make the terms known that no guards can accompany them as none will us,” he quickly rattled. I shook my head in acknowledgement, but he was already back to flipping, and now writing furiously.

I got up and walked out to the living room. Upstairs I heard Gabi having a fit. It took me a minute to realize that the library was sound proof to our standards, very unusual.

“I told you two to stop thinking with the wrong head and now look what happened! We could have been destroyed and at the very least would have suffered a major loss!” Silence, not even a breath by anyone in that room. Though the door was open, I barely heard the rustle of a shirt.

“I hate to admit it but I did like her,” she sighed. “Not at first, but she grew on me. And if the High Authorities favor her like you said, then she’s our best opportunity in

negotiating something with them..." I heard Rafique console her. He didn't say anything but I heard his lips press to her and a slight wind from a back rub.

"Are you ready to write our demands with Kai now?" Kalel asked. He sounded nonchalant as if he asked if she wanted a cup of coffee.

"Yes. Come with us Rafi," she stated.

A second later she was in front of me inches from my face. Kalel and Rafique were on high alert but did not pull her back. I didn't budge in hopes of proving my respect.

"The ring," she ordered with her hand out palm up. I slid it off my finger and obediently turned it over to her. She said nothing more to me; instead she took my hand and led me out the back door onto the deck overlooking the lake. She threw the ring out into the open water where it would sink to the bottom to never be used again. I watched it soar through the air and plink heavily into the lake a good mile out. It wasn't until she looked at me and smiled that I understood her actions as symbolization. She was tossing away my precinct for being there and embracing what I offered and me.

We turned back to the door and saw all three men staring at us. "What are you gawking at? Haven't you seen two women bonding before?" she huffed. I couldn't help but crack a smile with that.

"Well, if you ladies are done with your Gilmore Girls happy moment, we have work to do," Kai announced.

"You watch Gilmore Girls?" I teased.

"He used to. It's not on anymore but he was obsessed. He has all the seasons on DVD," Gabi laughed.

“Thanks,” he was now a scorned man.

“Just painting you in the perfect pink light you live under,” she grinned. They went back and forth for a while like siblings until Kalel cut them off.

I again saw their family dynamic on display. They were so different yet blended perfectly. The weakness of one was always the strength for another. And understandably, by them having such a small circle of friends, trust was never an issue; though I didn’t think it would be regardless. They formed a united front that the largest of armies was afraid of.

“We’ll be in the library if you need us,” Kalel prompted. He must have read my thoughts, again, and saw my checklist for Auggy.

“Schedule it at your house. I want to feel safe and anyone could infiltrate a hotel ahead of time,” Gabi requested.

“I’ll have to ask my parents first...” I replied, quickly adding, “But it should be okay.”

“Good,” she smiled. “I’m curious to see your wardrobe. It looks like you have fabulous taste.”

“Thanks.” I looked down at the ensemble I’d thrown on that morning. I wore my dark wash skinny jeans, a long black and teal plaid, three-quarter-length sleeve button up shirt with a wide black belt around my upper waist, and the one pair of silver ballet flats I talked my aunt and Eduardo into. The shirt was a mix of soft flannel and cotton so it’s ultra-comfy.

They retreated to the library and I looked out the window for a while. I was washed with relief to know my stint was short. On the same level though I was nervous. I

had to contact Auggy and not only tell him I blew my cover but I also had to convince him that a treaty was in everyone's best interest. I never checked to see if it was a viable option for the ranks. I was hoping it was or I would be in an awful position to choose a side.

"Jackson, talk to me," Auggy demanded the moment he answered his phone.

"They know," I offered up, mainly as a feeler.

"Caesar informed me. You've worked some magic considering they didn't off you," he sighed. "What do they want?"

"Peace. They want to negotiate something like a merger so you can work together when need be but exist separately at no threat level to each other," I explained.

"Hmm. Do they want to meet?"

"At my house or a neutral location to discuss terms from both parties and ultimately draw up a legal document for everyone to sign in blood. Multiple copies should be made and everyone will have their own copy for safe keeping."

"Twenty-four hours. No guards or spies. Tell them to call off their Florida pursuit or else we won't agree to meet," he ordered.

"I will relay the message."

"This could be a major advantage in the vamp community. An alliance of the strongest powers would be next to world domination," he thought aloud. "Excellent work Alexa. I'm pleased with your magic. Twenty four hours and don't be late."

“Thanks. We won’t be.” He hung up immediately. I found it ironic that he knew the terms they wanted and prompted them himself. Made me wonder if he wired me without my knowledge or bugged me as he said they would; I guess I’ll never know.

Now that I’d set up this meeting at my house, I hoped that my parents would agree to it. I probably should have called them before Auggy. Given how my mother reacted to the High Authorities though I didn’t see her rejecting them.

“Alexa!” my mother exclaimed. That was her ‘hello’ for today I supposed.

“It’s me, Mom,” I replied. I sighed hoping she wouldn’t overload me with questions or a lecture.

“Oh thank God. Are you okay? Your father is a wreck!” she said. She sounded very breathy, almost winded which wasn’t like her at all.

“Question is, are you okay? You don’t sound good...” I prompted.

“Don’t worry about me, I’m fine. Now tell me what’s going on,” she insisted. I heard her switch me to speakerphone so my dad could hear. That only made me more nervous. I knew he’s strong for a human, but how much of our world could he handle...

“They know who I am and why I was sent here,” I started. I heard my dad gasp quietly and my mother inhale deep, but neither of them spoke. “They’ve agreed to meet and we’re hoping to negotiate a peace agreement that benefits both parties with a strong ally. They want to meet tomorrow on neutral ground, which they’ve both deemed our house to be. Are you okay with that?”

My mother let out the breath she was holding. I pictured her talking to my dad with eye and facial expressions. "I guess we have to be. We can't deny two sets of authoritative leaders the use of our home. That would be like denying the President and Prime Minister..." she sighed.

"Thanks."

"I take it we won't see you until then?" she stated and asked.

"Probably not..."

"Well, that's manageable. It sounds like you're safe and we can handle it knowing there's an end in sight."

"I have a quick question..." I don't know why I got so shy. "You've talked to Kellan I'm assuming. How is he?"

"He's more frazzled than your dad. But he loves you and I'm sure he'll be relieved and overjoyed to hear this news," she stated.

My heart sank knowing he was so distraught these last couple days. I suppose I also felt guilty because he's proven his love for me. He risked his life to 'rescue' me. Meanwhile I'd been daydreaming of what it would be like to be with another man, kissed this other man, and thought about him more than Kellan. I really was a horrible girlfriend...

"Don't beat yourself up kiddo. He'll be okay," my dad chimed in.

"Thanks Dad."

"We'll see you tomorrow sweetie," my mother added.

"Sure. I love you both."

"We love you too," they confirmed simultaneously.

“So you’ve been daydreaming about me?” Kai asked. I jumped slightly at the sound of his voice. I didn’t hear him come in, which was unusual. I turned to see him smirking with a look of pure amusement on his face.

“Not about you in particular. More so about living here in general,” I stumbled to defend myself. I needed to learn how to block my thoughts...

“You already block quite a bit.”

“Well, I clearly don’t block enough...”

“So tell me Leka, do we have a venue?” he asked loudly plopping down on a chaise.

“Of course.”

“Good work. You, you’d make an excellent assistant. Care to entertain the idea?”

“I’m still in school, remember?” I opted for a less venomous response.

He’s so... moody and hard to keep up with sometimes. Kellan was impulsive in his emotions, but Kai was plain unpredictable... Oh my! I’d been so stupid! I could never have with Kai what me and Kellan have. Over and over Kellan had been there for me; he was even supporting me now despite not agreeing with my choice. Kai had only proven that he’s unpredictable and quickly bored. Guys like him were lifelong bachelors. They seek adventure with bold, ambitious women, but once the excitement is over and the rush settles into a schedule, he would quickly evaporate without a solid goodbye. I was young, I know, but that was definitely not what I wanted. And him asking me to downgrade to an assistant revealed the lack of commitment from the start.

How could I have been foolish enough to even entertain the idea? Worse, how could I have tested it? I let him kiss me. I had purposefully hurt Kellan over a slight temptation. Kellan was committed enough to risk his life for me; meanwhile I threw it in his face by succumbing in a weak moment of curiosity. How dedicated was I truly to our relationship? Granted all Kai and I had done was kiss a few times... and I slept in his bed, sometimes beside him, but nothing more. Yet that was certainly enough to count as cheating regardless of my mission.

“Oh Leka, stop overanalyzing. Every advance I made, you hesitated on. The only solid stand you took with me was actually against me when I was ready to shred your vamper.” He walked over to stand directly in front of me. He put his index finger under the chin of my drooping head and lifted so I was forced to look into the eyes of my mistake.

“Listen to me Leka. You are a good girl, a perfect girlfriend. I knew that and that’s why I wanted you. That and you’re *‘muy caliente’* as Gabi would say. Kellan is a lucky man. And I can attest that you did nothing with me out of desire. You are innocent,” he said consoling my frantically racing mind.

“Thanks Kai. That was really sweet of you. You are good with tender moments,” I smiled.

“I know,” he grinned.

“Ugh!” I shoved away from him sarcastically. “You’re such a play boy!”

“You’re forgetting irresistible and charming.”

“Try pushy and cocky.”

“I was irresistible and charming to you,” he smirked; now he was taunting my brief insanity.

“Make up your mind. Either I’m innocent or guilty,” I shot back.

“I’ll stick with innocent, just attach naïve to it.”

“Ugh. You kill me!” I stomped dramatically towards the library. He used his vamp skills to speed in front of me and block my path.

“Going somewhere?” he asked, one eyebrow quirked upwards. He stood with his legs shoulder width apart and his arms crossed.

“Yes. Are you?” I sassed copying his stance and narrowing my eyes at him.

He burst into laughter. “Oh Leka! Promise me you’ll visit after this.” He wrapped one arm around my neck and pulled me in under his arm and against his chest like a football. He roughed up my hair at the top of my head as if I was a locker room buddy.

Speaking of which, I hoped this was over soon. I couldn’t miss too much more school or else I’d fail due to absences...

“Stop thinking,” he scolded releasing me from his death grip. “I think I will start tuning you out.”

I quietly giggled trying not to crack a smile. Regardless of his actions or behaviors, I kept coming back to this feeling of family. We’d been bickering like siblings yet flirting like sinless lovers.

“Leka!”

“Sorry! Turning my brain off is not an easy quest you know...”

“Clearly I do.” He plopped down on the sofa nearby.

“When was the last time you left this house?” I asked thoughtfully; an idea was beginning to circulate in my mind...

“Ugh, today,” he sarcastically replied. His tone reminded me of a valley girl.

“You know what I mean. How long?” I demanded.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged.

“You obviously are long overdue. I say we go out for a night on the town,” I suggested punching as much enthusiasm in as possible.

“I can’t just up and leave my responsibilities,” he argued right as the library door swung open. Half a blink later Gabi was beside me.

“I knew I liked her!” she exclaimed. “Guys, you have to agree. It’s been a lifetime since we left this place. And I could so use a night out,” she pleaded. She went around persuasively pleading with each person.

“Rafi, wouldn’t you love a romantic night on the town? We could even book a room and, you know,” she leaned in to whisper the rest in his ear. I immediately tuned out, Kai and Kalel quickly copied. Based off the look on Rafi’s face, Gabi had swayed him her way. She kissed his cheek and completed a graceful twirl over to Kai. He quickly turned his head away from her as if to give her the cold shoulder; hard to do though when Gabi’s hands were firmly placed on the right one.

“Kai,” she began.

“You’re not talking me into anything. We cannot abandon our posts. Imagine what could happen if we did...” They began to argue back and forth. I turned my attention to a silent Kalel. Originally, I pegged him as the one to object.

“What do you think? Could you use a night out?” I prompted him.

“It’s not about what I want; it’s about what’s best,” he answered, the entire time his eyes never left Gabi and his brother. Kalel was a sensible businessman; I knew I had to appeal to that part of him.

“When a man opens a restaurant, he pours his heart and soul into every part of it. He’s there long before opening prepping and long after cleaning day after day, night after night. This is how he launches and establishes his business successfully, by coordinating every detail. But over time, human or vamp, you get tired. And if not tired, then bored with monotony and the rigorous schedule. That weakens you. If the restaurant owner doesn’t take a break, he will get sloppy and lose some of the quality he founded himself on,” I explained. He finally turned to look at me.

“Wise beyond your years. Point made,” he sighed. He went back to a still arguing now borderline yelling Kai and Gabi. “Enough!” he yelled, his voice authoritative and final. The silence that erupted proved his strategy as effective.

“Seriously?” Kai grumbled. Apparently they communicated mentally.

“It makes sense brother. We are going into a hardball negotiation tomorrow. We could use the rest,” he stated.

“You all go without me,” he insisted sitting down to sulk.

“No. We all go or no one goes,” I stood my ground; he really did need a night out. Kai cut his eyes at Kalel; seems I wasn’t the only one persuading.

“I guess that makes sense. Fine. You win.” He conceded.

“Yay!” Gabi shouted each arm squeezing Kai and Kalel without a millisecond of notice. “I have to pick out an outfit! Come Lexi!” She grabbed my hand and had me flying up to her room. I gave a quick wave to the guys but they were gone, well, I was, too fast...

—

Chapter Fifteen

Gabi had a wardrobe that trumped me and Mel combined. I felt like I was in a small department store. She had turned the room next door into her personal closet and everything was organized on display. Seeing how fashionable you could be as a plus sized girl made me feel like I was a bum before, always in jeans and a tee.

I helped Gabi narrow down her choices. In the end she wore a bold black and white printed empire waist halter dress that hit her mid-thigh. She paired it with slimming black tights, leather 2-inch thin-heeled ankle boots that had a few gold studs on them and a cropped distressed black leather jacket. She accessorized with purple feather earrings, a huge amethyst ring and a small black and dark teal checkered distressed leather clutch purse. It somehow all came together perfectly in a high fashion way.

It was Gabi who inspired me to step outside my comfort zone and wear, in my opinion, the most daring dress, no outfit, I owned. Aunt Claire and Eduardo raved over it and said I had to have it. It's a yellow, yes bright yellow, scoop neck dress that hit mid-thigh like Gabi's. The silk material perfectly skimmed my body.

Doesn't sound daring you say? Try a scoop back that leaves me bare from just above the butt on up. The gorgeous detail I actually loved was five small, delicate silver chains link the shoulders and each one scoops and hangs lower than the last. The final chain adorned a yellow and burnt orange feather. This dress certainly had a wow factor to it. I paired it with a pair of 3-inch high gray peep-toed pumps, stud earrings and a hammered silver cuff bracelet. We both went for the straightener with our hair, clean simple make-up and a spritz of Chanel No.5, which I found out, was Gabi's favorite. She called for an in-house spa manicure and pedicure so we were perfect tonight. We ended up with the same plum polish.

We chatted, flipped through magazines and bonded over 'girl time,' which Gabi clearly conveyed a lack of in recent decades. She missed that female camaraderie and in turn made me miss Mel. The two of them had a lot in common.

Mel, my ever devoted best friend. She's been worried sick about me, despite my clear advantage, yet I hadn't thought of her as often as she had me. How could I get so wrapped up in my mission that I forgot my loved ones outside here? Was this what's supposed to happen? Was I meant to forget them at the door? I guess it didn't matter now since it would all be over soon... I hoped.

"Ready Lex?" Gabi asked doing a final primp in the mirror. She even took to my shorter nickname like Mel.

"I'm ready," I replied pulling down my dress again. I felt so exposed. "On second thought, maybe I should wear tights like you."

"You can't. That will totally ruin it. Stop fidgeting; you look great." Ugh, she even sounded like Mel...

"Maybe I should change then..."

"Stop! You look perfect. I'm super jealous. I certainly couldn't rock that. Now let's go. The boys have a surprise for you downstairs." She grabbed my arm and pulled me to the door. "Ooh! I'm super excited to see you two together!" she squealed.

"Huh?" I wrinkled my forehead in surprise and confusion.

We were out the door before I could get an answer or even a clue as to the surprise. I had listened to the rustles below but occasionally got lost in our chatter; I had picked up nothing out of the ordinary though.

At the bottom of the stairs the guys were sipping a blood cocktail and chatting over sports, which I hadn't seen them watch. They immediately stopped when we approached to break up their huddle.

“You look gorgeous babe,” Rafi commented kissing Gabi sweetly as an embrace. She was beaming.

I glanced at Kai and Kalel, both had a deer in headlights look straight at me. I quickly yanked on the hem of the dress self-consciously.

“Stop,” Kai put his hand on my arm to assure me it looked okay. “You look...”

“Breathtaking,” Kalel finished his thought.

“Umm, thanks,” I replied shyly. I was still not comfortable with my exposure in the dress or my new body if I was honest.

“Don’t feel uncomfortable. You look great,” Kalel said kissing my cheek. He excused himself to the library.

“Kai,” I said. He was still motionless staring at me. He swallowed a bit of his drink and finally looked away.

“Where’s her surprise? Let’s get this show on the road!” Gabi interjected.

“Kalel’s getting him now,” Kai stated.

“Him?” I asked.

“Me,” he stated. I knew that voice instantly. My heart skipped a beat, not that it beats much these days. I looked at Gabi, then Rafique, Kai, and Kalel and dead-ended on Kellan. The tears instantly welled just by gazing upon him. I never realized just how horribly I missed him. He took my breath away. I wasn’t alone though; he appeared out of breath too. I was in his arms less than two seconds later squeezing what life was left out of him.

“Aw. They are so cute together!” Gabi exclaimed.

“It’s true,” Kalel confirmed. “You can’t read their thoughts when they’re together.”

“It’s the oddest thing,” Kai announced perplexed.

“I agree then. He has to be there to protect her remaining thoughts. I don’t want our plans revealed ahead of time,” Gabi stated firmly.

“Is that why you brought him here? To test us together?” I pressed slightly defensive and accusing. Kellan pulled me into his arms as if to silently say for me to calm down. He knew who we’re dealing with and I suppose I’d forgotten given my experience with them.

“Relax Leka,” Kai whispered. He moved to me fast and smoothly retrieved me from Kellan to look directly at him. “Despite your original agenda and association, we’ve accepted you as family, and you always protect your family. That is why he’s here.”

“What about Gabi’s thoughts?” I checked.

“We’ve taught her how to block them; she just chooses not to most of the time,” Kalel explained.

“*Ay muchacho!* It gives me a headache,” she complained.

“Oh, okay.” I turned back to Kellan. It was only then that I saw his clothes. All the men were dressed exactly alike; black silk pants, black leather shoes. They all had on a white button up shirt with the top few buttons undone to their comfort and, except Kalel, they had their sleeves rolled up. His hair was freshly cut and styled. I leaned in to inhale the exact spot on his chest that he sprayed his cologne. A smile spread across my face at the familiar scent. I felt that he was finally relaxing. I put one hand on

each cheek and pulled him in for a kiss. A few tears escaped which he wiped away as we separated.

These last few days forced me to re-evaluate our relationship. It forced me to define every thought and feeling I had for Kellan. My final conclusion? I love him. Kai distracted me because I was young. I hadn't dated around like you're supposed to which allowed curiosity to get the best of me. Regardless if I did though, my heart would always come back to him. He's a part of me that I couldn't and wouldn't strip away. He had a hold over me that, after this experience, I would never try to break. We truly have something; it's real. Age was never a discriminated factor in love, as with race and gender. It's one of the few things in this universe that scientists have never tried to change.

I reverted to my other tongue. "*Mi amor, tu es mi corazon; toda mi vida,*" I whispered near his ear; every other part of me was intense.

"*Igualmente,*" he stated.

"Oh! *Tu habla español! Como magnifico!*" Gabi squealed. She started into a Spanish rant over how this was a benefit to us. We could talk about the boys and they'd never know.

"*Ay que bueno,*" Kellan snickered sarcastically. I slapped his arm.

"*Estaria bien! Gabi es mi amiga y mi hermana nueva.*"

"*Si, ella es tuyo,*" he smirked.

"Oh pah! You're just as bad as them," Gabi stated. "And some boyfriend! You didn't even tell Lex how stunning she looks..."

"I was getting there."

“Well get there,” she demanded. Kai rolled his eyes and offered Kellan a sympathetic look.

“She’s right. I’ve never seen a more beautiful woman. Turn around... please,” he smiled. How could I resist that dimple? I lifted my hair off my neck and turned away from him. I peered over my shoulder back at him, but his expression revealed nothing. He put his arms around me and leaned down to my neck. “You’re breathtakingly beautiful. If it wasn’t for the crowd, I’d take you now,” he whispered in my ear. His breath on my neck so sexy and soft sent a chill down my spine.

“Ugh, enough mush. Let’s go,” Kai prompted.

“Wait. How did you get here?” I asked Kellan.

“Kalel called me from your phone and picked me up. At first I thought it was a trap, but I went willingly. I knew you wouldn’t let anything happen to me.”

“You know I wouldn’t,” I smiled. “Speaking of my phone, where is it?”

“In a safe place,” Kai winked.

I went full command; hands on hips, angry expression with eyes narrowed and roared. “Hand it over.”

He laughed and returned the phone. “You amuse me Leka.”

“Glad I could be of service,” I rolled my eyes stuffing the phone in Kellan’s pocket.

“Can we go now?” Gabi huffed impatiently.

“Please,” I added.

“Follow me,” Kalel stated. We sped out to the same underground garage. Gabi insisted the couples ride

together in the Hummer while Kai and Kalel took the black Infiniti.

“Where are we going?” I asked Gabi once we settled in the back seat. Rafi was driving with his left hand on the steering wheel and his right gently entwined with Gabi’s. It was a sweet moment to see. They looked so natural and comfortable together.

“Dancing. We’re going to a club. Woohoo!”

“I won’t ask how I’m getting in,” I said observing the scenery, mainly trees, around us.

“With these,” she passed Kellan and I two IDs.

“How... When...” I stared down at the state ID showing my age as twenty-two. My picture was the exact copy of the one from my real driver’s license. I glanced at Kellan’s which claimed he was twenty-four. “Is that your driver’s license photo too?”

“Yup.”

“Kalel makes them for us every few years. We rarely use them, but it’s better to be prepared. He hacks into the government’s records and implants us so they work and scan anywhere. That’s also how he got your license photos,” she explained.

“Wow,” was all I could say. Shocking, but it made sense given their real age.

Most of the drive I cuddled against Kellan. I felt relieved to have him beside me. It signaled the end of my mission in many ways. That and there was a familiar security I had with him. I knew he would protect me at all cost. My commitment to him was tested these last two weeks, and, while I failed on many accounts, I also

developed stronger feelings and an open, honest and fresh perspective on us.

“Stop thinking so much,” he teased.

“How did you know?”

“Because I know you,” he answered coyly.

“Uh huh,” I brushed him off playfully.

“I do and you know it.”

“Okay,” I snickered. He tickled me. Despite being a thick-skinned vamp, I was still ticklish. Go figure. I squirmed, laughing hysterically, and was fighting hard not to accidentally dent the car somewhere.

“Give! I forfeit! You know me!”

“See, you don’t have to be so stubborn,” Kellan stated, sarcasm was smeared throughout that comment. I let it slide with simply a quick cut of my eyes before yanking him to me to brush his lips with mine briefly. I’d really missed him. My cheeks hurt from smiling so much with him now. I was elated to have him back beside me.

We parked in a packed garage in downtown and walked, too many humans, towards the blasting music a couple blocks away. Conversations were everywhere, as were the illegal items our enhanced scent caught.

“IDs,” the heavysset bouncer demanded. We held out our mocked IDs and I held my breath waiting for a rejection.

“Go in,” he said motioning toward the door; he lifted the makeshift belted gate and we entered. I held tightly to Kellan’s hand since it was my first time in a place like this.

The club was packed tighter than a sardine can. It reeked of sweat, booze and cigarettes. Occasionally I got a whiff of someone's cologne or perfume. I lifted Kellan's arm to see the time, 11:57pm. Suddenly Gabi whipped me with her towards the crowded dance floor.

"When you're a vamp, you make space for yourself in the crowd," she said swaying gracefully with Rafi.

"Shall we?" Kellan asked from behind me.

"I'd never say no to you," I was beaming with delight. I didn't expect to see him for another few days so I wanted to savor every moment. "I want to dance with Kai later though, at least once," I added. He nodded with approval.

We danced for over an hour nonstop. Kellan was very territorial when any guy came close to me. I didn't mind. I was still self-conscious in my dress. We eventually separated and I went to find Kai. It took some convincing for Kellan not to follow me. I found Kai sitting alone on the sidelines. He appeared the opposite of the social butterfly I pictured.

"Having fun?" I asked taking a seat beside him.

"This isn't really my thing," he answered, still looking around at the masses.

"What is your thing?"

"Surfing. Anything in the water actually."

"Oh." We sat in silence for a minute before I mustered up the courage to ask him to dance. I felt like I was in middle school all over again. "You want to dance?" I spit out the words as quickly as possible.

He looked at me, completely serious without a hint of emotion traceable. I sat waiting for a response, but his gaze

only intensified.

“Where’s your boyfriend?”

“Wandering. I laid claim to you at the beginning of the night,” I smiled timidly, unsure of his reaction to come. I knew I’d said it before, but he really was unpredictably moody.

“You can’t claim me, but you can dance with me.” A smile gently broke through. I sighed in relief; rejection avoided. He hopped down from the ledge we were sitting on and held out his hand to assist me. Though I didn’t truly need it, the gesture was enjoyed.

“You can’t laugh at my dancing,” he conditioned as we made our way back to Gabi.

“No promises,” I smirked.

“Remember who has a gold dagger,” he playfully warned.

“And remember who has seductive powers,” I rebutted.

“Who?”

“Shut up and keep up with me. The trick is to listen for the beat and then move your hips in rhythm. Your hips swaying will motivate your feet. And your hands are freestyle; do whatever with them. Most people use their hands as their link. It’s the only thing that touches your partner... unless you’re naughty,” I winked deviously. I knew I shouldn’t have egged him on, but I did want him to loosen up. Kai, Mr. laid-back Hawaii, stood stiff as a board in front of me.

“Show me,” he challenged.

“Haha. I knew you’d make me work for that dance.”

“Actually, I just wanted to enjoy the view for a minute.”

I rolled my eyes and pulled him to me. I wasted no time moving with and around him. He cracked after two minutes. He started swaying with me, occasionally getting fresh with his hands at which point I had to remove them... repeatedly.

“What’s the point of dancing with the prettiest girl here if you can’t touch her?”

“You can touch, just stay above the waist.”

His eyes lit up and he immediately moved to my chest. I whisked around him and pinned one of his hands behind his back. “Don’t be rude,” I scolded. He laughed.

“You have good moves.”

“I know.”

“Beat it bro. It’s my turn with Leka,” Kalel surprised me with his cut in. And he was a surprisingly good dancer.

By two thirty, we had played round robin with dance partners. Gabi and I danced with every guy at least once.

“You ready to go girls?” Kai asked. We nodded in agreement and headed out. It wasn’t due to exhaustion, more so boredom. As a vamp, you rarely tire and have forever to do it again and again. You never want to burn out in one night when it comes to activities.

The streets outside were busy in spurts. Small groups dotted the road here and there as did the random streetlights. I walked quietly beside Kellan, hand in hand, while the others treaded in front and behind us in the same silence.

Softly, off in the distance, I heard it...

"Stop! Please don't! Take my purse, just leave me alone!" the girl spoke in a frantic tone.

I abruptly froze trying to locate the direction.

"Lexi don't. I told you about interfering," Kellan warned.

"Afraid it doesn't work like that. I'm not after money," the male's voice taunted her hauntingly. It slightly echoed which indicated an alley.

"Please," the girl pleaded weakly. I heard a tear of clothing, a tiny ripping of material. That's all I needed to locate them.

I left the others in the dust and raced east seven blocks. Her pleas became louder and eventually broke with tears. I heard the rustling. She was fighting. Good girl!

I flew around the side of an old brick building and startled them both. "Back off!" I ordered stepping closer.

The scruffy college boy held tightly to the girl's tattered shirt. She was small, a little over a hundred pounds, and adorned newly torn clothes, a few scrapes and a black mascara trail down her pale face. She was shaking violently with fear.

"Looks like I get two rounds of fun tonight," he grinned. Sick perv.

"Let her go."

He whipped out a small revolver from his jacket pocket and cocked it. He pointed it right at me. "Make me," he challenged.

“Lexi!” Kellan called. I heard him racing for me with the others close behind, but they were still a bit away probably trying to pinpoint my position.

The girl began pleading again, weeping hysterically. At vamp speed I yanked the gun from him and knocked him against the brick wall. His back slammed hard forcing a few stones to crumble onto him.

I turned to the girl who looked ready to pass out. “Do you live nearby?” Still trembling she shook her head no.

“Are you parked close by?”

“Y... Yuh... Yeah,” she finally managed.

“Did you come with anyone? Friends?” I checked. She just looked at the frat boy slumped against the alley floor now.

Kellan arrived in horror at the scene. “Damn it Lexi! I told you not to interfere!” he scolded, staring at the sunken male body with blood soaked hair.

“Rape is not allowed on my watch,” I firmly stated, angry that he could turn his back on such a thing.

The girl started inching away from the scene but tripped. Kellan caught her and she crumbled into his arms crying.

“Give me my phone,” I requested. He tossed it to me and I immediately dialed the police. The girl was clearly too shaken to go anywhere alone and this boy certainly belonged behind bars for attempted actions.

The others arrived as the 911 operator picked up. I explained the situation and then waited on the line as they sent over an ambulance for the girl and hopefully the

toughest police officers in Charleston County for the *pendejo*.

—

Chapter Sixteen

The girl was okay, my conscience squeaky clean, but my ears full.

The medics took care of the girl; her name I still didn't know. It's probably better that way. The medics also took care of frat boy Jay before he was arrested. Gabi had to stay away from the scene; it had been too long since she'd seen fresh meat. And the ear full came the moment we were permitted to leave.

Kellan, Kai and Kalel all agreed and lectured me on the risk, irresponsible impulsion and sheer forbidden interference I ignored in the situation. All the way home I heard it since Gabi and Rafi took the Infiniti earlier. I finally snapped when they parked; I actually growled and hissed at the same time.

"Listen to me you ignorant bloodsuckers! You keep throwing what if's and could have's in my face but, news flash, nothing happened. Yes I took a risk but had that been your mother or your sister or your friend you wouldn't have hesitated. Well, guess what? She is a daughter, a sister, a friend and possibly a mother to someone! So stop punishing me for doing the right thing this time and consider me warned against it for the next!"

I stormed off at vamp speed infuriated by their treatment. Why do people and vamps alike find it so easy to turn the other way? How can they ignore the abuse and destruction of a person's life and continue unfazed within their own? Why do they choose to do nothing when they have the ability to do something?

I banged on the door at the end of the long walkway underground since I didn't know the code. Rafi opened the door and I raced upstairs. Maybe it was a bit juvenile but I shut and locked myself in Kai's room. I heard the guys come in. Kalel told Kai and Kellan to give me time and space. I could hear their silent hesitation.

I woke up two hours later startled to be cuddled up to Kai.

"Morning Sunshine," he grinned.

"Where's Kellan?" I immediately asked.

"Relax. He's in the library with Kalel. Breakfast is almost ready."

"Oh." I glanced around the room. I could feel the sun alive and risen, but the blackout drapes left the room pitch black.

"What are you doing up here?" I broke the silence wanting to kill my curiosity. I did awake to his arms around me...

"It is my room," he replied. Smart-ass. I narrowed my eyes at him to show my lack of amusement.

"Okay, okay. You win," he sighed, still smiling. "I guess I was impressed with you a couple hours ago."

"Impressed? Between you, your brother and Kellan I nearly got my head chewed off," I scowled.

"I know. I reacted to fear. I wasn't rational with you. I apologize. Will you forgive me?" He put on his best look: open, bright yet dark, alluring eyes with a charming smile. "Please..." he added.

“What impressed you?” I refused to acknowledge forgiveness at this point though I was mostly over it. In a way I sort of expected it. Other vamps hold separate morals and values, if at all, than I do.

“You did what we could have but wouldn’t do. You rebelled against the crowd,” he answered. He pulled me into his chest and whispered in my ear, “It was so sexy.”

“Ugh!” I slapped against him and hopped out of bed. “I see some things don’t change.”

“What? I can’t use the word sexy?” he smirked still laid out on the bed. He propped himself up on his side with his elbow. “Especially when you’re wearing that,” he winked.

I looked down and realized I was still in my dress. I had kicked the heels off the moment I stormed in the room hours before. I yanked the dress down self-consciously and sourly said, “No.”

He softly giggled, amused again by me I was sure. “You always amuse me Leka. It’s part of your charm,” he said, his eyes locked on mine.

“I thought you couldn’t read my thoughts when Kellan’s around?” I checked begrudgingly.

“He’s in the library. It blocks everything.”

“Oh.” I picked up my bag of clothes and searched for my comfort staple: my VS Capri sweats.

“Do you want to maximize your ‘comfort’ – he did the air quotation marks with his fingers – and wear one of my t-shirts? I really wouldn’t mind,” he offered. Ugh. The last part was visibly a form of flirtation and his horrible stab at tempting me, testing the waters again. Or I suppose he

could have been trying to make Kellan jealous. Men are petty like that.

“Sure, thanks.” A bit of jealousy as an informal competition never hurt any man...or vamp.

I got comfy in my sweats, Kai’s tee, which hung on me but was worth the fashion faux pa, and my pink Uggs. The boots that felt like slippers were my birthday gift from Mel. Her words verbatim, “They are so not fashionable but worth the ticket.”

She had the same pair and wore them religiously on cold days. Of course she had more appropriate options, according to a stylist anyways, in knee high boots she bought in black and brown. And even though she bought them and wore them, she complained they’re too stiff and corporate looking.

“Breakfast!” Gabi called.

Everyone else was downstairs when I arrived to the full table. I sat beside Kellan, who had an odd expression, in the only remaining seat. I guess he’s not familiar with our eating ability either.

I leaned in to kiss him once in my chair to find him and Kai glaring at each other. I guess he took in the shirt.

“Ugh, good morning?” I said cheerfully trying to pull his attention to me. He growled softly at me. Taken aback, I set out to clean up the mess I invoked.

“Stop. I just borrowed a shirt; nothing more.”

“You could have worn mine,” he shot back. He wasn’t rude but in a foul mood now.

“I didn’t know you had any here.”

“Well now you do.”

“Kai is so not worth this argument. Now can we please begin?” Gabi cut in.

“Agreed. Sorry,” Kellan stated. He gave me the cold shoulder by not regarding me. We all joined hands and bowed our heads. This morning Gabi said the prayer.

This, the entire ritual of breakfast was something I’d come to cherish and would love to continue at home. We never had family meals together growing up. Of course I knew why now and would like to change it. In fact, I was going to make it a point to talk to my parents about it later. I said that because I wasn’t sure my dad could stomach my food soaked in human blood. Animal blood, as my mother used, was a bit different. Humans devour it all the time. It’s not as thick or vibrant in color and is mild, less flavored and dull in taste but it’s cannibalistic nonetheless.

I had to admit, it felt strange to be sitting beside Kellan amongst this crowd, not that I opposed.

Everyone started digging in, except Kellan. I did as Kai had done the first day for me; I loaded his plate. I stacked two waffles on his plate, scooped some berries on top. I placed eggs, bacon and sausage beside the waffles and smothered the dish with steaming blood. I tore off a piece of Cuban bread, dipped the end and handed it to him. He stared at it and me for a good thirty seconds.

“Take it. Try it,” I insisted pushing the bread closer to him. Reluctantly he took it. Looking around at every other vamp chowing down must have given him the courage. He slowly raised it to his mouth and bit off a small piece.

He chewed and swallowed, waiting as I had, to see if the serum erupted. He turned to me when nothing

happened and cocked his head as if asking for an explanation.

“I don’t know how it works. I just know it feels awesome to eat,” I stated taking a bit of my waffle. He watched me intently for a minute.

“It feels strange to chew after a years of drinking my meals,” he commented keeping pace with me and my waffle now.

By the end of breakfast, everyone was laughing and involved in the conversation. Any tension felt before with Kellan and Kai was long gone. Perhaps he was simply delighted to be able to eat again. He devoured twice as much as anyone... And Kalel and Kai have huge appetites.

I once again helped Gabi with the dishes while the guys ventured off to work instead of play. I assumed there were more spies, thieves and trespassers to take care of. I didn’t want Kellan to tag along with them given what I had seen and experienced. Okay, so I was also distrusting of the guys to not mess with Kellan, especially Kai. But he did anyways.

Gabi went to re-organize her closet after as I anxiously waited on the couch for their return. I talked to Mel as she got ready for school. She filled me in on all the gossip and what I’d missed. I told her what I was allowed and promised the rest in person. Things were moving along with her and Craig. She actually introduced him to her Mom, and, surprise, surprise, her mom adored him. Their time together was still limited and supervised when she was home though.

It was nice getting back to normal with the sound of my best friend’s voice. Everything else disappeared and it

was like I was home again in a way. Right as we hung up reality slapped me in the face.

The guys trudged in loudly despite their graceful footing. I immediately looked at Kellan who was composed or so he appeared to be. The moment our eyes connected he revealed his true horror just as I'd feared.

"So what did you witness these savages do?" I asked him lightly, trying to soften him up a bit. He reminded me of a soldier fresh from war.

"We're not savages," Kai quickly defended, though he didn't sound as if he'd taken it personally. "Well, maybe we are in bed," he winked.

I smacked him when he passed. We were morphing into quite the duo bordering a loving sibling rivalry at times and pure flirts at others.

"So," I prompted Kellan again.

"Three murders, one hand, an ear and two were spared but barred," he quickly spewed. I could tell he was really uncomfortable.

"An ear?" I asked, dumbfounded by the concept.

"He listened to the gossip about us and came to quench his curiosity. We did an ear to remind him not to listen to such nonsense," Kael explained.

"Oh..." I didn't know what else to say. My stomach was suddenly in knots.

"Relax Leka. We kept you in mind. That's why we spared the last two," Kai smiled as if I should have praised them for doing so. It amazed me how nonchalant they all were to death and killing.

The next few hours were spent discussing strategies, needs and demands for the meeting. Auggy called to reschedule for a later time, 11pm to be exact. They preferred to be inconspicuous given the location and chose a time when most humans would be in bed. We agreed.

As the time passed, the tension built. Gabi spent another two hours choosing an outfit. Rafi, Kalel and Kai spent their time in the weapons room. I didn't want to think about why or what they were doing. It gave Kellan and I some time together, which I felt we needed given our current circumstances.

"They were right," he stated randomly. We had been cuddled on the sofa in silence for over an hour when he suddenly blurted this.

"Who?"

"The docs."

"About what?"

"They said we were going to bring peace to our kind. I admit I laughed inside when I heard them. It just sounded like a bunch of fluff. But now, with this... It somehow seems doable."

"Yeah..." It did make sense somewhat now. I'd brought two huge entities in our world together; boisterous enemies had agreed to negotiate a treaty of alliance because of, well... me. It's crazy to think of it in a factual way like that. I could have passed the torch of responsibility to someone else, but truthfully, no one else arranged this. I did have cooperating parties though.

"You amaze me."

“Huh?” Having just returned from my mental roller coaster ride, I didn’t expect those words.

“You amaze me,” he repeated. I moved to look at him before replying. Men can say anything to woo a woman. Vamps are not immune to their game. One look at him told me he was being sincere. I was beaming, feeling loved and adored. I leaned in to kiss him. It felt like forever since I’d had his lips on mine. The moment our skin touched we were connected on that cosmic mental level, no tunnels to pass through first. I saw every fear, worry and contemplation he’d carried in my absence. He in turn relived my entire journey with the Bladangs thus far.

“Are you mad that I kissed Kai?” Best to deal with it now than later, especially since the guilt continued to mount.

“Hurt. But I know it was part of your mission, what you had to do. Plus I know you’ll always come back to me. I feel it.”

I lifted onto my knees leaning into him. I ran my hands from his chest to his shoulders and eventually to his back as I moved closer to him. He tasted sweet and refreshing. I never wanted to stop. I wanted to hold him to me forever.

“I know I don’t need air, but I do like it,” he chuckled the thought my way.

“Sorry. I just missed you more than I realized.” I loosened my grip.

I heard the weapons room door and flew off Kellan to my side of the sofa as if my parents had surprised us in the middle of a steamy session. Guilt and shock were plastered in my deer caught in headlights expression. I tried to pass it off but clearly failed. Thank God it was only Kalel. I don’t

know why, but I would have been embarrassed had it have been Kai.

“Don’t stop on account of me,” Kalel smirked on his way to the library. I blushed profusely, or at least it felt like I did.

“You totally freaked,” Kellan pointed out the obvious.

“Don’t remind me,” I replied somewhat snappy. I immediately felt bad.

“Why did you?” he asked, a bit defensive too now.

“Well it is their house...” I went upstairs to pick out clothes for tonight. I had somewhat lied to Kellan by not telling him the truth I’d just admitted to myself: I was interested in Kai as more than a friend or brother figure or else why would I have been embarrassed and jumpy. I knew he’s not what I needed and Kellan was my solid for a long-term commitment. But I was sixteen. I was supposed to have fun and Kai was the epitome of a good time, even if it’s temporary.

—

Chapter Seventeen

We arrived at my house an hour ahead of time. I did the formal introductions of Gabi, Rafi, Kalel and Kai to my mother. She, like everyone else, was in business mode. From the attitude to the conversations and all attire, we were ready.

I couldn't help but feel nervous. I was to be the mediator. If anything went wrong, I was the middle man (woman). I was the reason they're here and the reason it failed should that happen.

"Relax Leka," Kai said.

"I hope this goes well," I verbalized my concern. Talking to Kai always came easy.

"You don't control tonight. We do." This was his attempt at comfort, but it was useless.

"That doesn't make it better."

"Come here," he said pulling me in for a hug. I noticed my mother watching us with a peculiar gleam in her eyes I'd never seen before. I wondered what she was thinking but knew I couldn't ask now.

Kalel, Gabi and Rafi had taken over our dining room. They all carried the look of a high-priced attorney and evoked power. Kellan was upstairs on the phone with Craig; my mom grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. And me... I was a nervous wreck in Kai's arms in an open space between the kitchen and family room. I broke away from his grip and settled in a bar stool at the kitchen island.

"*Que paso, mija?*" my mother asked. I assume she used Spanish in case I wanted to say something about Kai or

what we were about to do.

“*Nada*,” I replied. She gave me the look. You know, the one every mother gives when they know you’re lying and something is wrong and they want you to know they aren’t leaving you alone until they find out. “*Yo no se*,” I sighed. She remained. “*Mañana, Mom*.” She nodded her head once in agreement before walking away.

I retreated to the dining room. My stomach was in knots and I felt like I was walking on eggshells. I approached the table right as Kellan returned to my side and the High Authorities arrived. The Bladang Leaders instantly shifted to the tableside closest to the door. I clutched Kellan’s arm as if my life depended on it; he immediately pulled me into him, ever my protective warrior. He’d risk everything for me regardless of how foolish it made him or what it cost. I felt guilty all over again about how things developed with Kai.

Laurence, Felipe and Auggy piled into the now crammed feeling formal dining room. They all were dressed in black outfits though the styles were individually matched.

“Gentlemen and ladies, our High Commanding Officer will be joining us this evening. We value his opinion and given your number of four, it will even the playing field,” Felipe smirked near the end as if taunting the Bladangs a bit.

“Of course. That will be fine,” Kalel replied. His voice was cold, body language stiff, and his eyes bore straight into every High Authority figure.

“Hartford!” Auggy called. My heart skipped a beat. It couldn’t be...

I scanned the room nervously, frantically. The two sets of leaders were dividing and organizing papers in front of them. No one spoke aloud, but you could tell conversation was in the air when in he walked. I would recognize him anywhere. He looked exactly the same as the first day I'd met him back in fifth grade at Mel's first slumber party with me. The shock factor was through the roof for me.

He recognized me; I knew it the minute he lingered too long in my direction. He gazed straight into my eyes with the same bright blue as Mel's, as if to bare his soul to me in an apologetic way. I wanted to scream at him; tell him that it's not me he ought to be appealing to but Mel, the daughter he abandoned!

Looking at him though, he appeared to be right around twenty-five or twenty-six, which meant he could have been vampeen or vampire. I didn't know how to tell the difference. If he's a vampeen, then Mel would be a... OMG! She would be just like me in a few months! But if he's not, then this would complicate her very existence in my life. Now that I knew, I couldn't keep that from her; I couldn't hide the truth about her own flesh and blood. I feared telling her though would only pull her deeper into my world, a world I'd even felt threatened within at times.

I had forgotten how much she looked like her dad... He was tall and sort of lanky but with a bit of muscle tone that matched her slender size zero frame. They both had fair ivory skin and the same blue eyes. He had the exact hue of blonde as her hair; it even had the same wavy fullness on top where the length fell slightly. They screamed Scandinavian in looks, but still appealed as the all-American ideal.

Laurence cleared his throat. "Well then, let us begin, shall we?"

“Yes, lets.” Kai pursed his lips, watching them closely.

“Alexa, please render your account with these leaders. Your thoughts have obviously been blocked,” Auggy ordered.

“Actually, it’s when I stand with Kellan that my thoughts are blocked,” I offered up nervously.

“Hmm. That’s quite peculiar,” Laurence stated thoughtfully. His thumb and pointer finger rested under his chin as if he were perplexed. “Nonetheless, we are here on a mission. Please render your accounts with us and we will gladly discuss your findings later.”

I nervously explained my experience starting in the woods to the end result of now. I even added the family aspect and my personal opinion regarding the Bladang Leaders as ones of integrity, honor, and charm. Though no smile was brought to their faces, I saw the gleam of appreciation and approval in Kai’s eyes. Kalel nodded once as if to acknowledge my verdict and Gabi, standing at the end of the table closest to me, took my hand and squeezed lightly as if to encourage me silently.

“What makes you the authority on verdicts?” Laurence asked in demeaning fashion. He was not amused or moved by my words it seemed.

“What does? Morals, values, standards that you yourself acknowledged I hold. Good judgment if you insist. As for who makes me the authority? No one did or does. Perhaps I may be overstepping a line in saying this, but I see no reason for two groups of Leaders in such positions to be arguing like school children with bombs and loaded guns.” I heard the tiny gasps around the table; the biggest came from my mother standing behind me a few feet.

“Alexa!” she scolded. She rushed to my side and pulled me back. “I’m so sorry. Please allow me to apologize for and on behalf of my daughter. She doesn’t realize the magnitude of what she is claiming.”

“Step back Sharon,” Felipe ordered. She glanced at me over her shoulder with a tortured look. She was torn between obedience and protection. She didn’t have to make the choice though; they made it for her.

“Hartford,” Auggy stated his name and he was at my mother’s side ready for a fight if need be.

“Just stop it,” I broke in. “Mom, step back. This is my doing, my responsibility; not yours.”

“Alexa. Return to the table and explain your outburst,” Laurence demanded. I obliged.

“I stand strong behind my words. The saying is the truth hurts, but tell me this. Why are you fighting with the Bladangs?”

“They attacked our forces in the Florida sector of the Vamp Army which is a direct violation of the code,” Auggy angrily spit the answer in their direction. He was pissed and poised for action as the rhetoric of that sentence.

“Kalel, why did you attack their Florida quarters?” I pressed in complete attorney mediator mode. I felt just as in control and powerful as the business suit I wore exuded.

“They launched an attack on our sub quarters in Virginia. The war was initiated by a J Russell under the direct orders of Augustine Ponte per the papers we recovered on July 19th,” he explained, never removing his eyes from Auggy.

“Auggy, explain your reasons for attack on their Virginia sub quarters.”

“I do not have to answer that. The reasons are confidential,” he spewed.

“He won’t answer because he has no valid reason,” Gabi accused. It was the first time she’d spoken all night.

“We have done nothing to deserve an attack, but we will do everything we have to once we are,” Kai added vigilantly.

Commotion set on. Everyone began talking at once spewing words back and forth. I couldn’t keep up.

“Quiet!” I yelled at the top of my lungs angrily. “Do you see what I mean about school children fighting?” They all were quite heated as they narrowed eyes amongst one another.

“Kai, share your distaste for the Vamp Army,” I issued my order hoping he would oblige with the tale of his father. He reacted with the bitterest of expressions. He looked at me like the scum who just branded him for life as a loser.

“Do you want me to?” Kael offered.

“I appreciate your offer Kael, but I feel it is Kai who needs to share his experience.” And it’s the complete truth. Perhaps he would feel better once he did.

“The previous High Authorities ordered your Hawaiian sector to kill my father because he was human and knew. I was attacked in the mountains. I fought heavily with my sword, which I believe scared off my maker. He did not bite me in the usual place, but rather my shoulder. I didn’t know what had happened or what had bit me, as I never got a glimpse at him or her. I returned home in shredded clothes

dripping in blood. My father went to bandage my wounds but found none. We were dumbfounded.

“Over the next forty-eight hours I slept on and off. When I awoke, I felt revived and strong. I felt better than I’d ever felt in all my life. When I found my father outside, he was weeping in the gardens. As I approached him, I didn’t want to hug him, but rather attack him. I heard the small pulse of his blood through his veins, smelled the sweet aroma of him in the air mixed with the honeysuckles and pineapple trees. I slowly approached him finding myself crouching over him in dire thirst. I ran away. It was that moment that I knew something was wrong. I realized my senses were heightened. With human ears I never would have heard his faint tears. The birds, the ocean waves in the background miles away; my nose smelled the coconut, pineapples and sand. And when I ran, I sped faster than any man or animal on the island.

“I returned days later having given in to my new savage nature. When I entered our home, I found my father buried in ancient writings and books in our native language. He looked up at me with both love and fear. My father was always the one who scared me. The only words he spoke that day were, “But son, you died.”

“As the days wore on, he opened up. He explained that my heart stopped beating, my body was flushed of color, and my sweat was stained with red. He said occasionally I would cry out in the first twenty-four hours, but afterwards, I was silent and my heartbeat gone. He just didn’t have the heart to bury his son yet so he hid me from any visitors.

“It was my father who uncovered the truth of me within his ancient readings; he told me what I was and I confirmed it on my own. He helped me through every mood swing, every furious thirst and occasionally even allowed

me to drink from him to kill my hunger. He loved me still as his son and treated me as such.

“One day, your brutal, fist army kidnapped my father and summoned me to the High Courts in our land. They had been watching me for months and knew of my father’s assistance. But they also knew that he spoke with no one. He severed ties with the majority of our neighbors and family members, a sign of disrespect and disgrace in our culture. But he did it to protect me, to protect the truth about vampires existing.

“They tortured him with questions. Beat him, slapped him and I was forced to watch every second,” Kai’s rage was surfacing second by second as he relived the tale. I felt horrible. Kai had never shared his story to this intimate of a degree in details.

“Your ranks murdered my father, an innocent man who protected our secret existence. He sacrificed everything to ensure I was hidden and no one else discovered the truth. You knew this when you executed him. You broke his neck right in front of me!” Kai screamed slamming his fist on the table. I was at his side in a millisecond hoping I could reign him back in. I couldn’t allow him to do something he might regret.

“Kai,” I whispered gently rubbing his arm. He looked at me with tears in the basins of his eyes on the verge of spilling. “Thank you.” I waited for him to compose himself. He stared into my honey brown eyes while he pulled himself back together and calmed down.

I returned to the head of the table and looked at the High Authorities. Vamps live for so long and typically we slowly lose our humanity along the way. When you witness the world in its evolution of war, democratic impulses and downward spirals of deceit acting out on constant societal

secret missions of blunder, you harden yourself to the reaction. You begin to close yourself off little by little no longer fazed by repetition or delivery. You've seen history repeat itself several times after a hundred years, let alone four hundred. It's not that you can't be impacted; it's that you won't allow yourself to be for it shows vulnerability.

A tough exterior is needed to survive. Weakness in our world is human emotion. Being married to a mortal in our world is considered a tragic mistake. A vamp will always have the upper hand over you since you feed your human side every day you live with them. You will forever be an easy target of abomination when your partner can't keep up and is easily killed. You weaken yourself for the length of their existence for you will always be fighting to keep them alive and protected, rather than keeping yourself alive and prized for war.

Our kinds were at odds with each other, easily roused up and egged on. We live for action since we live for so long without it. No vampire lives by a schedule; we live by our impulses. If we feel rowdy, we play with our food. If that's not enough, we spice up the hunt by seeking out our own. And for many vampires, that's how they were initiated into attacking vampeens and vice versa.

Looking at the right side of the table, the High Authorities appeared controlled, but you could see the hint of emotional relation buried far behind their eyes. We'd all lost loved ones, but to witness their murder, especially with a parent, was a play of torment. Even they couldn't deny that.

"Laurence, why has the Vamp Army been at odds with the Bladangs? This has been going on for over a century," I prompted.

“They attacked us for the first time exactly forty years prior to Pearl Harbor in our Waikiki base. It was a slaughter. They killed every last officer on the island. We do not sit back and allow our enemies to descend without repercussions,” he stated defensively.

“Kalel. Was this attack your retaliation in honor of your father?”

“Yes and we would do it again to protect our family name,” he stood straight across from Laurence and never looked away when delivering his answer. His hand was poised and fingers flickering ready to withdraw his dagger should anyone breathe wrong.

“Kalel, calm down. We are discussing and preparing to negotiate,” I warned. He looked back and forth between Laurence and me, his jaw taunt and defiant. He finally nodded once in agreement.

“Do I have your permission to speak freely without offending anyone?” I looked at both parties around the table.

“You’re in America Lex. Say whatever you want,” Gabi said giving me a controlled smile. I knew she wasn’t angry with me, more so trying to uphold appearances for the ranks.

“Yes Alexa. You may speak your mind. We’re not as ignorant as you may assume,” Felipe stated. His claws were out.

“Do we agree that this enemy clans thing started with the attack in Hawaii?”

“No, it started with the murder of my father,” Kai disputed. He clutched the chair in front of him harshly. No

one sat down preferring to stand at attention to protect themselves from quick moves.

“Understood. Your war started in Waikiki with the murder of your father. And Laurence, yours began with their retaliation, correct?” He nodded in agreement.

“Get to the point,” Auggy huffed.

“I’m getting there. Work with me,” I shot back.

“Auggy, go along with Alexa. I have relinquished control of this session to her,” Laurence defended my approach.

“Laurence, Auggy, Felipe, had your mother or father been tortured and murdered in front of you while you were restrained and prevented from defending them, would you consider yourself scarred in some way?”

“No.” Of course Auggy had to rebel.

“Who is your closest friend or family member?”

“I don’t have any.”

“Who raised you?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Why?”

“My personal life has nothing to do with this meeting.”

“It does when it’s involved in my point. The longer you hold off telling me, the longer it’ll take to be over with.” I felt my mother cringing behind me and Kellan tensing beside me.

“Since when did you become an obnoxious spoiled brat?”

“Since you became an arrogant military hardhead!”

He burst into laughter. We all looked at him crookedly.

“You are my best weapon. No one would have ever spoken to me like that except my grandmother. She is the one that raised me.”

“Is she still alive?” I asked softly returning to my sweet Southern mannerism.

“No,” he answered. I completed a quick movement of his fingers on his chest and shoulders before kissing them upwards. It took me a minute to realize they were the motions of a practicing Catholic and a sign of homage and respect to his grandmother.

“How did she die?”

“Old age.”

“Did you love her?”

“Of course I loved her,” his voiced went up defensively.

“Would you allow someone to harm her?”

“Never!”

“Should someone have kidnapped her? What would you have done?”

“Hunted him down and killed...” He knew where I was going the moment he blurted his response though he’d cut himself off.

“I think you just realized my point.” I turned my attention back to everyone else as the table. “Listen, I’m not saying murder and revenge are right. They go against the Bible and everything I personally believe. But as a vampire, you have very few attachments to another being

in life. Most of the time they stem from your days as a human. And should that be ripped away from you in the manner that it was from Kai, I think we all agree his actions are in line with our own had it have been us. Is this an agreeable statement Laurence?”

He reluctantly shelled out a small, “Yes.”

“Agreeing to that statement, you are also saying that though his actions weren’t right that they are forgivable given his circumstances. Do you still issue a yes as your response?”

Laurence cut his eyes at me. He was boiling beneath the surface I could tell which issued me a clear warning to watch what I said. “Yes. Get on with it.”

“Kalel, they have issued a stand to withdraw formal responsibility of the events in Hawaii from you and your group under the pass of impaired judgment due to grievance. Do you accept?”

“That is not my choice,” he motioned to Kai.

“Kai, do you accept?”

“I guess,” he sighed.

“I’m not saying their unit was right for killing your father. In my opinion, it was out of line with their code of conduct and they should have been dealt with by the High Authorities prior to your attack nearly fifty years later. They were conducting business in an underhanded way which made your army look bad,” I said shifting from Kai to Auggy. “Regardless, what’s done is done. We can’t change what has happened but we can change right now. Would you consider the vamp army an asset should they be on your side defending your camp?” I asked directly to Kai, Kalel and Gabi. They all agreed. “And would you find the

Bladangs an asset to your establishment as an ally and resource in all you're trying to accomplish?" I asked to Laurence, Felipe, Auggy, and Mr. Hartford.

"Their weapons and advanced technologies would be a huge asset to us," Auggy stated, finally on board with me.

"Exactly. I know it's hard to forget the past, but remember, the past is held onto by emotions. And you are not making emotional deals right now; you're making business deals. You each have something the other wants and can use. Now remember that when you start negotiating. This is huge. You will literally be a world empire at the end of this meeting should you work together. No one and nothing can stop you. But if you don't come to an agreement by the end of this, you will have an enemy that now knows each of your weaknesses. So it's in your best interest now as business men and defending units to work this out." I wanted to pump them up. Remind them of what was at stake if they couldn't agree to something, remind them of the chances they were taking but also help them envision the potential rewards. This was huge. The two groups coming together in our world is like the US allying with every Middle Eastern country.

"Well said Alexa. I believe you have a future in law," Laurence said.

"Thank you for the introduction and mediation Leka. You have opened our eyes I believe," Kalel praised.

"I hope so. I really believe that you two coming together is one of the greatest movements in my time," I smiled shyly. I appreciated the praise, but I really was just trying to stand tall and do in the vamp world what many wished they could accomplish in the human realm.

Chapter Eighteen

“Is there anything else you wanted to touch on or discuss prior to presenting your terms to each other?” I offered quickly returning to business mode. The separate teams spoke amongst each other in whispers, which were audible but hopefully ignored by both parties as an early sign of respect.

“No,” Laurence stated on behalf of the High Authorities.

“No,” Kalel spoke on behalf of the Bladang Leaders.

“Perfect. Laurence, Felipe, Auggy and Mr. Hartford, you will present first. Kalel, Kai, Gabi and even you Rafi, you are not to argue any points throughout their presentation. Once they finish, you may present your own terms and issue a response to their requests. Once you do that, Laurence, your team can respond to their counter offers and claims. Kalel, it will work the same. We will take turns, back and forth until both sides have reached an agreeable contract of conditions. I am a neutral party and therefore my mother is a neutral party so Mom?” I turned to her. She appeared quickly at my side. “Will you please type up the full contract at the end? You’re a real estate agent so I figure you’re perfect for the job.”

She lit up as if the President asked her to be his Vice. “I would be honored to,” she dutifully replied.

“When she has finished the agreement, everyone will sign and date it. Do each of you have your seals?”

“Yes,” Felipe replied.

“Yes,” Gabi confirmed.

“Great, then we can finish it all tonight and get on with life. Laurence, your team may begin,” I passed the leader role on to him for the moment. I pulled out the chair in front of me and sat down to listen to the High Authorities deliver. Inside I was screaming with excitement. I didn’t know who that girl was that had spoken with such candor and control but I loved her. I felt like I was on top of the world. In human terms, I’d just conducted a meeting between two country leaders at war and they respected me, listened to me and best of all, they accepted my rules instead of insisting on their own. That was unheard of! I’d officially accepted the role of Vampbassador... hehe. Couldn’t resist the cliché title!

Three hours... it took the High Authorities three hours to get through their terms list. This part of it I could not get into. Granted, it’s important but it’s like being stuck in a three-hour board meeting about peanut butter when you’re a marketing firm. The Blandang Leaders took the stand. They actually sat down midway through taking my lead; it was a major move on their part. They were agreeing to trust the vamp army leaders at least to not attack them.

Another three hours went by. The sun was up and humans going about their daily routine outside before Kalel, Kai, Gabi and Rafi finished their portion. Back and forth negotiations continued for another four hours. This was worse than school; this was borderline torture. Why did I agree to this position again?

“We have our final outline,” Laurence announced.

“Yes, we have reached an agreement,” Kalel confirmed.

“Mom, please go with Kalel and Laurence to type the final paper. Everyone else, sit tight,” I smiled.

“Kai, I like your tribal art. How many do you have?” Auggy asked. It caught me off guard. The last thing I pictured these two discussing was tattoos.

“They are part of your right of passage, or they were for me anyways. I have five of them,” he took off his jacket and roll up his sleeves to show them off. I assumed Auggy had seen them before and that’s how he knew or perhaps his spies were fans of them too. Who knows? All I wanted to do was crawl into bed beside Kellan, the man who’d stuck by my side through all of this and try to forget about Kai, the man who would simply be a flavor of the month. Okay, so I would be his flavor of the month...

“Felipe, *donde tu eres?*” Gabi asked. Felipe lit up and immediately slipped into a cross between Spanish and Italian, which seemed to be understood by Gabi.

I was trying to avoid only one person at the table and perhaps I didn’t include him like I should have but I couldn’t help but be angry with Mel’s father. Did he have any idea of what he had put her through in his disappearance? Worse, did he know what situation he was putting me in by him being here? He had to have known it was my house and me who would be here.

“Lexi, I know I’m not your favorite person right now but I would like the opportunity to speak with you at some point. You are my only chance at seeing my baby girl again,” he offered moving down towards me. He stood beside me waiting for me to say something.

“What kind of vamp are you?”

“Vampeen. Now you know why I need to speak with Melanie,” he sighed. I heard the defeated strain in his answer.

“I know it’s against the rules but she does know about me; no titles though to protect her. That should make it easier. She’s also started dating a vampeen, a friend of Kellan’s,” I motioned towards Kellan.

He didn’t say anything. I didn’t know if I’d offered too much too soon or what... But then I felt it. A single tear splashed down on me. I looked up at him. He had no emotion splayed on his face; he was controlling every part of him. I stood up and positioned myself in front of him.

“She’s a great girl and I’m sure she will forgive you when she finds out the truth. It won’t be easy because you could have stayed and explained it to her when the time was right as my parents did. But she’ll need you. She’ll have questions that I’m too new to answer. She’ll need you,” I stated.

“I hope so,” he finally offered.

“I won’t say anything to Mel about it right now. It’s your place to tell her. Just promise me you won’t procrastinate.”

“She’ll find out. Her mother is one too.” His voice was chilling as he spoke the answer.

“But...I... How...” I stuttered caught off guard. I’d never suspected anything. Mel’s mom looked young, but supposedly had had multiple plastic surgeries. Damn my nose I couldn’t smell her... and, but... Kellan would have said something had he picked up on it. He was at my side intrigued as well.

“Lexi can’t smell blood, humans or vamps but I’ve never picked up on it. I’ve met Mel’s mother several times,” Kellan said.

“And you won’t. She’s paid a lot to ensure that. She’s wanted in our world by many and not for her looks.” I gasped. That explained it. That explained why Mel was limited to me as a friend. Her Mom must have known my parents weren’t a threat; I wondered if they knew. This... this made so much sense now. Why her Mom was so overprotective and off in so many little ways. Perhaps this was why they’d divorced and she probably fought to keep the kids. The kids were her only reason to stay here and not live a life on the run; they kept her grounded and sane. This also explained why they’d moved so much. But why would she have been wanted by so many in our world? What had she done?

“I’ll make sure Lexi calls you to set something up. We won’t discuss this with anyone. We both love Mel and don’t want to see her or Kyle hurt,” Kellan spoke for me since my voice was gone. The wind had been knocked out of me. Was anything in life as it seemed anymore?

“Here is my card. That’s my cell. You’ll have to protect your thoughts around her mother; she has that gift. I don’t so I can’t tell if you’ve blocked yours or not. Be careful. She’s good at what she does,” he warned.

“And what does she do?” I asked.

“She’s a vamp assassin.” I officially drove ninety miles-per-hour into the brick building and crashed. Craig!

“Why... why haven’t you turned her in?” I pressed.

“Because it would destroy my children. They’ve been through enough and will go through more I can’t control. I don’t want to add to it.” That one answer proved his love and devotion.

“Now, wait. Does she kill anyone she wants or do people hire her? Mel’s boyfriend is a vamp,” I tried to

remain calm though inside I was screaming and trying to keep from passing out.

“You can relax. She’s hired and paid very well.” I let out the breath I didn’t know I was holding, but felt no less at ease with the situation. I suppose it made sense since a vampeen was the only thing capable of keeping up with a vampire to axe them and vice versa, but still...

“Th..Than...” I sighed frustrated and overwhelmed. “Thank you,” I finally managed. He nodded and returned to his seat. I was officially spooked. I’d immediately thought of Gran. Had someone hired an assassin like Mel’s Mom to kill her?

Kellan pulled me into his arms and held me tightly. I fought back tears for my best friend. A tsunami was about to crash her world and she didn’t even know it.

I sat like a zombie the remainder of the two hours we waited. My mother returned with both men and a mile high stack of papers!

“Yay! Let’s sign! Everyone get your pens, pins and seals out!” Everyone obeyed.

“I never sign anything without reading it first,” Auggy declared.

“I’ve read it on your behalf and ensured every clause is binding. You can sign without the formality of reading,” Laurence replied.

The factory line began. Mom separated, I passed, they all signed. Once all their signatures were on the papers, followed by a drop of their blood, I requested that Kalel and Laurence seal them. Moments later the deal was done. I felt a load lifted off of me and dispersed into the air.

“Please congratulate each other with a formal handshake and exchange business cards with everyone for contact purposes while we separate your copies,” I ordered. The vamps shook hands and swapped cards all over. I heard random chatter of meetings and tours being prepared. I helped my mother separate two copies for each party, the second being a precaution. History reveals that if a treaty is destroyed most of the time the agreement is never redrawn. I wanted to ensure at least one of my worlds was protected from that.

I passed two copies to Laurence and two to Kalel. “Congratulations vamps and thanks for doing business with Alexa Jackson, Vamp Mediator,” I smiled hoping they loved the edgy ad I adlibbed.

“No thank you. Great work Alexa. I’m very impressed. I was nervous in the beginning, but you proved your worth and worked your appeal,” Laurence beamed approvingly. Pride surged through me. Somehow he defined a father figure type role in my life now and his approval meant the same as my biological father’s.

“Thank you Leka. You must promise to visit still.” Kalel pulled me in for a hug, an informal appreciation I would never expect from the High Authorities.

“I promise.”

Hugs and handshakes were all over the dining room before they left. Kai gave me a special good bye I wasn’t expecting. A hug, kiss on the cheek and Hawaiian lei with a key to their house. “Come visit anytime. I could always use some entertainment,” he winked. I knew he would miss me though he didn’t say it.

When the house was empty, I didn’t know what to do with the silence. Granted there was still noise from outside

but for a while I'd had much more inside. I went to the kitchen and looked at the clock. 5:06pm. Eighteen hours after it all began; it was finally over.

"I'm so proud of you sweetie. I've never been so proud of you in all my years. You were amazing," my mother hugged me tight.

"Don't break a rib," I teased.

"I didn't know you had it in you. You've never come across so assertive and commanding. You commanded their presence and interest. You certainly impressed everyone. I'm just so very proud of you," she continued to gush over me.

"Thanks Mom," I smiled.

"Now I need to locate your father and you need to take a rest. When was the last time you fed?" she asked.

"Oh my gosh! Yesterday and I ate human food!" I detailed the breakfasts with the Bladangs. She was intrigued and at times appeared slightly relieved. "So can we maybe do something like that here? It doesn't have to be every day but I've never had a family meal with all of us together. Do you think Dad will go for it?" I was excited at the possibility. I know it's a small thing for most people, but it was huge for me.

"I think he would be delighted. Perhaps queasy in the beginning, but I'm sure he will adjust if it means a meal with you," she fixed my hair that I was sure was a wreck at this point.

"Awesome. I love you Mom."

"I love you too sweetie. And you really did make me proud today."

“I know...”

“Kellan!” she called. He was at my side in half a blink just like Gabi, who I’d surprisingly missed a bit. I missed all of them. Even though I was only there two weeks, I’d really bonded with this family.

“Yes?”

“While I’m away, please make sure my sometimes rebellious daughter lies in bed and rests after a long day at the office as the newest Vamp Mediator in Charleston,” my mother ordered. This was the first time I’d ever seen her that playful. Her mood was light and flowery.

“As you wish Your Honor,” Kellan bowed before my mother.

“O.M.G. you two!” I burst into laughter. My mother left through the garage right as Kellan scooped me up and rushed me up the stairs. He threw me onto the bed and hovered over me in a protective cage.

“Finally, you’re all mine,” he whispered. He leaned down and kissed me passionately. We picked up right where we’d left off easily reliving the night through his thoughts. He gently went from hovering to lying on top of me. His hands caressed my face while mine explored his toned back. I felt relief in the moment. I was releasing all my pent up stress, anguish and nerves in the action.

“You were great. You’ve never looked so sexy,” he thought aloud to me.

“Thanks for sticking by me.”

“I always will, even if you venture off with Kai, Mike or Joe Schmoe.”

“I know you will. That’s what makes me love you even more.” Kai had limits. He would only protect me to a degree. Kellan wouldn’t. While Kai was appealing, it’s for the wrong reasons. While Kellan thought he would stay even if I ventured off, he would stay and resent me for it after. I couldn’t risk that. I didn’t want to chance losing this, especially when this was so good. I’d had to learn that, to recognize that before I could accept Kellan and reject the temptation around me. There will always be someone better available if you leave the door of opportunity open, but I don’t want the door slammed in my face if I realize I made a mistake. Kellan is it. No more back and forth. Kellan is my forever as everyone has confirmed.

“Did you forget I was in here too?”

“Maybe. But I don’t mind that you know how I rationalize things... I’m ready Kellan.”

“What are you ready for?”

“I’m ready for you to claim me. I want you to claim me. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Are you sure?” He asked in my mind but pulled away to look into my eyes. His were shining that beautiful grassy green with the emerald sparkles.

“I’m sure,” I said returning his gaze. I didn’t want him to think I wasn’t ready. I didn’t want him to question me; I just wanted him to do it. I wanted to be his forever. I was ready for everyone to know I was his.

He sat up on his knees and looked down at me contemplatively. I knew he wanted to do it, but he also didn’t want to pressure me. He wanted to be sure I’d wanted this and wasn’t just talking from a high from the events of today.

I slipped off my jacket leaving me with my tank top. My collarbone was exposed but my shoulders and neck covered by my hair. I lifted my hair and pulled it to my right side. I lay back down on the pillow and tilted my head to my right exposing my neck and my central pulsing vein. This was the greatest form of seduction to a vampire.

He ran his fingers over my neck up and down the vein. He collapsed back down and gently placed himself on top of me. He put his hand on my left cheek and moved my face to look directly at him. He pressed his lips to mine sensually. I felt the contour and minimal dips of his on mine.

He trailed to kiss from my forehead down along my jaw line. I tilted my head offering myself once more as he made his way to my neck. He stopped at my ear and whispered, "I love you." He immediately bit my neck sending a quick sting before a surge of ecstasy through me. I inhaled a silent gasp of pleasure. I felt the blood being pulled from me into him. I closed my eyes and enjoyed feeling so close to him. A part of him was in me and I was going into him. It was such an intimate exchange of the highest forms of love making for a vamp.

I felt his withdrawal. He licked my neck as a warm ooze of his serum closed the wound. He kissed me again more passionately than before. We rolled around until I was on top of him. He held me tightly to him.

"Are you okay?" he asked between pecks.

"I'm better than okay. I'm in love." I smiled.

He turned his head to expose his neck. I took the moment to tell him what I now knew without a doubt. "You are my forever."

I bit down on his most vulnerable point. His blood filled my mouth. He let out a low growl no doubt of

pleasure. His blood tasted better than anything I'd ever tasted in all my life. No dessert could ever compare to the sweet nectar he carried. I felt stronger than ever as I drank his life force. He flowed into me with such flavor I didn't want to stop. But I did. I loved him enough to pull away. Perhaps that is the greatest proof of a vamp's love. That they love the other enough to stop when it's the best addiction they'd just developed. I finally understood Edward's words to Bella, "You're my own brand of heroine."

I pulled out of him and allowed the serum to build up on my tongue so I could lick him closed as opposed to the ultimate unladylike way of spitting or vomiting it on him. I kissed a path up his neck and jaw to his lips. His fingers fit like combs in my hair and his thumbs caressed my cheeks. A few tears slipped from my eyes as I kissed my forever.

—

Chapter Nineteen

It felt great to return to school and a somewhat normal routine. My teachers loaded me down with make-up work. One good thing about being a vamp was the whole little or no sleep needed part. I finished all my assignments in one night.

Jason was still persistent, but Kellan stayed glued to my side as often as possible which put him off slightly, not off enough though. It was nice to see Jenny throw a mini-hissy fit in the cafeteria when he paid her no mind. It was a decent distraction for the moment because I was bursting at the seams every few seconds to tell Mel about her family and heritage. But I couldn't go back on my word. Just because we were best friends didn't mean I had the privilege of delivering news of this magnitude.

"How was school sweetie?" Mom asked as I walked in the house from school.

"It was school. Not the same once you're a vamp," I commented.

"You received two letters in the mail today. They have the Bladang and Vamp Army seals on them," she added. She was trying to be nonchalant, but I could tell she was struggling to control her curiosity.

"I wonder what they sent. They could have just called you," Kellan stated entering the kitchen behind me.

My mother handed them to me. I opened the first with the seal of the Vamp Army. There were two sets of papers inside. I opened the first, a letter, and read it aloud.

Miss Alexa Jackson

You have achieved the highest of honors within our ranks and amongst your fellow kind. We would be delighted and honored to title you our Chief Ambassador within the Vamp Army. The terms would not change per your discussion with Augustine Ponte.

We were impressed by your achievements in the Bladang mission and have valued you beyond our initial payment via an asset assessment.

We hope you will accept this position ongoing with flexibility being offered with your conditions.

We appreciate all you have contributed to our organization in the short time you have worked with us and look forward to an eternity of future endorsements and alliances.

Sincerely,

Laurence Chateau

“Oh my!” my mother exclaimed. She reached her hand out for the letter, which I relinquished to her.

“I wonder how much the initial payment is,” Kellan pondered aloud.

“It can’t be too much because I didn’t do much. It was barely two weeks of work,” I rationalized as I pulled out the other paper. I unfolded the trifold discovering it was printed like a paystub with a check on the bottom third. I gasped.

“How much is it for?” my mother asked. Kellan had leaned over my shoulder and was staring at the paper as dumbfounded as I was.

“Uh... I... it... uh...” I couldn’t say it. I couldn’t get the number out. Pinch me! I needed to be pinched! This wasn’t

real. I was dreaming. It couldn't be real...

"Alexa!" she screamed. "Oh my goodness!"

"That has to be a misprint!" I blurted trying to rationalize the number. But it wasn't. The stub, numeric portion and written portion of the check all matched. At sixteen, I was officially a millionaire.

"Come to papa my sugar mama!" Kellan swept me up in his arms and kissed me.

"Stop, put me down," I was laughing. I was trying to process this but couldn't.

"Five million dollars is a lot of money Alexa. I hope you will be responsible with it," my mother tapped into her parental role to explain the magnitude of the opportunity.

"I don't even need anything. I have nothing to spend this on... Aunt Claire bought me a whole wardrobe. You and dad got me a car. I have a computer. I don't eat food... well sort of. I don't need anything except for maybe a new phone," I said looking at my worn Motorola. It was a good phone, but definitely beat up. It could use an upgrade.

"You've qualified for a free upgrade for over a year now," my mother offered.

I burst into laughter. "See, I can't even pay for a phone. I guess I could get a fancy phone."

"You have time sweetie. I'm still so proud of you. And they obviously are too."

"Thanks mom. Now pass me the other one." She handed me the second envelope. I opened it and pulled out a letter from Kai. This one I didn't read out loud since it was personal.

Hello Leka,

I haven't written a letter in so long I'm not sure I remember how. Amusing, I know.

It has been very different here without you. I thought you would have visited by now. Gabi is back to sulking with violent mood swings and even Kalel seems a bit down. You are certainly missed.

I do have a point in writing you. I decided you were right. I should take a vacation. I have booked a trip back to Hawaii for after the holidays. I would love for you to come with me. Please don't leave me hanging.

Take care of yourself. Come for a visit soon if you can.

*Love,
Kai*

My heart melted knowing they missed me. And I'd never been to Hawaii. But could I trust myself to not slip up? Was I sure I wouldn't make a mistake with Kai on the trip? Maybe Kellan could come with me... Actually, that would be more awkward. I would be stuck between both men the entire time. I would have to think about it.

"There's another paper in here," my mother handed me the envelope I had set on the island. I retrieved the second paper. It was plain white printer paper. I opened it to a quick note handwritten in Kai's penmanship.

This is from Kalel.

"Another check. Another check! Holy sugarplums! These people are serious when they say they pay good!" I held up the second five million dollar check. This one was a personal check from Kalel Kulani. Next to 'For' he'd written 'services rendered'.

“What am I going to do with all this money Mom?” I asked somewhat frantic and overwhelmed. I couldn’t believe I was holding two checks for such high amounts. This was more than most people saw in a lifetime and I had double in my hands at sixteen for less than a month of work. All I could think was that I didn’t deserve it.

“You can invest it and save it. Buy your new phone and put away the rest. You are immortal, so you will get to spend it.” God bless her for being so calm and well put together all the time.

“You’re right. Do you and dad need anything, want anything?” It’s the least I could do for all they’d sacrificed and done for me.

“No sweetie. I appreciate the thought, but we don’t need anything.”

“Kellan. What about you?” I checked. I guess in a way I was hoping someone needed something or wanted a splurge. I felt bad having that much money sitting there, but in truth, I didn’t know what I could do with it. I might need it so I didn’t want to spend it, but then again I did want to buy something.

“I have all I need right here,” he smiled pulling me into my arms. He playfully kissed my cheeks and neck making a loud, dramatic noise with each one. I was beyond blessed.

A week went by with little commotion in my life for once. I deposited the checks into my account. I’d never felt comfortable discussing money with friends or family even. It’s not that it’s a touchy subject; it simply felt wrong. If you had more, you were rubbing it in their faces. If you had less, you could easily become unhappy and invest in greed. I didn’t even tell Mel. Only my parents and Kellan knew.

Auggy contacted me about a potential mission in Spain, but said it could be postponed until Christmas or Spring break to accommodate my schedule as it's only talks of a potential militia group coordinating. I was relieved to know I had more time to enjoy the somewhat normal teen life I was permitted to live between all things vamp.

After weeks of debating, Craig had taken up a permanent residence here in Charleston. He purchased a condo near downtown through my mom that he was set to close on in a few weeks. In the meantime he'd been all over Mel. I was afraid to ask how far they'd gone. I just hoped she hadn't gone too far. I'd tried to keep her mom out of my thoughts, but she's forever lingering in the backdrop. The shock factor hadn't left me. You always hear that serial killers appear to be perfect citizens and neighbors; typically one wouldn't suspect a thing. That was definitely the case with Mel's mom. I couldn't even bring myself to ask my parents if they knew about it.

I knocked on the door politely waiting for an answer. They gave me a key, but I still felt like a guest and didn't want to barge in. I heard faint footsteps in and about the house. A second later the door was opened.

"Leka!" Kalel greeted and announced pulling me in for a hug. "Where have you been?"

"Oh, you know, around," I smiled coyly.

"So it seems. I smell the change," he smirked.

"Really?" My mom never said anything to me so I assumed Kellan and mine's exchange remained private.

He raised his eyebrows in a brotherly way. "Did you not want to?"

I ignored the question. "Where's Kai?"

“Lexi!” Gabi exclaimed bounding down the stairs. She squeezed me into her arms and swung me around. “Oh how I’ve missed you. You don’t know just how torturous it’s been living with these heathens.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I smiled.

She sniffed me. “Hm. Seems things are going well with Kellan.”

“Is it seriously that obvious?”

“Totally,” she said pulling me into the living room.

“*Hola Lex. Como estas?*” Rafi asked, walking in from the weapons room.

“*Muy bien, gracias. Y tu?*”

“*Bien, bien.*” He sniffed the air.

“Yes, me and Kellan did the deed. Don’t ask or comment,” I pounced before he could say anything. He chuckled to himself and shook his head acknowledging my wish.

“So where’s Kai?” I asked again.

“Miserable. He’s been sulking and depressed ever since you left. He lives between his room and the library and only talks if he has to,” Gabi detailed. Her expression was one of concern. I knew she loved him despite their past.

“You really messed him up,” Rafi added.

“Me? How?”

“The guy is head over heels about you. He was never that way with any girl, even me,” Gabi stated in a ‘duh, didn’t you see it?’ sort of way.

“Nothing like a welcome back guilt trip... I feel horrible. I didn’t mean too.”

“A phone call or reply to his letter might have helped,” Kalel said.

“I figured I would tell him in person.”

“Well, you might want to get on that before he attempts vamp suicide,” Gabi ordered. “He’s in the library so go talk to him. We’ll catch up with you later. I need to plan a shopping trip with you.”

“Okay. Nice seeing you all again,” I waved as I made my way to the library. My nerves kicked into high gear.

I knocked on the door and entered right after. I suppose the knock wasn’t necessary. He didn’t even look up. His head was down staring at the picture of his father on the desk before him. His face was pale compared to his usually tan complexion. His eyes were sunken in a bit as if he hadn’t fed lately. He was the definition of depressed and looked it in every way.

“Hey stranger,” I greeted. His head whipped up and eyes instantly brightened. They were right...

“Leka!” He swooped me and held on tight. Once he collected himself he put me down and tried to play it off as if nothing was wrong with him. “How are you?”

“Good. How are you?”

“The same as always. Tell me what you’ve been doing.”

“School, catching up on missed assignments and hanging out with friends. It’s strange trying to get back into the flow of things after such a life changing experience.” Uh oh. His nostrils flared a bit. I knew he smelled Kellan. I braced myself for what he would say.

“So Hawaii, you coming or do I have to kidnap you?” he chuckled. He chose to ignore the obvious.

“Going. I decided it would be a good opportunity to see the islands. Someone told me they were beautiful and had fun adventures from sea to land to mountain,” I smiled.

“Hmm. I wonder who that wise person was...” he prompted sarcastically waiting for his plug.

“You know, I don’t remember his name. He was cute though,” I grinned plopping down on a chair.

“Oh. Cute, huh?” He sat in the chair beside mine.

“Yeah.” We sat in silence for several minutes. I looked around the library and the many shelves of books trying not to acknowledge him gawking at me. Nothing like feeling awkward.

“How quickly you forget that I can read your thoughts...” he broke the silence.

“I told you not to and I trusted that you wouldn’t,” I defended. Perhaps I was being a little manipulative in twisting it around. It’s not so much that I forgot; it just slipped my mind. I felt so comfortable around Kai. He’s so easy to talk too even knowing how he felt.

“So they told you...”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I didn’t know how you felt. And you know where my mind was. I think if the circumstances were different, we could have worked. But, I could never hurt Kellan like that,” I explained fidgeting with my fingers, something I hadn’t done in a while.

“He’s a lucky guy,” he said the words but all I heard was his heart cracking with each syllable.

“You’ll always be my first second round pick though. He messes up and you’re in.” I was trying to make him feel better, but didn’t know if I was making it better or worse. I knew what it’s like to be rejected. And sometimes being told you’re in second place was worse than being told you’re last. Second means if you tried a little harder, you could have been first. Last means you never would have had a shot so you don’t need to beat yourself up.

“For your sake I hope he’s not that stupid.”

“Aw, so you do have a nice side,” I joked. “Come here!” I stood with my arms open. I pulled him in for a hug. His hands ventured down to the off limits zone. I smacked his arm and broke away. I took off through the living room out the back door and down the deck and pier to the jet skis. I hopped on one and cranked the engine. I heard Kai right behind me as I sped off. I pressed the button to shield me.

He rushed up on my side, revving his engine – show off! He divvied out with a quick right turn; he successfully soaked me. I knew I was going to regret wearing jeans in the water. I spun around and chased him down. My mission: revenge!

An hour later we walked back inside both completely soaked from the splash war. I achieved my goal though. I’d cheered him up. He was beaming from ear to ear.

Still dripping wet, we walked into the kitchen. I grabbed two blood beers – my new name for their assortment – and handed him one. I watched him crack it open and guzzle the whole thing. I quickly handed him mine. He devoured both drinks in less than thirty seconds.

I approached him and ran my fingers under his eyes. His color was returning as each second passed. “Promise me you won’t starve yourself again.”

“Promise me you won’t make any permanent decisions about me or him right now. Give us both a fair chance. I can be right for you Leka,” he pleaded.

“Don’t be foolish.”

“Don’t torture me. I’m not asking for a commitment, just an opportunity.”

Why, oh why? I thought I’d decided. I thought I’d made up my mind that Kellan was my forever. There’s no one else. Why couldn’t I just walk away from Kai? Why couldn’t he just accept my decision for what it was right now?

“Because I’ve been where you are. I know the choice isn’t easy. That’s why you can’t make it so quickly. Love isn’t black and white. Just because he’s your first doesn’t mean he’s your last. Open the door for me; that’s all I’m asking. No strings attached.” I didn’t reply. I nodded once acknowledging that I’d heard his request. He certainly gave me a lot to think about. Was I making a mistake with Kellan? Did I rush into things? We’d been together less than two months and he’d already claimed me. Why does life and love have to be so confusing at times?

“I’d better get going,” I found myself whispering.

“At least put on a dry shirt. I’ll get you one,” he said. I followed him only as far as the living room. I stared out at the water. The lake reflected the many colorful hues of the sun as it began to set.

“Here,” he handed me a clean t-shirt. It smelled of him; a subtle mix of sand, coconut and cologne. Wait... I smell him. My nose didn’t work on vamps, humans and blood so I never tried to smell them. But I smelled him! He had a scent to me!

I yanked him closer and pushed my face into his chest and inhaled. This time I got a bit of a musky, forest scent blended perfectly with the others. I looked up at him and grinned.

“You really smell me?” he asked. Of course he’d read my thoughts again.

“Yes! This is so exciting!”

“Glad I could be of service,” he chuckled.

“Thanks.” I took the shirt from him. I turned away from him and quickly changed. The shirt hung on me but smelled entirely of my first vampire scent: Kai. I lifted the collar to my nose and inhaled deep. I couldn’t stop smiling. At least I was making progress in one area of my life.

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Chapter Twenty

“I’ll walk you out,” he offered. I shook my head in agreement.

“Oh, wait. I’m supposed to catch up with Gabi before I go...” He didn’t move, only stared at me, no expression. “Never mind. Can you have her call me?” He agreed with a quick nod of his head.

“Thanks.” We didn’t make any movements. I stood both comfortably and awkwardly looking at him, observing his features from his curly, now sopping black hair to his full lips. He returned my gaze unashamed.

“Uh, I should get going...” I stuttered knowing I needed to take a step at some point.

“You say that but don’t move. If you want to stay, you can,” he offered. I saw the longing in his eyes. He wanted me to stay, which meant I really shouldn’t. I leaned into his chest once more to inhale my first scent. I was trying not to overanalyze it but why could I smell Kai and not Kellan?

He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. I reciprocated before gently disentangling myself. I turned on my heels and walked towards the door. He followed in step beside me; he placed his hand on the small of my back, the simplest of gestures.

At the door I announced, “I can take it from here. I am a vamp after all. There’s not much that can kill me.”

I started to open the door but stopped abruptly. “What can kill us or what does kill us I should ask?”

His lips lifted in the corners slightly and his eyes sparkled with amusement as a small chuckle escaped him.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes...” I replied suddenly embarrassed. He scrunched his forehead switching into business mode.

“Decapitation and fire,” he answered. His look now showed little worry lines as if I should have known this. “No one educated you on this?” he asked. I shook my head.

“Those are the only ways?” I checked remembering the stories with wooden bullets and arrows.

“The main ones more or less,” he snickered.

“Stop reading my thoughts!” I scolded though I was smiling as I said it.

“Decapitation severs your head from your body.”

“I know that,” I sarcastically bemused.

“Without your head, your body can’t move to find itself since the brain controls the nerves and movements. That and all your serum and blood drains.”

“Makes sense. And fire?”

“Fire is tricky. It depends on the strength of the vamp as to whether they can truly die by fire. It’s like the sun. It weakens you. But if you fed that day, you could make it to water miles away and put it out. It would take at least a day or two for the burns to heal, but you’d live,” he explained.

“So the only sure way is to chop off our heads and burn us?” I checked. The entire time I couldn’t stop thinking about Mel’s mom. She actually did this for a living...

“There are ancient swords that can kill a vamp with one stab of their heart. They are rare and worth billions,” he added, eyeing me carefully as if I was going to pass out.

“Your gold daggers?”

“Yes. Gabi and Rafi have mini Samurai swords.”

“Hmm. Interesting.” I stretched up and pecked his cheek. “Thanks.”

I opened the door and casually strolled to my car parked in the driveway. It’s probably the first their neighbors had ever seen. I pressed the button to automatically unlock my doors. I turned to wave at him. He stood on the porch, his hands in his wet pant pockets, feet shoulder width apart in their stance, as he watched me like an over-protective parent. I slid into the driver’s seat, kicked off my wet shoes, started the ignition and put the car in reverse.

As I began to back out I saw the flicker in my rearview mirror. It was quick forcing me to jerk to a halt. Had I not been vamp, I would have missed it. Kai had just walked back inside, of course. I sniffed the air cautiously willing myself to smell something out of the ordinary, but, thanks to my nose, came up empty aside from the pinecones and slight floral mix from the trees outside.

I sat motionless and listened for any movement. Nothing; no cars, no birds, not even wind.

I brushed it off and started to pull out again when a thin silver wire flew around my neck and cut me. My hands flew to the cord and yanked it away. I felt the blood trickle down my neck.

I did a quick maneuver of my feet. My left foot took the brake pedal and my right whisked upwards to hit the horn. I prayed Kai or someone came to my rescue. I could see only a flurry of movement in the mirror facing behind me. I tried to focus during my struggle to see something,

anything of detail. Black, they wore a black shirt and had short black hair.

Suddenly the wire I was tugging at was released and hands began grabbing at me. The horn blaring, I was beginning to panic. Whoever or whatever was behind me was strong. I barely withstood their attack. I stopped fighting off their hands and reached for something solid behind my seat, some part of him, her, it... I gripped a shirt skintight over bulging muscles.

My seat broke giving way to my strength and sent me flying down and back. I swung what I grabbed forward through the windshield. He was quick. His hands snatched my jeans midflight but lost their way dropping me on the hood straight into the pile of glass. My car was moving, still reversed backing at an angle into the fence at the curb.

I didn't have time to think. The vamp was on top of me cut but not harmed from my slam. I got a clear view of his face for a millisecond before I was jerked about. His features were a cross between Asian and Hispanic. Almond eyes, tan skin, a slightly wider nose upon full rose-colored lips. It was a wrestling match of speed and strength. We moved so fast. I was so focused on defending his moves that I couldn't attack. My sliced neck stung in the whipping of the wind against us.

Where the hell is Kai, Kalel, Gabi... anyone?

Though it was a lot of action, it had only been about thirty seconds. I was just shocked I had no hero yet given how loud my struggle sounded, to me anyways.

I was suddenly airborne, tossed again the house with brute force and strength. Damn, I'd gotten distracted. The window below me shattered. It must've gotten their

attention because Kai and Kalel flew outside at max speed just as I hit the ground.

My eyes darted trying to locate my attempting murderer. I saw only the two brothers in utter shock at the scene before them. Kai was at my side and I in his arms in less than two seconds. His jaw was clenched and hands in fists as he angrily glared at me.

I winced feeling the shards of glass in my arms and back for the first time. I looked in the direction of my freshly wrecked car. Kalel cut the engine and ripped a piece of paper taped to the windshield that I hadn't seen before.

"What the hell happened?" Gabi exclaimed. Rafi and Art burst through the door to my side right behind her.

"*Ay dios miyo!*" Rafi gasped. Kalel walked back over still scanning the area on high alert.

"Get her inside. Rafi put everyone on high alert. Tell them we have a vamp assassin in our perimeters," Kalel ordered, his voice scarily monotone.

"I can walk," I offered, my voice low and afraid of the Kai holding me. I saw him struggling to maintain his composure.

He didn't respond. Rafi took off towards the forest as Kai, still gripping me, Kalel, Gabi and Art silently escorted me inside. The atmosphere reminded me of a funeral.

Kalel took charge again as Kai sat on the couch holding me in his arms straight out away from him.

"Gabi, contact Leka's parents. Tell them we have her and she's not leaving but they can come. Art, gather the first aid kit and a pair of tweezers and scissors to remove

the glass." They were off. Kalel turned to me. "I'll get you some clothes but I'm afraid you'll have to strip down so I can get all the glass out." I shook my head, defeated by the fast change in events.

"You can set me down," I stated to Kai; we were alone in the room as the others dispersed.

"Actually I can't," he spoke through gritted teeth.

"It's okay Kai. I'm fine," I assured him softly. I couldn't tell if he was mad at me, the situation or all of the above.

"I'm not mad at you Leka. You have glass in your feet. Damn it!" he yelled. "You have glass, cuts and scrapes all over you!" I shut up. I stared at him wide-eyed caught off-guard by his outburst, though a part of me suspected it was coming.

He sighed dramatically taking in my reaction. "Sorry... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." he huffed fidgeting like he couldn't find the words. I reached out, wincing as a piece of glass cut deeper, and ran my hand along his cheek to soothe him. He leaned into it for a moment; I sensed his new peace battling the anger raging below.

Gabi popped up beside me, no warning - she's so quick and quiet - with Kalel trailing her. Art returned moments later.

"Your parents didn't answer. I left them both a message," she reported. Her phone started ringing. She looked at the ID. "It's your mom," she announced strolling towards the library again. I didn't bother asking why she left the room considering it's my mother.

"She doesn't want you to hear her distress and feed off the fear," Kalel explained taking the tweezers from the bowl of supplies in Art's arms.

“Why does the glass hurt? I thought vamps healed fast?” I asked absently trying to distract myself from his quick hands removing the pieces from my feet.

“The sheer fact that it penetrated your skin shows how hard you were pounded into it. Once it’s all removed you should heal though. I’ll make sure you feed; it’ll speed things along.” He didn’t stop while answering. He worked swift and steady, proof in the plink, plink, plink I heard of the glass hitting the bowl. He removed the glass from my feet and face first.

There were times when vamp strength helped and times when it hindered. This was definitely a hindrance. Had this been a human fight I would simply be scraped up in a few places with minimal glass engrained, but because I was fighting a vamp that continually slammed me into the shards, I was covered.

I looked over at Kai biting his lip. “Stop,” I lightly scolded. He watched his brother fast at work for a minute before officially obliging my request.

“Okay, you can stand her up,” Kalel instructed. Kai hesitated.

“Just set me down. I’ll be fine,” I reiterated.

“Your parents are on their way. They’re a few hours away though in Virginia,” Gabi interrupted the tense mediation. Kai still hadn’t made a move to stand me up.

He suddenly lifted me up higher as he stood from the couch. “Spot her,” he ordered anyone. He bent halfway and set me down. Kalel was in front of me in case I toppled.

“Is anyone going to tell me what the hell happened?” Gabi cut in eyeing everyone hoping to appease them for the info.

“Later.” Kalel’s tone was final, authoritative.

“Ugh. This is ridiculous! I’m a part of this family you know! I have a right to know these things,” she pouted as she stormed upstairs.

“Art. Ready our assassin ward,” Kalel directed. He set down the bowl of utensils and drifted obediently to the weapons room.

Kalel began pulling glass out of every exposed portion of my body. Considering my jeans and Kai’s shirt were ripped beyond repair, that was quite a bit.

Kai paced the room watching me intently. He projected edginess with every cut of his eyes, every curl of his lips and dent in his scowl. His hands nervously went between combing, well yanking, his hair and fisting his palms.

“Kai,” I called his attention. He stopped for a brief second and looked directly at me. “Calm down. You’re making me nervous.”

“Be still brother,” Kalel encouraged. Kai came and stood in front of me. I lingered my eyes on him, distracting myself as Kalel continued working from my forearms to my legs to my neck, head and back.

“Okay, Leka. I can’t remove any more until you remove your pants and shirt. It will hurt worse if you slide them off; could tear your skin. You’d heal but its unnecessary pain. I can cut you out of them if it’s okay with you,” he offered.

“Just do what you have to do,” I sighed. My eyes wandered the room. I knew they’d seen me in a bikini but I was still self-conscious.

Kalel stopped, scissors in hand to look at me with the same open-eyed gaze Kai now splayed.

“What does a girl have to do to get a little privacy around here?” I grumbled. They quickly looked away. Kalel started with my pants. He cut up the side seams of my jeans. I felt a few tugs and miniscule tears of the glass in my skin but within seconds they were off and he was back to tweezing out the crystals.

“Watch it *kunane!*” Kai growled at Kalel. Koo-nah-nay? He was behind me so I couldn’t see what he was doing. “It means brother in Hawaiian. And he was enjoying the view too much,” Kai stated eyeing his brother like a predator.

“Just stop. The sooner he’s done the better. If he works faster with a view, I don’t care.” I just wanted this to be over with. Would I be deemed a wimp to say I wanted my parents? Even when they were zealous in their efforts, I felt safe and loved. I especially needed that now when I had avoided the conversation to this point of who attacked me and why. I contemplated bringing it up.

“Later Leka. You need to heal first,” Kai softly spoke the words as he rubbed my cheeks with his thumbs. We were having an intimate moment until Kalel shifted my panties to expose a cheek. My eyes bugged out in horror.

“Brace yourself. This one’s deep,” he warned.

“Focus on me,” Kai continued stroking my face. I felt the extraction; it stung and seemed to open a gaping wound back up. The piece was big because the moment it was out blood began oozing down my leg.

“Jesus!” Kai exclaimed catching a glimpse of the stream. He put his fist through the closest wall causing the beams to creak.

“Oh God. Calm down Kai. She’s already starting to heal,” Kalel sighed. He reacted to Kai like he was an over-dramatic child having an unnecessary tantrum.

He cut off Kai's shirt and tossed it aside. He went to work on my back and shoulders. I glanced at the bowl filled to the brim with shards of varying sizes. Kai saw me. I felt exposed wishing I could cover myself but I still had glass in my mid region.

"Will you please stop gawking at me? You're making me even more self-conscious." I fidgeted with my arms trying my best to cover myself. He approached, clasped my wrists and held out my arms.

"My turn. Stop. You look great but you are also flexing your shoulders which could lodge a piece." I bit my lip anxiously praying for Kalel to hurry up. I moved my eyes around the room unable to face judgment no matter how kind. I wished Mel was here. She would have entertained me, made me forget I was nearly naked in front of two men.

And Kellan... Kellan!

"Did Gabi call Kellan?"

"I don't know," Kalel answered, paying little attention to the question. Kai dropped my arms and walked away towards the windows. Kalel shifted to my front now.

"Almost done," he stated. I breathed a sigh of relief, the end in sight.

"Can I please have my phone?"

"Done!" Kalel announced dropping the last bit into the bowl. "Your phone's a goner babe." He pulled a bunch of plastic and metal pieces from the pocket of my destroyed jeans.

"Ugh," I pouted. I grabbed the fresh clothes off the arm of the sofa and yanked them on begrudgingly. "Stupid freaking assassin," I muttered. I quickly got dressed in a

pair of drawstring basketball shorts that barely hung on though they were tied as tight as possible and a t-shirt I literally swam in.

“Can I please borrow a phone?” I held out my hand for someone’s cell. Kai reluctantly handed me his. He knew who I was going to call and he didn’t like it.

I looked at the phone. I tried to slide it, flip it; I turned in over and over but found no buttons.

“How do you use this thing?” I asked studying the phone. He took it from me.

“What’s the number?” he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as if to alleviate silent pressure. I gave him the number. He punched in the digits on the touch screen and passed me the phone again. It was already ringing.

“Thanks.” He walked away. I heard the library door close behind him.

“Hello?” Kellan’s voice was leery unsure of who to expect.

“Hey, it’s me,” I answered trying to sound perky.

“What’s wrong?”

“How do you know something’s wrong?” I pressed. I thought I’d covered well.

“What’s wrong?” Insistent little sucker.

“How soon can you get here?” I didn’t want to tell him over the phone. I knew he would flip and I didn’t know if anyone would be around to bring him back down or stop him from doing something crazy.

“What’s wrong?”

"I miss you." Maybe this approach would help...

"Damn it Lex. Stop playing games. What's wrong?" he pushed. He was losing his patience.

"I don't want to tell you over the phone..."

"What you mean to say is you don't trust me enough to tell me over the phone. You think I'll overreact right?" His tone was hard, accusing but the words accurate.

"Promise you won't?" No use lying to him. I didn't want to make him more upset.

"Yes, I promise," he droned robotically almost sighing as he spoke.

"A, ugh, a vamp assassin attacked me. I'm fine though!" I quickly added at the end hoping to soften the blow.

"Where the hell was Kai when this happened?" he demanded. Uh oh. I should have thought through that angle already.

"He was inside. I was in my car, which is officially totaled." Tears began to fill the rims of my eyes as the magnitude of it all hit me. "When can you get here?" I asked, my voice cracked despite controlling my emotions for the moment.

"I'm on my way babe. Don't worry. I'll be there as soon as I can." His voice was soft as butter. I could tell he felt bad for giving me a hard time.

"Okay." I sniffed trying to hold back the breaching down pour.

"Hey."

"Yeah?"

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” I couldn’t help but lift the corners of my mouth forming the beginning of a smile with those words.

I handed the phone to Kalel since Kai was m.i.a. “I don’t know how to end the call.” He took the phone, pressed the screen a few times and set it down on the coffee table.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, thanks for taking out the glass.” I settled on the sofa looking straight out into the night sky. Though I was unsettled, the night was peaceful and stars bright.

“Do you want to talk now or wait until he gets here?”

“I prefer to wait until everyone is here. I don’t want to have to repeat myself.” He shook his head. He ran a finger over my nearly healed but still puffy and welted neck.

“He was strong. I can tell he used a wire by the marking. That’s why your hands have those slices, right?” I shook my head confirming his perfect guess.

“You were lucky. You are stronger than I thought,” he smiled.

“Yeah, I guess.” I fidgeted with my fingers nervously. I traced the ridged cuts on my healing hands.

“Art!” Kalel called. The old man came running.

“Yes?”

“Bring me a human. One from the holding cell,” Kalel ordered.

“Right away.” With that he was off down the stairs I’d entered my first time.

“You have humans in holding cells?” I didn’t know if I was more shocked, appalled or confused.

“Mortals who know of our existence and seek us out for immortality. We put them in holding cells. Most of them we kill; some we turn but they must work for us.” He was so casual about it. I recalled what I was told about them turning people but it’d slipped my mind with the events of the past few weeks.

“As long as you don’t hunt or capture them I guess it’s okay. Is that where you get your blood supply?”

“Most of the time. We work with banks too.”

Art returned with a Goth teen. He had a pitch-black Mohawk, chipped black nail polish, even though he was a guy, grungy black boots, parachute pants and a skeleton shirt, both black as well. Does this kid know that other colors exist?

“She is going to feed from you,” Kalel announced standing over the boy.

“Man this is cool shit,” the kid said. I couldn’t believe he was excited to have a vamp drink his blood. It sort of creped me out; he was like an overjoyed fan boy.

“Sit.” Kalel grabbed him by the arm and jerked him down beside me on the sofa.

“Ugh... Could I just drink a bottle from the fridge?” I didn’t like this one bit. This teen was on drugs or a suicide mission to want a vamp to feed from him.

“You mean you don’t want me?” he frowned acting heartbroken.

“Fresh has the most nutrients and will speed up your healing time the fastest.” I sighed. I knew Kalel was right but the boy was creepy.

“Give me your wrist,” I demanded succumbing to the pressure.

“Oh yeah!” He stretched both arms in my direction officially earning the title of suck-up.

I pulled one wrist to my mouth and sunk my teeth in. His blood covered my tongue like warm melted chocolate. It was, dare I say, delicious. I drew quick and sucked hard pulling more and more.

“Damn this is awesome shit,” he said sinking closer to me completely engrossed in my work. I officially lost my appetite. I withdrew and literally spit the serum on his wound.

“Whoa! What’s that?” he asked watching as the bite marks disappeared.

“Healing serum,” I replied getting up and walking to look out the window.

“So do I pass? Are you going to change me now?” the Goth asked anxiously looking to each of us with hope.

“You’re not ready yet. Tone it down first.” Kalel nodded to Art and he quickly removed the teen.

“How do you feel?” he asked. He came and stood beside me.

“Officially freaked out by fan boy but other than that I’m good, thanks.”

“You should see the others. Believe it or not, he’s the mildest one.” I just stared at Kalel shaking my head in

slight amusement and disbelief. What is this strange fascination humans have with us? Our world is no better or easier than theirs.

“We know that, but they don’t believe it.” Of course he’d read my thoughts. I frowned. “Sorry, it’s a habit.”

“A bad habit,” I scolded. I couldn’t stay mad at Kalel for long. He has a pure heart and acts on the best intentions and the smartest of intentions given his way of analyzing everything.

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Chapter Twenty-One

There was suddenly a fury of knocks and pounds on the door. It must be Kellan. Kalel opened the door and Kellan raced straight to me. He looked me over from head to toe scowling at every scrape.

“Are you okay?” he asked fervently.

“Yes, I’m fine I told you.”

“Hello Bladang. I’m Craig, this buffoons best mate,” Craig introduced himself to Kalel extending his hand courteously.

“Kalel,” he replied shaking the outstretched hand but making no warm welcome. He closed the door and brushed past Craig back to the living room.

“Hey love,” Craig greeted kissing my cheek. “I hear you were in a bit of a scuttle with a villain.”

“Uh, yeah.”

“No worries. We’ll plaster the kangaroo,” he said settling on the couch.

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Kalel commented scrunching his forehead in a non-approving way.

“You learn to go with the flow. Craig’s a little quirky.” I shrugged at Kalel’s raised eyebrow, smiling sheepishly.

“So what did this bloke bastard do to you? You look healed except for the noose mark on your neck,” Craig prompted. Kellan’s eyes went straight for the wound. His features hardened instantly. I quickly covered it with my hand but it was too late.

“Um, I want to wait for my parents so I don’t have to repeat anything.”

“Did you call the High Authorities?” Craig asked. Kellan continued glaring at my hand, which was making me nervous. I knew he would eventually explode like Kai but the question was when.

“Ugh, no. I didn’t think about it,” I stuttered eyeing Kellan cautiously. I started to back away as his eyes lost their green hue to raging red. I’d never seen him so close to convulsion.

“Hey mate, air the bullocks,” Craig said. Kellan shot him a look. Craig patted the sofa. “Come on man; you’re scarin’ your babe.” Kellan scowled over to the sofa.

“I called them. They know. Auggy will be over later to discuss security for you,” Kalel stated. He stood by the fireplace, hands in his pockets but his body at attention. He didn’t trust Kellan or Craig; he didn’t bother to hide his feelings.

“Security?” I couldn’t cover the worry or distaste in my tone.

“Yes security. You were almost killed Leka,” Kalel argued.

“Holy shards of Chuck! Was all that in you?” Craig pointedly studied the bowl of blood glass pieces. I shrugged. Dang bowl of evidence; I didn’t have any privacy.

Kellan’s breathing increased, his hands balled into tight fists that turned his knuckles white. I angrily snatched up the bowl and pulled a Gabi by storming into the kitchen to dump the remnants. I stood against the counter trying not to break down the tough outer shell I’d been fighting so hard to create.

Just when my life was back to a somewhat normal existence, bam! I was attacked and I had no clue why. I didn't meddle in other people's affairs; I had no known enemies aside from Jenny and maybe Mike. I felt like I was being handed the short end of the stick all the time and I couldn't figure out why.

"It's not your fault Leka. You didn't do anything wrong. You'll learn that as the years pass." I looked up to find Kaleb in the doorway. I was getting good at blocking everything out: noises, people, certain emotions...life.

"I know. I'm just looking for a reason."

"Why waste the time when you know you won't find one?"

"To distract myself from becoming a blubbering mess," I offered. He chuckled lightly.

"Your parents are here."

"Thanks. I know it's childish but I really want my mommy and daddy." I intentionally added their toddler titles. He nodded and smiled, no judgment, only understanding.

My parents ambushed me the moment I exited the kitchen. I welcomed their comfort leaning into both of them. I looked up and noticed everyone was watching us.

The next several hours were spent being scrutinized. I had to re-tell every microscopic detail over and over. It became annoying but I knew they meant well.

"Kellan, please go." I turned to Kai and Kaleb. "How far away does he need to be?"

"It's not exact," Kaleb stated.

“Fine. Kellan can you please start walking and I’ll tell you when to stop.”

“I’m not leaving,” he bucked.

“Well, unless you want me to kiss every mind reader in this room, then can you please work with me?” Maybe I was a bit harsh but the repetition wore my patience. I felt like I was on trial but had eight lawyers trying me at once. Questions shot out from everyone.

“Kiss me and I’ll relay,” he replied leaning into me. His eyes were set on me to show he wasn’t backing down.

I huffed and turned to Kael. “Will you accept his rendition?”

“I need yours. Yours will be more detailed. It won’t be missing anything small but pertinent.”

I swung back around to Kellan. “Well...”

“I’m not giving in on this one. I’m not leaving you here.”

“My parents are here, Craig’s here... What can happen? What are you afraid will happen?” I was livid yet still pleading to understand.

“Perhaps we ought to take a break,” my mother offered.

“No. I just want this to be over with. I don’t want to relive it over and over.” My tone changed from angry to bitter to sad bordering break down. Whoever it was was still loose.

“Kellan you’re being difficult. Lex, just kiss them,” Gabi stated motioning to Kai and Kael. Her hands were on

her hips in full boss mode. I got the feeling she was just as frustrated.

I chanced a glance at Kai. I could tell his hopes were up. I focused on Kellan again waiting...

Nothing. He zoned everything out. He stared aimlessly out into the night ignoring everyone. I turned to Craig; he shrugged eyeing his best friend. If he was concerned or thought the idea was bad, he certainly didn't voice it.

"Mocoso obstinada," I muttered madly. "Kai, Kalel, will you please walk with me so I can show you." Kellan growled instantly and was at my side.

"You're not going anywhere with them alone."

I sighed deeply as the tears streamed down. I was mentally and emotionally exhausted. "How else am I supposed to do this?" my voice was barely audible.

"Just kiss them!" Gabi yelled.

Kai took matters into his own hands and planted his lips on mine. The shock value was certainly there. Kai's lips were soft but held too much passion. He became eager and rough quickly.

"Can you see it?" I thought hoping he was connected already viewing my thoughts rotating on a loop of the events.

"Yes, I'm in no rush."

"I am. Don't push." I was certainly in a foul mood after Kellan...

"Promise me I'll get another chance to experience this." I felt his hands cup my face holding me to him.

“Kai, don’t push.” I repeated but left his hands in place.

“Never.”

“Did you get it yet?”

“I got it the first second we began. I just wanted more.”

I yanked back and gave him the dirtiest look I could muster. He had the audacity to wink at me. I growled a rumble I didn’t know I was capable of. Why must men abuse opportunities with women?

“Kai, you better not have abused the situation.” Gabi was suddenly beside me facing off with him in disapproval.

“I take advantage of every opportunity life gives me,” he smirked arrogantly and shrugged nonchalantly.

I looked at Kael not bothering to look at Kellan. I was pissed at him. I wouldn’t have had to do any of this if he would have just cooperated. It’s not like I asked him to die for me, only walk a few hundred feet. “Can you get the information from Kai; do your mental thing please?”

“Yes,” his answer was solid. I suddenly looked around very aware that I’d had an audience to my spat and brief kiss with Kai. The silent tears continued down my cheeks as they flushed with embarrassment. Kael grabbed my hand and took me into the library. He hugged me knowing I needed it before he pulled back and looked at me with seriousness.

“Be solid in your choice of man Leka. If you can hesitate, than you’re forcing it. I don’t want you to make a mistake.”

“Thanks. I’m trying not to,” I sniffed.

“But you are.”

“You think me being with Kellan is a mistake?”

“Only you know that.”

“You think I should be with Kai, don’t you?”

“Maybe. Or perhaps there are others out there too; even me.”

I broke away and stared at him in disbelief. Did he just say he liked me? Was that what he was implying? I didn’t even think he saw me like that in that way, potentially speaking. I just... Why did he have to further complicate things for me?

I slowly backed away from him. I know I had a funny sort of startled expression but I wasn’t ready for that. I walked out of the library and walked to my parents.

“Grab me if you need me...” I whispered before escaping to Kai’s room. A million thoughts flooded my mind as I collapsed on his bed.

Tap, tap, tap.

“Yeah?” I called. The door opened and shut. I was face down in the sheets and didn’t bother to look up.

“Hey kiddo. You have a minute for your old man?” I instantly shot up into a sitting position and startled him.

“Sorry,” I smiled apologetically. “What’s going on Dad?”

“Now you know I don’t usually pry,” he began settling on the bed beside me. “But what was that downstairs? It’s not like my little girl to let guys other than her boyfriend kiss her.”

He was right... That, this, wasn't me.

"I don't know Dad... I'm so confused. I thought Kellan was the one, as in the one. But then I met Kai and he's so different. They both offer me something different. And now I think Kalel likes me. I'm just being pulled in so many directions and I don't know which way or which guy is right anymore. I'm just so very confused," I carried on. He didn't comment or cut me off. He listened to me. He let me ramble, be hysterical and dramatic at times, yet he never interrupted. After ten minutes straight of my verbal vomit over boys to my father of all people, I shut down. I got quiet to hear his thoughts.

"You know how I knew your Mom was the one for me?" he asked. I shook my head no. "She was the one I couldn't live without." He took a deep breath to gather himself. "When she wasn't around I went crazy. I felt like I was missing half of myself. We went our separate ways many times before she knew I was it. She dated other men but kept coming back to me. I like to think it was because I was better than the others, but if I'm honest, it's only because she loved me. When your heart is already taken but one man, no other can fill the void. You'll always feel like you're missing something," he explained.

"Like me and Kellan," I rationalized out loud.

"You're young sweetie. You have, as strange as it is to say, you have forever to make a decision."

"Not if I want kids," I interjected though I understood his point.

"You still have eight years for that with a year to fall back on. My point is there's no rush. And when you've found the one, you'll know." I sat motionless thinking over all he'd said.

“Did you waver at all with Mom in the beginning or did you know right away that she was it?”

“I felt a strong connection to your Mom in the beginning but I didn’t know she was the one until we broke up the first time.”

“Thanks Dad. That really helped,” I smiled at him adoringly. I felt five again with the glossy perfect view of my dad as a hero and no less.

“Anytime. I know I’m not immortal, but as long as I’m breathing I’ll always be here for you.”

“About that. Whatever you decide I’ll support you. I know Mom doesn’t want it, but I think it’d be cool if I had you forever.” It took me a minute to realize I was fiddling with my fingers. I tucked them under my legs.

“You’d always be my little girl.”

“I know.”

“I was thinking of asking the Bladangs. What do you think?” I heard the quiver of his voice but he was beaming. He really was doing this for us unselfishly.

“I think I could pull some strings. I have a few connections.” We burst into laughter at the same time; it was a giddy chuckle. I breathed deep seeking refuge from the reality of the moment. My dad and me just had our first heart to heart since I was a little girl. The best part: it didn’t matter that I was vamp and he human. We were still relatable; love being our commonality.

It was agreed that I would stay with the Bladangs through the weekend since there was no school. No one was happy about it but I refused security and they were the only ones trained against assassins.

After I went to Kai's room, Kellan left without so much as a goodbye. I was still angry with him for being such a stubborn donkey, but on the flip side, I did disrespect him in front of everyone. I stabbed his manhood and dishonored our relationship by allowing Kai to kiss me. It proved helpful though. They were able to create a sketch of the villain and study his fight sequences.

"Rise and shine sleepy head!" I jerked straight up on high alert.

"Relax. It's just me," Kai said patting my shoulder.

"What time is it?"

"Just past five."

"AM, right?"

"Maybe," he arched one perfect brow, toying with my consciousness.

I felt my pockets for my cell. Nothing... Oh wait. I don't have one. Crap. And I was still in somebody else's baggy clothes.

"Your clothes are in the bathroom. Craig and your friend Melanie brought them."

"Mel was here?" I cut him off.

"Well, yes."

"When?"

"About an hour ago."

"And nobody thought to wake me up?"

"You needed to finish healing Leka."

“An hour less of sleep wouldn’t have stopped that. I would have been fine,” I grumbled. I stomped off to the bathroom to sift through the bag.

“Why must the women of this house be so moody?” Kai mumbled more than asked in a narcissistic way.

“Because we have to put up with you!” I roared back.

I changed into my Juicy Couture velour set. If I was going to be on lockdown I might as well be comfy. After searching further I found my Uggs with an ‘I miss you’ note from Mel. I crushed it to my chest sentimentally. I knew I’d just hung out with her yesterday, but I always thought about her. Her parents still hadn’t told her, which was torturing me, but I was excited that I was never going to lose my best friend.

Well, until I flipped the post-it over for the PS.

You both were wrong. Just say sorry.

Ugh. I knew she was right. Those two words – I’m sorry – are the hardest to say sometimes. Nobody likes to admit they’re wrong. Harder is admitting you’re wrong to the one you love. With a stranger, if they don’t accept it then oh well. It’s not like they matter to you or play a big role in your life. But the one you love, if they don’t forgive you; let’s just say there’s a lot more at stake.

I trudged downstairs in a zombie-like state. I was lost in thought. They were all in the dining room on cue with their morning routine.

“I’m going to skip breakfast if you don’t mind...” I announced.

“*Por que, mi amiga?*” Gabi asked, concern wrinkled in her forehead.

“No se. No tengo umbre...”

“None of us are truly hungry,” Rafique chuckled. He shut up instantly when Gabi shot him a look.

“Okay, *nena*,” she sighed. She eyed me curiously but said nothing more.

I walked back to the living room. The sun was beginning to rise which confirmed it was morning. The sky was painted with the vibrant hues that preamble its grand entrance.

I heard someone approach. I continued to look out over the water not acknowledging them directly but also not ignoring them.

“Here. We got you a phone.” I turned to see Kalel handing me a bright pink phone.

“Thanks. It has keys,” I smiled. He laughed lightly.

“Yes, it does. It’s a blackberry. It’s advanced though. It has a built in tracking device. And if you press the center button for five seconds a laser will shoot out through the camera.

“A built in weapon. Nice,” I said scrolling through the menu options.

“Your e-mail is connected to it and I’ve input everyone’s number for you.”

“This is really great. Thank you. Just one question... How do I dial? The numbers also have letters...”

“Three ways. Scroll to your address book, highlight the person and hit call. You can just start pressing the numbers from the home screen like your old phone or if you want to

go high tech you can speak the number or name of the person you want to call.”

“And I will take door number two! I never knew there were so many ways to call a person.”

Suddenly a loud whistle shot through the air. Less than a second later the window shattered and Kalel was on top of me on the floor.

“Flip it! Flip it!” he yelled.

Instantly the windows were covered in some sort of metal. I heard loud pings and items being ricocheted off them.

“What the heck was that?”

“Your assassin is back for round two. And he’s ready,” Kalel huffed as he jumped off me.

“How can you be sure?”

“That’s high tech bullet and bomb proof glass. He’s done his research,” Gabi explained. They were flying all over amongst several rooms and downstairs corridors. Clanks, drawers being opened and shut, floorboards being plucked up... they were gathering.

“Alert the troops! I want all officers here in three minutes!”

“Grab the bows, daggettes and lasers!”

“Pull the trackers and release the hounds!”

“Hounds?” I asked aloud to myself. I nervously fidgeted with my hands standing in the spot Kalel knocked me to.

“Robotic dogs. They have built in surveillance and weapons. We can see and attack from wherever they are via remote control access,” Rafi explained as he crossed to the library.

“Leka, put your hair up and put on this hat,” Kai threw me a dark green bourette. I scooped up my hair immediately and tucked it under the fashionless hat.

I looked up and they were suddenly all there. They were dressed in combat attire and each was packed with weapons in multiple stuffed pockets. They had guns, knives, swords all situated around them in various slots on their shirts and pants.

“Are you up for a game of cat and mice Leka?” Kai asked.

“Uh... I guess,” I shrugged. My usually slow pulse was running a marathon. It happened so quickly...

“She’s in shock,” Kalel sighed.

“No, I’m fine. Let’s just do this.” I put on my best game face. “So what do I need to do?”

Everyone gave me a hesitant head cock and narrowed observant eyes.

“Just tell me!” I yelled. “I said I’m fine.”

“You have to really be ready Lex. One wrong move and he’ll get you,” Gabi warned.

“I know,” I whispered tightly.

“Okay, we’re splitting up. Art, you man the canines. Rafi head south and direct the officers. Anyone who slips up or lets him by gets axed on the spot; that should keep

them in line. Gabi head west, pick up the Blackheads and drop the pellets,” Kalel ordered.

“Blackheads? Pellets?”

“The Blackheads are our neighboring clan. Pellets are tiny bombs that are set off by movement within a certain radius. Kai head east and scour the river rocks. Set up traps along the bank. That’s where he’s likely to try and escape. He’ll know we’re on his trail,” he continued not missing a beat.

I jumped at the sound of a siren in the house.

“Damn it!” Kai yelled.

“What...” Kai had me in his arms before I could say another word.

“Scatter!” he yelled.

“Tighten the belt!” Rafi directed across the way.

Kai shut us in the library, locked the door. He began furiously yanking books off the shelves revealing a door. He punched in a code and pushed me through first before pulling it shut behind him.

“What’s going on?” I pressed furiously.

The siren stopped and I stood motionless against the wall. He had secured us in a small cement and metal closet. Along the back wall were weapons and a shelf of ammunition though it wasn’t ordinary bullets of sort.

“This ass isn’t working alone. He’s cut throat. Your head must be worth nearly a billion,” he rambled; it made no sense to me.

“English, please!”

“They lined the house with stealths, tiny gas bombs that won’t kill a vamp but will certainly knock you out for a bit.”

“I thought gas couldn’t harm us. We don’t have to breath...” I rationalized.

“It seeps into our pores and acts as a powerful anesthetic. Each bomb costs a good five million dollars which makes me think whoever hired these goons is offering a reward of close to a billion dollars,” he explained but his voice was annoyed I guessed by my questions given the edge it had towards me. “I’m annoyed with the assholes, not you,” he stated fiercely not back to his regular control level.

“For someone who’s not mad at me, you sure as hell are acting like it,” I growled back. After a minute, logic set in. “They’re vamps too. How do they protect themselves from the gas?”

“With expensive protective gear.”

“Oh...” I sunk to the floor in an angry, scared huddle. For being immortal, there were a heck of a lot of things that could hurt me...

He sighed and settled down beside me. He opened his arms and I scooted into them as he stroked my back soothingly.

“I’m sorry. I was an ass. I panicked. We’ve prepared for this exact scenario but we’ve never actually had anything happen before.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause so much trouble.”

“Leka, you only say sorry when you have something to be sorry about.”

“I know. I just... I don’t even know what I did. Why are these vamps after me?”

“I don’t know but I promise I’m going to find out,” he swore solemnly.

“I’m just glad I was here and not... my parent’s house! You don’t think...” I couldn’t even finish the sentence. Tears filled my eyes at the thought. I couldn’t bear to... if anything happened to them. I didn’t know how I’d survive.

I found my new phone and punched in my mother’s cell number. It rang and went to voicemail. Crap.

“Hello, you’ve reached Sharon Jackson with Atlantic Shore Realty. I apologize for being unavailable but if you’ll leave your name, number and a brief message I’ll return your call as soon as I’m available. Thank you.”

“Mom, it’s me. It’s an emergency. Call me as soon as you get this. I love you.”

The moment I hit end I dialed my dad. Kai sat silently beside me rubbing, comforting me the best he could. I knew he didn’t say more because the possibilities were endless outside this safe room. We couldn’t know how many of them were working together or what they were sent to do.

Voicemail. Dang it. The tears once restrained now crashed down my cheeks like a waterfall. I left the same urgent message.

I knew the only other person I could call was Kellan. I didn’t have his parent’s numbers. I pressed the numbers through glossy eyes and a painful feeling clutching my heart.

“What?” The word was dark; hate spit at me in his tone.

“Kellan, be mad later. They’ve bombed the Bladang’s house with gas. There’s more than one assassin. You have to check on my parents. Please!” I cried. “Please, please, please... please check on them.” I broke down into a puddle of tears.

“Shit! Okay. Calm down babe. I’m already in my car. I’ll be there in a minute. Where are you?” his voice became warm yet urgent.

“Kai pulled me into a hidden closet in the library to wait it out,” I replied wiping my face profusely with my sleeves. He released the breath he had been holding.

“I’m here. Damn. You were right. They did bomb it. I see the cans still attached at the window seals...”

“No!” I screamed.

“Give the phone to Kai,” Kellan ordered. I shoved the phone at him and buried my face in my arms on my knees.

“Survey the house and call me,” Kai directed immediately clicking end afterwards. He stood and started pacing. I heard him dial more numbers. There was a pause before the phone rang. It was answered on the first ring.

“*Kunane?*” I recognized Kalel’s voice.

“They gassed her parent’s house.” Kai didn’t bother to greet him. He eyed me for a minute before going in and out of his native language. It must be bad if he didn’t want me to hear.

“Five more minutes and we can go out. Kalel switched on the vents which should clear the air soon,” he spoke softly. I felt like a broken soul.

He lifted me up into his arms giving me a strong brotherly hug. He kissed the top of my head and gently rocked us side to side as we stood.

“I know this is a lot for you Leka, but you have to be strong. You are new, still very human. In our world though, weakness will get you killed.” I knew he was right. I recalled Kellan’s words. “As a human, you act with your heart. As a vampeen, you act with your mind. And as a vampire, you act on your instincts. There is a distinct difference between each race. The weakest will always be a human and the strongest always a vampire because of this.”

—

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Get me home now,” I demanded the moment we were out.

“Gabi, Raf, hold it down here with Art. Make contact with every officer in the forest and the Blackheads. We’ll be back,” Kai instructed on our way to the garage.

“I’ll sit in back with her; you drive,” Kalel threw the keys at Kai.

He beeped open the black Mercedes and we all got in at once. He started the engine and immediately backed out. Kalel rapidly pressed buttons and flipped switches in various parts of the car.

“Armor activated. Shield enabled. Right quadrant secure. Left quadrant secure. North scan complete. South scan complete. Tracker deactivated. Satellite disabled. Right boost in position. Left boost failed.” The female computed voice spoke with every move Kalel made. He tapped a few more buttons. “Left boost in position. Shark software launched. Communication complete. Connection complete. Diamond App in position. Laser guard active. Laser guard ready.”

He finally sat back in the seat beside me. I flipped the phone in my hands nervously. I didn’t know what was waiting for me when we arrived; Kellan still hadn’t called back.

I was struggling to stay under control. I cried all the tears I’d had in that tiny hide out. I was empty, devoid of emotion by this point. Every possible scenario had flashed already. I’d prepared for the worst but hoped for the best. “You can’t change fate,” Kai had stated. He meant death,

but if my parents were murdered, I didn't consider that fate. I considered it a mistake. Wrong place, wrong time, but not fate. More like accidental fate.

We flew through the morning traffic. Kellan's car sat in the driveway when we pulled in. I didn't wait for the car to stop before I leapt out and pushed open the front door. I heard my dad crying hysterically from before we arrived. I'd never been so scared in all my life. He'd never been so broken.

"Dad? Kellan?" I raced through the house, upstairs and down. I was so upset I couldn't focus on his exact location given my supersonic hearing. I finally ran right into Kellan's arms. He gripped me harder than necessary.

"Lexi," he sounded like velvet. "Your dad needs you."

I couldn't answer. I just shook my head.

"Brace yourself. Be strong." Brace myself? Be strong?

He grabbed my hand and squeezed tight. We walked side by side into my parent's bedroom. Kai and Kalel stood outside the bathroom door. Their faces evoked rage and yet sympathy simultaneously. It was in their eyes.

Without going further, without seeing anything, I knew. There was only one thing that could bring my father to rock bottom. There was only one thing that could make him cry out like that. She's gone...

I released Kellan's hand, slipped past Kai and Kalel and lightly forced open the door.

She was lifeless, no color. Her clothes were soaked from my father's tears; he had tried to revive her. He had razor cuts all over him. He had tried to feed her. The blood still ran from the corners of her lips.

There was a dart poking from her chest. It was syringe-like and had held some sort of liquid, the poison that killed her. Pinned to her shirt by the short arrow was a note.

Thanks for the collateral.

I began to convulse. Serum soaked my mouth. My bones ached with rage. I punched a hole in the tiled wall. It gave me no relief.

My dad looked up at me. His eyes were bloodshot, his body shaking profusely and his face showed nothing but defeat. I took in his blood stained clothes. The world around me began to blur for the first time since my transformation.

I pulled my dad into my arms, cuddled him as if he were my child.

I was cold, numb. Nothing can ever prepare you for the death of a parent.

“They said I wasn’t a threat. They saved me because I wasn’t a threat,” he cried. “They wouldn’t let her go. I couldn’t save her. I... I couldn’t...” he stumbled to form a sentence, to convey what he’d just been through. He was a broken mess.

I walked silently past the other men in my life and carried my heart broken father to the family room. I set him down on the sectional. He was shaken, distraught. And I was in shock, disbelief. Perhaps it hadn’t hit me. Maybe I didn’t want it to hit me.

That was it. I couldn’t let it hit me. Kai had said I had to be strong. Dad needed me to be strong. Humans are more vulnerable than vamps.

I sat beside him. We held each other; we comforted each other. He hugged me; I hugged him.

He eventually stopped crying yet we sat entangled into each other for hours more. We didn't speak a word as my serum never settled.

Kalel left. I heard him say he would take her body to the morgue. Kai and Kellan lingered, pacing repetitiously but never approaching us.

They made calls for us. Soon our home was filled with familiar voices but we didn't move. Our father-daughter mourning continued. Aunt Claire, Beth, Al, Auggy, Mel, Craig, Gabi, Rafi and others I didn't know or recognize flooded our house with well wishes and many more tears yet none of them dared to disturb us.

How did this happen? Why did it happen? She was innocent. She's gone... She's really gone and I never got to say goodbye.

I was a complete brat last night. I took their presence for granted. I didn't expect to never get the chance to say I love you again... I assumed I'd get to hug her again. I was so wrapped up in me, me, me that I'd missed my last chance. She came in and said good-bye. I'd given her a kiss on the cheek, but no hug; I said "Good-bye. I'll see you tomorrow," but not I love you. I was horrible; a spoiled vamp who didn't deserve to be an ambassador. I deserved what was coming for me, but she didn't.

I was startled by a hand on my shoulder. I didn't flinch. Whatever fate had for me I was ready. I deserved every bit of harsh reality and torture I got.

"Stop beating yourself up." It was Kellan. His voice still melted with warmth and comfort. I swallowed the serum to a controllable level.

“I’m not,” I answered robotically.

“You’re projecting your thoughts. I’m hearing everything you’re thinking.” How is that possible? “I don’t know,” he offered hearing my one phrase of confusion.

My eyes shot open for the first time in hours. I turned my head towards him. I wondered if everyone else heard them too. Granted I had a motive for temporary insanity but it would still be embarrassing.

“Don’t worry, I checked. It’s only me.” He spoke softly; his eyes were full of concern.

“I’m sorry for everything,” I thought.

“Don’t be. I was a jerk. I’m the one who needs to apologize.” He came around and stood over me. His emerald eyes darted between my still lifeless father and me.

“Sit with me?” He sat beside me taking my hand closest to him. He caressed me rhythmically but didn’t invade the connection I had with my dad.

The house slowly emptied and we were still in the same spot. Dad hadn’t moved. His stomach had been growling for hours; he didn’t budge. The numbness was beginning to subside to a hollow pain I couldn’t fabricate on the worst of days.

I had to move. I had to do something at some point. I didn’t have a protective bubble any longer. That was always my mother and now she’s... gone.

“Dad,” I whispered his name; the only name I’d ever known him by.

“I couldn’t stop them,” he stated. He was beside me but his mind was far away.

“It’s ok,” I hugged him again.

“I couldn’t protect her. But all she did was protect me...” he trailed off.

“You did all you could,” I said knowing it would never be enough for him. He’d always feel guilty.

“It wasn’t enough. It’ll never be enough.”

“Your love is enough for me. She knew you loved us.”

“Love doesn’t protect anyone from pain. I’ll never forget her pain...” His eyes filled with tears again begging to trickle over his red rims.

We were silent again. Flashes of her on the floor passed before me again. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what had happened, how she died. Vampeens are supposed to be immortal. There are only two main ways to kill us and she didn’t die by either...

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“I’m ready Alexa. I’ll be damned if they get to you too. The only way to protect you is if I become one of you,” his voice was full of conviction. I knew he was right. He needed to be made vampire for his own protection outside of mine.

“I said I’d support you. Are you sure you’re ready though?” I checked. His tears dried. I sensed the change in him. His grief was overturned by determination and maybe a desire for revenge. I didn’t hate him though. I shared the same outrage. If fate wouldn’t deliver justice then I, no we, would.

“I’ve been ready.” He didn’t hesitate. He didn’t blink, cringe or move. He was firm when he said it. We both smiled at the same time.

“Do you want to eat one last human meal?” I asked.
“Trust me; it’s not the same after.”

“Thanks sweetie, but I’m ready.”

I nodded affirmatively. “Kai?”

“I’ll do it but not here,” he replied immediately. “Auggy assigned two guards to you. They’re patrolling outside.” Kellan stood and peered out the blinds to check.

“Do you want me to be there?” I asked but wouldn’t let him go without me.

“Is it painful?” he looked at Kai.

“For the first few minutes it stings. It will pass when your body sedates you. The pain makes you numb. You’ll go to sleep. You’ll die in your sleep and wake up vampire two days later,” he explained.

It seemed strange hearing the timeline. It would take me a while to think of my dad as anything but human.

“I would love to have you with me,” he invited me along to the biggest event of his life: his death and resurrection.

One last embrace with my dad led me into another with Kellan. I squeezed him as close as possible to me and didn’t let go. All the fighting, tempers flaring over nonsense. Going through what I had, seeing the pain in my dad’s eyes; hearing the pain in his heart be screamed outwards was grueling. At the end of all of it though, it only reminded me of how much I loved Kellan.

Had that have been him and me in my parent’s place; I would have been more disheveled than my dad at this point. Regardless of how tempting Kai was, the fact was, I could live without him. I would survive just fine without him in my life. But Kellan, I couldn’t picture my world without him. If anything bad ever impacted him or took him from me my world would collapse right at that moment.

It hadn’t just been my mom to get me to this point. It’d been a combination of people in my life. And Kellan was

certainly one of them. He'd guided me, taught me and even laughed at me; he'd protected me, almost died for me and continued to love me in spite of all my mistakes and mood swings along the way.

I'd been foolish; ridiculous and stupid were probably more like it. I couldn't believe it had taken my mother dying in cold blood for me to realize how much I'd taken for granted. I... she... she's gone. She's truly gone to be with Gran.

I didn't want to look back and regret anything with Kellan. Most importantly, I didn't want to regret ever letting him go. I couldn't lose him like my dad did my mom. I couldn't lose him like my mom. My heart couldn't handle it. I can't handle it.

"We need to go Leka," Kai prompted. I let go of Kellan and returned to my dad's side. I took his hand and squeezed lightly.

"You'll always be my daddy; even if you're a vampire," I smiled.

"And you'll always be my little girl; even if you're over a hundred years old."

As we left, closing the door that one time was so symbolic. I was closing one chapter of my life, shutting out the past full of family memories. After school chats at the kitchen island, the endless loop of CSI on the TV at night; the special moments where I caught her looking at me in awe as all parents do. I'd miss her voice. I'd miss her I love you's, her words of advice and praise, her hugs. Most of all, I'd miss her guidance. She was my how to, what to and when to on all things both human and vampire. And now she's gone, and with her, everything else.

Perhaps Kai was right. Maybe it was fate. Had my mother been taken from me a few months before, I wouldn't have survived my transformation. I wouldn't have met these new key people in my life had it not been for her connections and influence.

Very symbolic. I closed the door on a past with her and was walking into a future empty of her. From now on it'd be just Dad and me, father and daughter; vampire and vampeen.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

This was it, the moment my dad had been waiting for. I stood by his bedside clutching his hand. He smiled at me, his eyes dancing excitedly. I tried to be happy for him and I was to a certain degree but the nerves had taken over. I'd just lost my mom and no matter how "safe" this appeared to be, there were still far too many risks involved for me to relax.

I looked around the room. We were in a downstairs room. It had a single mirror on the crimson walls. The only furniture in the room was a four-poster bed made entirely of thickly carved mahogany wood. The sheets were red as well, more of a brick color that somehow worked.

On my other side Kellan squeezed my hand tightly reminding me of his presence. I rested my head on his upper arm watching my dad anxiously. He didn't seem hesitant in the slightest. A bit flighty maybe but only in anticipation.

"You okay, Dad?" I asked breaking away from Kellan.

"I'm good sweetie. Don't worry." He was beaming; it put all my fears to rest for a minute.

"You remember what we talked about?" We had given him a crash course on everything including how he would feel waking up; i.e. the intense cravings for blood.

"I remember everything. Stop worrying kiddo." He ruffled my hair playfully trying to lighten my mood.

"I can't..."

"Okay. Let's get this show on the road," Kai announced as he entered the room. His eyes passed between us. "Are

you sure you can handle this Leka?" he checked. I nodded afraid my voice would crack if I spoke. Kellan stepped closer and put an arm around me.

"You ready Stew?" Kai pressed with him one last time.

"I've been ready," his answer was solid.

"Great. Where do you want me to bite?" He flashed his teeth and I involuntarily squirmed.

"Here," he threw up his wrist. Before anyone could react Kai bit into him. I heard the tear of my dad's flesh as Kai's teeth sunk into him.

Everything went into slow motion. Dad winced and looked over at me adoringly. My eyes returned to Kai. I planned to make sure he didn't take too much. As it was I was fighting the urge to knock him away from my dad; that's only my protective instincts though. I leaned down and gently kissed his forehead. He was beginning to sweat; his skin was glistening as his color slowly drained from his cheeks.

Kai pulled out and licked his teeth and lips enthusiastically.

"You taste really good Stew," he winked. He stifled a smile back, but I knew that took effort. His forehead was scrunched together as he concentrated.

"It hurts a little worse than a sting," he admitted. I crouched beside him. "It's bearable. Don't worry," he quickly amended.

"How long until he zonks out?" I asked Kai again. I knew we'd covered it before but my mind was muddled by the moment.

“Depends. It’s different for everyone,” he stated. He turned to my dad. “Do you need anything Stew?”

“Water,” he choked. This was more brutal than I’d expected.

“I can bring you water, but it won’t help. Do you still want some?” Dad shook his head no. Kai nodded his head in acknowledgement. “Come get me if you need me.” With that he left us.

I diligently stood, sat and laid with my father for hours. I sent Kellan to get a wet rag and wiped away his perspiration like the best of nurses.

Five hours after Kai’s bite he finally drifted off to sleep. I didn’t move though. His heartbeat had slowed already; his pulse barely sprinted steadily. It was then that I realized there’s no going back. My dad would never be human again...

This resting period had given me time to think. It all happened so fast. She was here and now she’s not. He was human and now he’s not. We were safe and now we’re not.

I was furious with the assassins. They’d destroyed my world in less than twenty-four hours.

Growing up I took the abuse. I allowed my classmates to put me down because I wasn’t model pretty. I let them destroy my self-esteem. They walked all over me and I said not one word in defense. Not this time. Not now. I refused to accept this. I was timid before but I’d learned to not take crap from anyone. Vamps are notorious fighters and I’m a vamp now. Just as Kai and Kalel came together to battle in honor of their father, I’d planned to stand together with my dad and take down these bullies.

“Vamp yourself for war Dad. We will fight for Mom,” I said dabbing his forehead again.

The hours lingered while passing. I never left his side. People were in and out checking on us. They offered me reprieve, even insisted I take a rest, but I declined them all.

Right around twenty-four hours his heart stopped beating completely. I held my breath hanging tightly to his weak pulse. He wasn't breathing, his heart stopped beating and eventually his pulse was still. They assured me this was normal but my creativity wreaked havoc on my mind during this time. I settled on my knees on the floor, my elbows resting on the sheets, my hands secure around one of his as I prayed silently but hard. I stretched my hands and his to my temple; the entire process tried me. Waiting tried my patience...

And wait I did. I sat in that position for hours more. My resolve was dwindling.

Suddenly I heard his heart beat again. It was faint, but ever present. I listened closely, silently, as it slowly continued its new spurted pace. I couldn't help but smile at the sound of it.

Shortly thereafter, he stirred. I jumped up and watched him closely. His eyes flew open, though they weren't the same anymore, a bit more glossy; though the same hue, somehow different.

“Dad?” I whispered cautiously.

“Everything. So clear. I see.” His words were jumbled a bit. I recalled how overwhelmed I was in the beginning. He sat up and looked around as if he was seeing for the first time.

“Dad?” I called again. He shot in front of me startling me. This would definitely take some getting use to. “How do you feel?” I stumbled back a bit. Strangely I was afraid of him. New vamps are unpredictable; he seemed unpredictable.

“Great,” he chuckled. He raced around the bed amazed by his own speed and grace. I stood stunned into a corner. The door cracked open. Kellan and Kalel observed the scene before venturing in.

Abruptly my dad burst through the door and took off running. I followed faster than I’d ever traveled; up the stairs, through the open door – idiots left the door open – through the house and out the door.

“Dad!” I called but he didn’t slow.

“He’s hunting,” Kalel explained at my side.

I sped up to him and yanked his arm. He tossed me like a small pebble against a tree; he’s strong.

“Damn it,” I cursed under my breath not missing a beat before I was back on his trail.

“You okay?” Kellan yelled. He didn’t stop.

“I’m fine,” I grumbled.

Thankfully Kalel and Kellan caught up with him. They each took an arm but were struggling to restrain him. I went and stood in front of him.

“Dad.” My voice was feeble and shook slightly. His eyes stung me. They were dark and hazy. I felt like I was talking to a demon in my dad’s body.

“Dad,” I spoke again waiting for him to calm down. His foot jerked out. I leapt backwards but he still connected

knocking me down. The guys instantly tightened their grips.

“Dad,” I said as I picked myself back up. The tears swelled threatening to brim over. “Dad, stop. Listen,” I pleaded. He stilled as if recognition finally hit him.

“Lex?” he looked me straight on.

“Yeah,” I whispered. He convulsively swallowed, serum I guessed, while turning his head about. He was trying to control himself.

“He needs to feed,” I stated the obvious but my tone was heavily defensive and demanding. I quickly apologized. “Sorry. I just... he needs to feed.”

Kai took charge. “Come along Stew. Let’s get you a human.”

The men escorted my dad back to the house. Kalel let him take a human from the holding cell, much to my disapproval. I argued a bit from a morals perspective. I knew how hard it was to stop. And I knew he wouldn’t. But he needed to feed; he needed the nourishment. I finally surrendered and retreated to the living room. Kellan remained by my side.

“I knew it wasn’t going to be easy. I knew things could go this way. I guess inside I hoped they wouldn’t. Maybe I lied to myself and believed they wouldn’t. He’s been around us for so long I assumed it’d be different.” We were silent for a minute before I cracked. “I feel like I made a big mistake. That this is a big mistake. Before at least I had one parent even though he was human and weak. Now... now I have none...” I pulled my knees to my cheek and curled into a ball. Kellan wrapped me in his arms but remained quiet. He knew I needed an undisturbed moment to deal with my new reality.

“Come Leka,” Kai told me to follow him with a hand gesture. When I didn’t move from the couch or Kellan’s arms he said it like an order. “Come Leka.”

“I really should wait here for my dad,” I offered. I didn’t feel comfortable leaving in the event something happened.

“He’ll be fine. Rafi and Kalel are with him. Please come with me.” He extended his hand towards me. I ignored his hand but stood up to follow him; Kellan was right beside me.

“You stay here. I want a moment alone with Leka. Please.” The courtesy at the end was clearly an afterthought. Kellan looked at me searching for what I wanted.

“I’ll be fine. Just stay here in case my dad needs you,” I thought. Again he heard what I projected. He nodded and walked down towards the holding cell.

“Where are we going?” I asked as he led me through a side door. The only thing I knew to be down this corridor was the weapons room.

“The weapons room.”

“I’ll actually get to see it?” He looked at me sideways and smiled a crooked, goofy smile.

There were three doors back to back with code and key locks to get through followed by a final scanned access door. We walked into a closet sized room with a few weapons on the walls and along the floor.

“This isn’t it,” he said noticing my skepticism. He placed his hand on another scan pad. A quick beep sounded

and air tight pressure released. He pushed open the door and led me through.

“Wow. Now this is a weapons room...” I was awestruck. My jaw was hinged open in the perfect ‘O.’ The site was overwhelming and utterly breathtaking.

Think of the biggest warehouse you’ve ever seen and multiply it by ten. The ceilings were a good thirty feet high which baffled me since we hadn’t gone down any stairs. All around the walls in pool stick holder-type racks were swords of all shapes and sizes. There were floor to ceiling shelves full of boxes and barrels of who knows what. In the center was a large four-walled thick glass box, again floor to ceiling, with grenades. Four more lines behind the first with more tiny bombs of some sort. There was one row that spanned the entire warehouse of wine racks. Instead of wine though they held guns; a lot of rifles but many others I didn’t know by name too.

“Follow me. Don’t touch anything. We have trick boxes that will explode if touched,” he warned.

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

I tagged close behind him down the center row of shelves and crates. Midway, beside the glass enclosures he took a quick right. It was then that I saw for the first time a science lab. Three men in white lab coats busied themselves amongst the bubbling chemicals and massive computers with blue holographically imaged screens.

“Hello Mr. Kulani,” greeted a blonde haired tech. I had a hard time telling his origin. His features were exotic yet normal.

“Cut the crap. Is it ready?” Kai demanded. His chastise surprised me.

“Yes sir,” the man replied not thrown the slightest by Kai’s tone with him. “Do I get to meet the lady?” he asked as he searched for what Kai requested.

“Leka, this is Ralph, Gabi’s cousin. Ralph, Leka,” he sighed agitated into being cordial I suppose.

“Gabi, as in slightly tan, brunette and Spain Spanish Gabi upstairs?” I checked.

“Her mother was Russian. I’m her aunt’s child,” he explained as he handed a box to Kai. He extended his hand towards me and I shook it but couldn’t get over how different the two were.

“Where did the name come from? It doesn’t sound Russian...”

“It’s not. My birth name is Rachevik.”

“Raw-shay-vick? Okay, I sort of like Ralph better now...” Ralph was strange. He was informal yet formal. He was loose yet stiff. Something was off about him but I couldn’t put my finger on it...

“Come Leka, Ralph has work to do.”

“Yes, of course I do.” I heard an edge in his response. I made a mental note to drill Kai about him later.

“It was nice meeting you,” I waved awkwardly as Kai was already pulling me back towards the door. Ralph smiled and waved as we rounded back to the center aisle.

When we were back in the closet he set the case on the single wood table in the corner. It looked more like a café table since it was barely 2.5x2.5 and the top hit near my chest. He opened the box and lifted out two more, one small and one large.

“These are for you and you alone Leka. They will only work with you,” he said. He set down the large one and revealed the content in the small one. Inside was a silver necklace with a charm, a thick upside down cross with intricate carvings on it.

“It’s beautiful,” I gasped. He chuckled. “What?” I was confused by his reaction to my comment.

“It’s a necklace but it’s not meant to be a necklace.”

“Run that by me again.”

“It won’t work for me; remember it works only with you.”

“Okay?”

“Here. Put it on for now. I’ll show you after.” I turned and he gently put the necklace around my neck.

“Thanks.” I put my hand over it to make sure it was secure.

“Don’t!” I jumped back throwing my hands up, startled by his reaction.

“Sorry,” I shrugged. How was I supposed to know what I could and couldn’t do with it?

He moved on to the big box. The things he removed were surprisingly familiar; a gold dagger like his and a holder. The holder was on a belt about an inch in width.

“You can wear it like a belt, sling it over your shoulders like a purse or take off the holder and stick it in your pant pocket. That’s what I do. Whatever you choose, you have to guard it with your life because it’s really the only thing that can save yours.” He bent slightly and

buckled the belt around me and placed the dagger in its new home.

“I... ugh... This is too much. I don’t deserve this. I... I don’t even know how to use it...” I stuttered trying to compose myself.

“Kalel gave you money and I’m giving you these. They’re my way of saying thank you and you can’t refuse.”

“I don’t even know what to say. Everything is such a blur,” I shook my head, as if that would help. It didn’t.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he smiled at me; his whole face lit up. “Now let’s go try this necklace.”

We went outside through yet another side door. We took our time, which only gave me more time to think about other things. Every now and then I would think, okay, more like worry... or panic, about my dad. I knew all three men together could handle him, but I was still uneasy with the situation. Kai kept giving me side-glances confirming that, yet again, my thoughts weren’t private. He winked proving what I just thought. I scowled at him.

“Amusing,” he smirked.

“Annoying,” I shot back.

“We’ll go into the forest.” We walked in the way I came that first fateful trip. Kai snapped his fingers and the three monkeys who cornered me dropped out of the sky.

“Keep watch. Don’t ask questions,” he ordered. They nodded and dispersed.

“Okay, grab the top half of the charm and yank it off your neck.”

“Won’t it break?” His directions took me aback.

“No. Now grab and pull. Hold it away from you just in case the idiot didn’t program it right.” I obeyed. The cross flashed twice. “Okay, it’s ready. Put the end up to that smaller tree there.” I was hesitant at his instructions, unsure what to even expect, but I trusted him.

I pressed the end of the tree trunk. I froze when the tree was suddenly electrocuted, lit up with sparks flying everywhere. It finally surrendered to the shock and snapped sideways to the ground. All the leaves were now brown and smelled burnt.

“Great. Now hold the necklace by the chain and swing it in a circle, front to back, at your side.”

I carefully whipped it around as he instructed. Tiny laser rays shot out the exposed tip of the charm lasering the trees in its range. They were marked with tiny black spots where it hit. My eyes barely kept up with their speed of attack.

“Wow.” I was stunned by the performance.

“We’re not done. Put your ring and middle finger under the T portion and grip the end that just shot to your palm securely.”

“It’s not going to hurt me, is it?”

“Not if it’s programmed perfectly.”

“Ugh. Shoot Ralph for me if it’s not...” Luckily it was.

“Good, now jab the long end, chain and all into a tree.” I stabbed the tree closest to me. The sound was of a quickly eroding acid as the necklace sunk right into the wood. I pulled back to reveal a hole the size of my weapon. I realized in that moment just how powerful a weapon I was working with.

“Very powerful,” he commented from my thoughts.

“I’m going to start calling you Snoopy,” I frowned.

“How original,” he replied, full of sarcasm and arrogance.

“Yeah, yeah. What else can this baby do?”

“Unhook it and choke the tree,” he advised. He paced forward a bit. The chain sliced the trunk like butter. It creaked and rebelled before toppling forward. Kai’s move put him inches out of danger.

He showed me several more defenses with my new tool. We tried the dagger as well which Kai had Ralph again program to work only for me. It was more of a precaution than a necessity but he was insistent on “It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

He trained me on a few karate style moves but didn’t overdo it. He said the weapons were far more effective than any fight style I mastered. That didn’t stop him from having Connor mock attack me multiple times from different angles and approaches. All in all it was useful but I was anxious to return to my dad. I had tried to call Kellan but he didn’t answer. I took that as a good sign, it meant he was too busy watching him to take my call or get distracted.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

I burst into the house seeking my dad immediately but ran into Kellan first.

“Where is he? How is he doing?” I rattled off the questions back to back.

“We need to talk,” his voice was low, controlled yet there was so much emotion behind it.

“We can, right after I check on my dad.” I brushed past him but he restrained me.

“Let her go!” Kai was in Kellan’s face, dagger in hand. The two guards Auggy left, twins named Ramon and Ramos, got in on the action as well.

“Just stop guys. Don’t punch your egos over me right now. Kellan, please let me go.”

“No,” he answered with a definitive tone. He softened knowing brute would only worsen the situation. “Lexi, please don’t go in there.”

I slowly moved to look into his eyes; there was visible pain in them. That made me only want to see him more. What happened? What did he do or what did they do to him?

I withdrew my arm from his clutch and took off. I projected the thought, “I need to see this; I need to see him.”

The holding cell wasn’t what I expected at all. It was like an underground camp. I walked into a large room with a sectional, huge flat screen and game systems galore. There was a kitchen and dining table to my right but it was

all one big room. I walked over to a door with no windows on it. The entire setup reminded me of an office with the white walls and ugly carpet. I expected a pirate dungeon so I guess this was better.

There was silence all around me; it was eerie. Strange because I usually loved quiet time since it's rare.

I heard them all approach. I didn't turn, only asked, "Where is he?" My nerves were bouncing but I managed to sound calm. A hand touched my shoulder.

"You don't want to go in there." It was Kalel.

I shrugged him off and clicked open the door. I immediately gasped in drowning regret. I locked eyes with my tattered clothes father. There was no recognition in his glare. It's like he was physically there but had lost all his human memories. Pulling back I noticed his blood stained clothes.

I zoned out and studied the room's disarray. Pillows and blankets were scattered, bits of material previously attached to shirts and pants covered the floor. The floor led my eyes over the total of twenty-three drained bodies and body parts. I scanned up the blood-splattered walls and dead-ended on a vomit worthy decapitated head dangling from the ceiling fan. Moments later I noticed the Mohawk entwined in the rim.

"Dad?" I called. He hissed in a protective stance over the body collapsed in his lap.

"What's wrong with him?" I choked to everyone behind me. I was frozen in a dumbstruck observation.

"We don't know," Kellan replied.

"We called Dr. H," Kalel offered.

“What happened? He... he was okay. He...” I was fighting to hold back tears at this point. Not him, not my dad too.

“Let’s see what the doctor says.” Kai spoke for the first time. My dad bared his blood dripping teeth and continued to hiss, borderline growl, in our direction. I hated to say it but they were right. “I... you were right. I shouldn’t have come in here,” my words were barely above a whisper. The tears officially broke the dam my eyelids provided.

“Come Leka,” Kalel gently eased me away from the massacre. I swallowed the serum rising.

I felt like I was losing control. All I could do was repeatedly ask, “What happened to him?” My new family stuck to me like glue, but it didn’t erase the gaping hole I now wore in place of my old, familiar one.

“Alexa, dear,” a familiar voice called. I looked around trying to discern where I was.

“It’s okay, babe. You fell asleep,” Kellan hugged me letting me know I was safe. I finally focused and saw Dr. H standing in front of the fireplace.

“Dad!” Reality hit me like a ton of bricks.

“Are you up for a chat?” he asked setting his ancient medicine bag on the coffee table. I sat up straight.

“What happened to him?” I asked the same question I’d been seeking an answer to all along.

“It’s a rare occurrence. It happens in one out of five thousand transformations.” He paused, clasping his hands behind his back. “I’m afraid there’s no cure, nothing we can do.”

“What happened to him?” I pressed as Kai, Kalel, Gabi and Rafi joined us. I tentatively looked at each of them, urging someone, anyone to answer my question.

“It’s called Black Brain Syndrome. In essence, your father’s body is here but in lame man’s terms, he’s brain dead.” Everyone was watching me closely, waiting for me to lose control.

“But I asked him how he felt when he first woke up and he said he felt great... How... I mean... What happened to him?” I insisted my question be answered.

“It’s not guaranteed that a human will live through the transformation; it shocks their body. My theory is your father’s body was already in shock with your mother’s passing and the jolt of being bitten was simply too much for his system to handle without the loss of some vital function,” he explained. He was monotone and spoke evenly.

“What happens now?” I whispered the question afraid of what was coming...

“He cannot be permitted to roam. He is comparable to a handicapped child with a lethal weapon. His comprehension no longer exists.” He stopped and eyed me as all the others had. He was leery too, probably waiting for me to hyperventilate already before continuing. “You could keep him alive, but he’d forever have to be under high security surveillance. And you would be responsible for bringing food to him. Or, and this would be my suggestion, you put him to sleep.”

“You mean kill him...as in murder my own father?” My voice was louder than I meant to project but the recommendation was capital punishment; it scared me.

“Alexa, I know it’s hard but you must distance yourself. That vampire is no longer your father; he is merely a savage beast.” I retracted into a ball at his words.

“Cool it doc,” Kellan ordered in my defense.

“Alexa, your father is a risk to us and a massive risk to humans. He drained twenty-three bodies in a short time. Even the oldest of vamps would have stopped at five, which is a gluttonous number. Another aspect you must account for is the vamp army. Regardless of where you stand with them, the High Authorities will not tolerate such a threat to our existence.”

As hard as it was to accept, I knew he was right. Both of my parents were gone. POOF! Just like that. I never thought of becoming a vamp as a bad thing; I never associated any sort of risks with it. Furthermore, these things just aren’t supposed to happen.

“I still see him as my father regardless of the connection.” My voice was low, contemplative. I honed in on Kellan; stared directly into his eyes.

“It has to be done. He can’t be a burden.”

I shook my head and eyed Kellan closely. “Did you say something?” I checked to ensure I wasn’t losing it.

“Poor girl thinks she’s losing it. What she has lost is both parents in three days. She needs support and love.”

“Holy canola! I hear you...” My eyes were wide and full of comprehension. His brows furrowed in confusion.

“My thoughts?” he asked; he seemed unsure of the situation. He was actually looking at me with pity.

“Can you hear this now? I love you,” he thought.

“Can you hear this now? I love you,” I repeated. We got lost in each other, lost in the new discovery of telepathic communication.

“Ah. It seems more of Dr. Zhan’s revelation is accurate. He will be pleased to hear the news. But, alas, I must break up the moment. I need your answer Alexa. What have you decided about your father?” Dr. H was all business.

The dread resurfaced. I allowed my emotions to go numb again in fear of losing control. It happened so fast. Four days ago I had two wonderful parents loving and doting on me. Now... Now I had one parent who had been turned into a ravenous beast who didn’t recognize the daughter he raised and loved for sixteen years...

“You know what needs to be done and I’ll be here to help you do it,” Kellan offered through his thoughts.

I swallowed the serum at the base of my throat. My hands were fidgeting nervously. I needed more answers to decide.

“Is there any chance he could snap out of it and be normal again?”

“No,” Dr. H’s answer was final in tone.

“Can he be tamed?”

“I’ve never seen it,” he replied. I sighed finally realizing that this was it. There was no loophole; no hope left. I glanced once more at the silent souls surrounding me. Their expressions were all a cross between sorrow, pity, and much to my dismay, relief. I guess they knew they’d have to help me with him all while trying to ward off assassins; assassins who I now wanted to hunt hard.

I pulled away from Kellan. I gathered myself and stood in front of Dr. H trying to hold back the angry tears stinging my eyes. I never thought the tears would sting being vamp now, but they did this time. I lifted my head, chin held high as my mother used to tell me when I was a child crying my little eyes out over a mean comment from an equally mean child.

“Are there any painless options?” My voice cracked but I remained together.

“Yes, but it is very expensive,” he sighed sounding almost impatient and annoyed. He reminded me of the snobby sales clerks who snubbed someone because they looked lower in status than their store catered to.

“How much?” I pressed strong-willed and defiant over his manner. This was the first time Dr. H had ever been rude in any way.

“Whatever the cost we’ll pay it. You don’t have to be a prude to the poor girl. She just lost her parents for Christ’s sake. Where the hell are your bedside manners, doc?” Kalel came boldly to my defense. I accepted in front of the doctor, but made a mental note to pay him back whatever the bill was for. Turning slightly, out the corner of my eye, I noticed Kellan was fuming, his hands balled into fists.

“My apologies Alexa. I was very fond of your parents and I know this is a difficult time for you. I will take care of your father and be on my way. Please accept my condolences.” He bowed gracefully to me, as in the olden days, before collecting his bag and heading towards the holding cell. Panic set in.

“Wait, now? He’s doing it now?” I began to hyperventilate despite not needing the air. My mind was racing, trying to piece together what was happening. Fresh

tears covered my face prompting Kellan to quickly console me.

“I... I... I’m not ready to be an orphan,” I thought aloud. I shook as the sobs threatened to bellow from me. I felt the lump in my throat as I tried to swallow my emotions. He pressed my head to his chest and tried his best to sooth inconsolable me.

I heard commotion around me but blocked it out unable to focus on anything but the fact that they’re gone... they’re both gone.

“Take her to my room,” I heard Kai whisper to Kellan. I felt myself being lifted into his arms and carried away... away from my freshly killed father.

Flashes of memories flipped in my mind. My dad teaching me how to ride a bike when I was five; it was my first memory in South Carolina. Our first family camping trip where he went overboard on everything from fishing poles to a deluxe tent and portable grill came next. Family vacations, a trip to Disney, they all drew to the forefront of my thoughts. He taught me to play baseball and soccer, traveled on field trips with me, as that was one thing my mother never did though I understand why now. The most precious to me was our Daddy-daughter date day. Twice a month from age five until twelve - of course I hit that awkward rebellious stage then - we would go wherever I wanted to go. No matter where we ended up those days, it was a ritual for us to stop for ice cream on our way home.

All of these memories are gone with him. I’ll never be able to play soccer with him or have another heart to heart. He’ll no longer be there to educate me on his newest electronic gadget I have no plans on ever touching. Beyond that, he’ll never see me accomplish my dreams, have

children or, the hardest to think of, get married. He won't be there to walk me down the aisle.

They all took turns supporting me over the next day. I didn't stir. I lay motionless, empty on Kai's bed, curled in a ball. I lost all sense of time in my dark retreat.

Kellan's parents, Beth and Al, Mel, Craig, Aunt Claire and the most surprising, Laurence, stopped by to check in on me and keep me company for a short while. They all attempted small talk, comfort, but I never responded beyond a nod of my head. I felt I couldn't. I felt like I was in a coma; I was able to hear them, feel their hands and small pecks on my cheeks and forehead, but I couldn't reply to their questions of how I felt. I couldn't form words or focus on anything aside from the window that they lifted the shades on slightly after a while so I could tell how much time was passing, if I comprehended it they had muttered.

I comprehended. After a day and a half of solid sulking, I forced myself out of bed. I couldn't return home though. It was too difficult. So I drifted amongst the homes of my supporters, my new family. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have made myself face the world again. Regardless, I was a walking zombie. I couldn't shake the emotional weight of it all. I couldn't concentrate at school; I couldn't even bring myself to feed. I had no desire to even try, which was depression, ugly at its worst. I was beginning to feel weak, my muscles sort of rubbery. My throat was on fire and the serum burned like acid, but I didn't eat. Apparently I looked pale too per Mel's offer.

"Lex, I'm really worried about you. I know this is hard, but you can't walk around dormant forever. You have tons of people who want to help you, but first you have to help yourself. You haven't showered, haven't brushed your teeth or taken care of yourself hygienically, but most important

you haven't eaten... or drank. Whatever you people call it. You look pale as a ghost and just, well, awful. I would feel a lot better if you just fed. I'll even let you drink from me... Just, please?" She flung her wrist to my lips prompting, tempting me to bite her... but I didn't. I couldn't. I appreciated her gesture though.

"I'll be fine. Thanks for the concern though," I replied dismissively.

I shuffled through my day to day robotically, but never truly lived it. Even when I stayed with the Bladangs, with all their robust family charm, I wasn't able to enjoy it, to drop my guard and allow myself to enjoy life again. I was afraid to enjoy any one or any thing; afraid it would be ripped from me should I do so.

"You have no thoughts Leka," Kai announced to me. "You are empty. It's... it's not healthy..." he stumbled. "Don't make us bury you too." He stared right into my eyes as he spoke the last line.

That was my wake-up call. Kai had punched through my walls, my emotional barriers erected over the past few weeks, and finally gotten through to me. What was wrong with me? I didn't want to be buried alongside my parents. Despite the fact that they were gone, I wanted to live; I just found it very difficult to live without them.

"Thanks," I said as I leaned over on the couch and squeezed him tightly. I heard his sigh of relief.

"You don't know how great it was just now to see the sparkle return to your eyes," he smiled.

"Yes Leka, you need to take care of yourself," Kaleb gently stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. He was sitting on the other side of me. "You haven't slept well, if at

all, haven't fed. You look ghastly, still in a beautiful way though," he quickly amended.

Somehow his words struck a cord inside me. They were all dealing with my parents' deaths too. Instead of coping together, helping each other, I was adding another element of stress. They were being forced by my selfishness to deal with the deaths, memorial arrangements, wills, other arrangements and finally... me. I lifted my eyes to peer at Kalel's worry lines. He obviously heard my thoughts as Kellan wasn't near and was at attention.

"Leka, you were closer to your parents than any of us. You lost far more than we did," he smiled with forgiveness. I nodded my head in acknowledgement. I made my first expressive movement in I don't know how long and lost it. That was what I'd been fighting. I was tired of crumpling into a ball of emotions drowning in salty waters or on occasion blood.

He gently cupped my face in his hands. He spoke softly. "It's okay, Leka. We don't expect you to handle the world and your parents at once. Kai was worse than you after our father's murder and you have twice the grief. No one's rushing you; no one's judging you. We'll all be here when you're ready to lean on us." He kissed the tip of my nose, which felt red, and wiped away my tears. My throat was burning, had been flooded for a long time with my fuel. I silently cried attempting to swallow the ache that will never fill the new hole inside my core.

"You need to feed," he urged.

I nodded, knowing what I needed; I felt weak. My body felt deprived.

Before I could change my mind, I had a drink in my hand, uncapped and ready for consumption. I didn't even know who had handed it to me. Suddenly, an entire tray of uncapped bottles was in front of me on the coffee table and Gabi stood beside them. Concern was written all over her face.

"Are you okay? We've been so worried about you," she was hesitant, torn between waiting versus bombarding me I'm sure. I nodded.

They all stood around watching me like a hawk. I couldn't tell if they thought I was going to faint, cry again or run away.

"Drink now," Kaleb ordered.

I raised the bottle to my lips and took a quick sip. Just a few drops encouraged me to keep going. Before I knew it, I chugged the entire bottle and grabbed another. The fire that scorched my throat was finally being put out. The chill of the blood actually helped. Within two minutes I had downed all ten bottles of blood, yet was ready for more.

"You need more. Ten bottles is equivalent to about four pints. You need at least four more," Rafi stated. Taking the hint, Gabi was back in a couple seconds with another round. I looked around nervously at everyone. Their concern was endearing, but their hovering nerve wrecking. Reluctantly, I drank the final four without reserve.

I felt better after I ate. Drowning yourself in misery and further torturing yourself via starvation is not the quickest route to recovery. Logic spoke that to me every day, but I couldn't force myself to listen before. I didn't care enough to listen before. Now I did though. Now it made sense.

"Thanks," I smiled. That lit up the room.

Later in the week, Kellan, Aunt Claire and I had a meeting with my parents' lawyer. Everything had been left to me: the house, their cars, bank accounts, investments and several vacation homes throughout the world I wasn't even aware of. Aunt Claire had been wonderful throughout all of this. Despite mourning the loss of her sister and a man she loved like her own brother she remained intact and solid. She was strong and reminded me of my mother more than ever with that strength.

"My aunt is finalizing some documents with the lawyer to transfer all the titles and accounts into my name for me," I announced as I plopped down on the chaise next to Kellan. Craig, Kai and Kalel lounged on the couch while Gabi and Rafi shared the other chaise.

"My parents are keeping an eye on, well now your house. Laurence actually assigned my dad to it after his visit with you," Kellan said, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me close to him.

"Mel, I totally love her by the way, is coming by later tonight. She has been texting me non-stop. We're planning a girl's weekend for sure when you're up to it," Gabi smiled.

Speaking of weekend and trips... I wondered if the one Kai booked had passed already. I never knew when he had scheduled it for, yet he hadn't spent any time away from the house that I knew of either. "When is the trip to Hawaii Kai?"

"It's passed already. It was booked for the first week in December." He tried to appear nonchalant, but I could tell he was disappointed.

Kellan cocked his head sideways waiting for my reaction. I bit my lip. Almost an entire month I'd wasted. A

month of these people's lives was wasted worrying and watching me day and night. I felt wretched, horrible. I felt guilty. It just confirmed my earlier theory on my selfishness. Since when did I become so self-centered? I wasn't like this before. I always tried to put others first and respected their feelings, yet lately I'd done anything but. I took this to an unnecessary extreme.

"You're not a horrible person babe. You're trying to cope with a huge loss. Stop feeling so bad about us. We chose to worry about you. You didn't force anyone," his words were strong. He sounded like he was going to drill them into me regardless of how hard I bucked. "Do you understand me?" he firmly requested my acknowledgement. I nodded. I knew I needed a tight grip to understand the circumstances. I wasn't at my best; these people recognized that, especially Kellan.

Kellan stood and started pacing. I reached up and touched my hair. I pulled a few strands out as far as they would go and looked at them. They felt dirty. I felt gross and ready for a shower.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

I realized I hadn't been home since that day. I didn't even know if I was ready to go home, but I wanted to. I wanted my shower, my own bed, and all the familiarities of home.

I knew they wouldn't let me go alone so I looked over at Kellan for approval. I have no parents but I do have a lot of over protective friends.

"She wants to go home," Kellan relayed to everyone. They all passed looks amongst themselves having silent conversations. Gabi shrugged her shoulders and Kai seemed angry over the idea.

"Only if you take Ramon, Ramos and Kellan," Kalel stipulated. I agreed with a swift nod. "Good. Drink and we'll gather your things and redirect everyone." He gave a reassuring smile and left the room. I heard him shuffling about upstairs but ignored it. I drank several bottles of blood in complete quiet. Everyone around me was still but the atmosphere was tense. Kalel returned with two bags and a file of papers.

"I'll take those," Kellan offered extending his hands towards the items in Kalel's arms.

"Sure." He passed it all to him. Kellan came over to me, kissed my forehead and announced via thought that he'd be right back.

"Are you going to be ok? I feel like I should be doing more for you," Gabi flung into a verbal ramble of questions and statements like this back to back not giving me time to answer if I wanted to. I went to her and wrapped my arms

around her. She hugged me tight finally getting the hint to shut up.

I didn't speak a word but went around to each of them with a hug; Kai and Kalel I added a kiss on the cheek to.

"Keep your necklace on and call us if you need anything," Kalel said patting my back. I again nodded and offered him a reassuring smile. I needed to do this.

Kellan took my hand, waved bye to everyone and led me to the underground garage. He didn't rush me. We walked as humans, slow and steady. He watched me cautiously the entire way. From time to time our eyes connected prompting a small grin from me. He'd done so much for me, sacrificed so much for me despite how awful I continued to be. His eyes narrowed harshly.

"Sorry. I forgot," I thought, not ready to talk yet.

"Love isn't based on merit babe. I'll be here for you, always loving you even if you tried to burn me at the stake."

"That's a bit harsh, but point made." He snickered victoriously. I let it slide too tuckered to be a hard head.

He walked right up to my repaired and barely recognizable car. Kellan or Craig had chauffeured me between houses and school the last few weeks so seeing my transformed car was shocking. I only knew it was mine because of the license plate, but my coupe had been altered to the extreme. Seeing my eyes pop at my Mercedes, Kellan quickly explained.

"We all agreed you needed better protection to prevent a repeat attack. Your doors only open with your hand, mine, Kai or Kalel's; it's been programmed. You have bullet and bomb proof windows. The aftermarket body kit

has built in rockets if you need to get away quicker and launch darts to deflate the tires of anyone chasing you. Your side mirrors have tiny pellets that will shoot out at the push of a button on your steering wheel. There's a satellite tracker so we can find you if you're being chased and they added a second fuel tank so you won't run out of gas if you are too."

Inside he showed me all the coordinating buttons and shield launches. They even installed an ultra-expensive mirror deflector that basically allows me to drive invisible to others. Vamps will see the wind whipping by and know but it would be difficult to keep up with me. They added a raised "exhaust" notch on the trunk and hood that fires laser flashes, which is what he called them. They were laser bullets though.

It was all so over the top. I was appreciative but truthfully didn't like it. It reminded me of how much my life had changed. My car now reflected that distinct difference. It went from speed racer fun and fancy free to white Batmobile, stylish but dangerous.

Kellan of course heard my thoughts on it and stopped showing it off immediately. He heard all of mine now, but his were only what he projected; unfair but I couldn't change it.

"I'm not sorry. I need you alive. And I'll work on projecting all my thoughts," he sulked. He started the car and pulled out. I saw the Hummer quickly follow. I assumed Ramos and Ramon were in it.

"Kellan lightly squeezed my thigh before finding my hand. He kissed the back of it sending a chill through me. Despite everything I couldn't help but smile. I'd lost a lot but at least I didn't lose him.

The emotional weight of returning home hit me when we pulled into the garage. Al's car was in the driveway but it was my parent's vehicles in the garage that triggered me.

I ran my hand along the hoods on my way to the door. I stopped short to collect myself... Maybe I wasn't as ready as I thought.

Luckily I caught the lingering scent of bleach, Lysol and soft scrub throughout. I noticed everything had been scrubbed top to bottom. They knew my nose never caught their scent, but perhaps it wasn't for my benefit.

"Your aunt couldn't take their scent. She cleaned it away." I shook my head as I stepped across the threshold.

Al was standing behind the island but he didn't say anything. It was a good thing since I was overwhelmed by the space. I tried to keep the memories and emotions at bay. I preferred to be numb as I walked the familiar halls.

I slowly observed every detail of my home the way I never had before. I saw the knick on the floorboard I hadn't noticed prior. I studied the intricate pattern of the imported sofa in the formal living room. I eyed the reflective coating on my mother's prized china displayed in the cabinet in the dining room. I even entered the never touched guest rooms upstairs. I wandered my house, peered in every room and picked through every inch except my parent's room. I froze in front of their closed door, my palm absently placed on the wooden panels. I lingered searching, trying to feel for energy in their room. I found myself wishing it all to have been a dream; I envisioned my mother opening the door at any minute... but she didn't.

Exhaustion caught up with me. My emotions and memories caught up with me. I pulled myself away with a sigh, a sigh that cracked my barely beating heart, and

retreated to my room. It too was pristine. Everything was spotless. It felt like they had been erased from every square inch. Erased from existence.

I stood under the showerhead detached from reality, staring into space, forcing myself to feel nothing. I went through the motions of washing my hair and body, shaving and rinsing. I dressed in my favorite Capri sweats and a tank. I didn't even bother brushing my dripping hair.

I opened the door and walked straight into Kellan. He appeared torn between jumping me and pacifying me. I knew him well enough to know he missed our physical connection. He'd been so patient with me never pushing for more in my weak state. He didn't even kiss my lips once.

"I wanted to so bad. I talked myself into believing it might shake you up," he admitted. "The hardest thing I've ever done is watch you suffer knowing I couldn't do any more," he choked the words. My heart clenched. I looked into his emerald eyes and saw them glistening before it happened. I witnessed Kellan cry. He tried to hold it in, look away and be discreet, but I didn't let him. I held his cheeks to the palms of my hands and diligently wiped each drop away. After a few minutes he collected himself and smiled softly revealing his adorable dimple. I traced the indentation it created with my fingers. He grabbed my explorative hand and kissed my palm.

"May I?" he asked properly running his pointer finger along my lips.

"Yes," I managed a small whisper. My voice sounded slightly hoarse after barely speaking the last few weeks.

He didn't hesitate. I barely had time to process his question before his lips were on mine. He was eager and aggressive in his touch yet sensual and patient. His hands

went everywhere excited by the sheer ability to caress me again. We instantly connected.

“You don’t know how much I missed this,” he thought as he moved us onto my bed. I didn’t reply. I let it hang; I let myself absorb the full meaning of his words with his touch.

I awoke hours later to night. I heard conversation downstairs. I separated the voices to Aunt Claire, Mel, and Al. Second later Craig’s distinct accent filled the air. I looked around my dark room searching for him; it’s not like Kellan to leave me. But alas, he did.

I sighed. I hopped up and sprung downstairs. Without Kellan, I’d have to talk. I scurried past the stunned group, opened the fridge and yanked out a water bottle. I turned around twisting off the cap as Mel apprehensively approached.

“How are you Lex?” Her voice was barely above a whisper. I gave her a thumbs up, but she didn’t buy it.

“Lex, you literally died for three weeks. You were dead to the world. You don’t just suddenly snap out of it perfectly fine and happy. I’m your best friend. Let me be that role. Let me help you.” She was between scolding and pleading as she spoke. I sighed, quickly moved past her to the sectional. She didn’t take it. She stormed over, officially on the angry, scolding end of the spectrum.

“Do you want to talk?” she huffed. I shook my head no, but looked down at the bottle in my hands as I did so. Maybe it was cowardly but I knew she would give me hell for my actions. Though fully deserved, I wasn’t ready to hear it.

There was silence for a moment before I heard the sniff. I looked up to see tears streaming down my friend’s

cheeks. I dropped my bottle and squeezed her into a bear tight hug.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you. I’ve just been so worried about you. You were the same after your gran died so it was expected but I still didn’t expect it,” she sniffled. I stayed quietly embracing her. “God, Lex, I ... I-” She tried to pull herself together. She took a deep breath as I released her. I wiped away a few strays. It seemed now that I was on the road to recovery everyone around me was on a downward spiral.

“I’m not mad at you. I don’t think a few weeks would be enough for me. I would be balling my eyes out in a corner somewhere still. You’re strong Lex. You just scare me. I was scared for you...” she stuttered through her ramble. I frowned. Should I still be mourning them? I was trying my best to move on. I didn’t want to talk because I wanted what happened to stay in the past. I couldn’t carry their deaths into my present. The best way to cope is not to think about it... for me anyways.

Mel was finally able to control her tears a few minutes later. I glanced at the kitchen clock, 12:42AM; late for a human who needs sleep.

“You need sleep. Girls day Saturday?” She nodded enthusiastically.

“Alright then love. I’m off to take my main love home. A chip, chip, chiparoo to you for being up and at ‘em’!” he smiled. He kissed my cheek and protectively led Mel to the door. Seeing the two of them, hand in hand, so happy had me beaming.

“*Sientate aqui, mi amor,*” Aunt Claire said patting the cushion beside where she now sat. I obliged. “Let’s find a

good movie." We caught the last part of the classic funny movie 'The Long, Long Trailer.' Even Al enjoyed it.

"I don't know anyone who doesn't love Lucille Ball," he chuckled.

When 1:30 rolled around and Kellan still wasn't back, I began to worry. A lump of fret built in my throat.

"Where'd Kellan go?" I croaked, the fear nearly surfacing by this point.

"I can't tell. I'm under strict orders not to. He said he'd be back by two. So don't worry yourself till 2:01AM," she instructed.

"I need some air." I got up and headed towards the door.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she objected rushing to the door.

"I'll take the twins." I knew that was my only shot at freedom. I needed it though. I needed space. I needed to feel the cold December air whipping through bare branches around me.

She contemplated for a minute.

"Where's your cell?"

"I don't know..." I hadn't thought about it. At least there's one positive to blocking out the world for weeks: you'll break all your technology addictions.

"Take the twins," she finally conceded.

"Thanks." I hugged her quickly. I threw on my tennies by the door and headed out.

"Ramos, Ramon," I called.

“Yes Miss Jackson?” They appeared out of nowhere.

“I want to walk. I have to take you with me,” I sulked, my lips a solid line of frustration. I hated that everyone doted on me. For once, I’d like to protect someone else.

I found myself walking slowly. I wanted to savor my time. And I have to give them props; it was like Ramos and Ramon weren’t even there. The good and bad was it gave me time to think about everything. Everything I wanted and didn’t want to think of was included. Unfortunately filtering doesn’t happen easily. It’s a strain to avoid a subject or memory. Like a restrictive diet, it’s hard to resist the untouchable yet easy to become obsessive over it.

I turned back around backtracking a few miles from home. I had just come around the bend when I saw him, the one I’d been trying to avoid for so long: Mike.

He was restrained and being held off the ground before I could blink. He didn’t struggle or fight, which meant he was either setting me up or he wanted something.

“What do you want Mike?” I was hesitant to move closer but cautious that my back wasn’t covered.

“I know who’s after you.” He was monotone, nonchalant yet cocky, very cocky. He had what I wanted and needed; he knew it.

“Put him down,” I sighed. They dropped him. Had he been human he never would have caught himself.

“Now again, what do you want?” He looked directly at me.

“What have I always wanted?” His voice filled with desire, his body tightened. I swallowed hard; my face froze

in a glare of denial. Me. He wanted me. I knew it, but didn't want to say it.

"I don't know Mike. Just get to your point," I huffed. Despite the temptation to kill him and rid my life of him once and for all, I held back. He knew what I needed to know at that point so he suddenly became valuable to me.

"You Lex. You. I've always wanted you." He spit the words in my direction angry to have to spell it out I guessed.

"I'm with Kellan." I was cold. I would never be with Mike. He had vengeful intentions. He would have successfully banged me up physically had I been human when he tried. I will never forget that. You don't abuse the ones you care about. You protect them as Kellan has me. You fight against those who attack your loved ones, not harm them yourself.

"I have everything he has now," he smirked.

"So."

"So if I killed him, would you consider my offer?"
Arrogant bastard.

I felt the serum surge into my mouth. I tasted the anger boiling from his words on my tongue. His words were what I'd needed though. How dare he threaten my little remaining family! How dare he prance around as if he has some hold over me! That's when it clicked. That's exactly what the assassins were doing. They roamed around nonchalantly while their actions, past and potential, weighed me down. They were controlling my life and me through this emotional reaction they sparked in me. No more. I couldn't allow others to have such a strong influence in my life. I couldn't allow them to impact every decision I made. I couldn't walk around on eggshells

forever, nor could I stand by silently waiting anymore. This was it. I had to take back control of my life. I had to run them all out of it.

My hands bound into tight fists of fury as I glanced at Mike in all his pitifulness. He took notice.

“Lighten up. I haven’t done it yet. Just weighing my options,” he winked. He had the audacity to wink!

Like the rage that consumed me with Keira, it controlled me in this moment. I lunged, full force lunged, at him. My spring was that of a mountain lion having observed his prey for hours, very calculated.

We rolled on the ground, a fight of equal strength. Before he or I could do any damage, he was yanked off of me. Ramon and Ramos cuffed his arms. I hopped up in one quick graceful move. I removed my necklace and went straight up to my victim. That’s right, he was the victim now, not me.

“Start talking,” I ordered.

“Never. You’ve pissed me off!” he replied through gritted teeth.

“Try again!”

“Fuck you!”

“Wrong choice!” I stabbed him with my necklace. The twins jumped back as Mike fell to the ground writhing in pain.

“What the hell?” he screamed when he was back on his feet.

“You ready to talk?”

“Sure,” he snickered. “Did you know the sky is blue, the grass is green and the sun yellow?”

“I’m trying to be nice but you’re just pissing me off!” I yelled as my breathing escalated.

“Welcome to the club,” he grinned.

“Grab him!” I demanded. They quickly responded.

“Whatcha gonna do? Taze me again?” He laughed a full, heartily mocking laugh.

“Say goodbye Mike,” I warned.

“Screw you!” With that I whipped my necklace around his neck and with one jerk sliced through. I looked away. I didn’t want to see. I didn’t think I could handle seeing death again so soon.

“Finally! That jerk annoyed me,” Ramon said.

“Dispose of him. I assume you both know how.”

“With pleasure. About time we got some action!” Ramos commented.

“I’m going home. Meet me there,” I announced as I replaced my necklace around my neck.

So he was gone now, as quick as that. No more threats, no more stalking; he’s officially out of my life for good. I hate violence though. I hated the way I had to ax him. I’m not an angry person. Contrary I am a mellow vamp compared to my counterparts. Yet he brought out the worst in me. I don’t know if it’s good or bad, but I never would have killed him had he not threatened Kellan. I had been reset mentally. I have very little family left, and I’ll be damned if anyone harms them.

I was still very upset when I walked through the door. It wasn't my mood that gave me away though.

"Where are the twins?" Al asked, searching behind me for them.

"Doing what I told them." I sat on the sectional and flipped the TV channel.

"Why are you covered in dirt?" Kellan pressed eyeing me suspiciously. I didn't think about it; I knew I couldn't around him. I looked down at my brown smeared clothes and shrugged.

"Alexa Lorryne Jackson, you tell us what happened this instant!" Aunt Claire ordered. I raised my eyebrows in shock and disapproval. "Too motherly?" she checked.

"Uh, yeah." I couldn't help but grin at her attempt.

"Oh, sorry." She was calm and humble. I had a feeling she was confused about what role to play in my life now.

"It's okay. I'm going to rinse off and change. Both R's should be back soon. Hound them. After I'm heading out." I kissed her cheek and went to my room.

—

Chapter Twenty-Six

“I don’t know whether to be mad at you, proud of you or scared of you. You have to control your temper babe. That’s the second vamp you’ve killed when they push your hot button,” Kellan said the moment I walked out of the bathroom.

“They both threatened more than just me. They were criminals who refused to reform despite the opportunity to. I couldn’t let them continue to roam rampantly destroying and threatening the lives of others,” I clarified. “It doesn’t matter. I’m pissed. The same people who killed my mother are roaming free. I’m done being hunted. I’m tired of always having to look behind me. I’m ready to hunt these snakes that have poisoned my life. No more nice girl. They’ve woken the beast within and now everyone will need to vamp themselves for war.”

“Lexi, they’re trained. They’re skilled, very good at what they do. Regular vamps can’t compete. That’s why they’re paid so much,” he objected.

“So because I’m not an expertly trained killer, I’m supposed to wait around on pins and needles for them to find me? I’m supposed to torture myself day and night waiting knowing whether they seek me or I seek them I might die? Sorry, babe, but I can’t do that. I’d rather do something than nothing.” I scurried past him. Killing Mike just now had awoken the fighter within me. He’d pushed the buttons that needed to be pushed. These last few weeks, I accepted defeat. I allowed the assassins to rule my life rather than using them as fuel to fight for my life.

“Lexi! Babe! Wait!” He chased me. I abruptly stopped in the family room.

“I assume you all heard our conversation.” I received four doe-eyed, innocent, non-confrontational stares. “I’m going to see the Bladangs. They can train me. Tell Auggy what I’m up to so I don’t get heat later.”

Without one word or objection I left. Waiting for the garage to open, Kellan jumping in the passenger’s seat. I paid him no attention. I was on a mission he openly was against... again. Everything happens for a reason; I’m a firm believer in that line.

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” he said as I drove out of my neighborhood.

“About what?”

“It’s better to do something than nothing. I just... it’s just...” He pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes closed, visibly flustered. “I worry about you. That’s all.” We sighed together.

“I know. But I am a vampeen you know; I’m not a weak human anymore. Plus, I can’t risk losing you the way I did my parents. I know I’ve been a horrible girlfriend this past month. I’ve been inattentive, despondent and just plain cold at times. I’ve drowned my emotions and just shut down the accessible part of me and I’m so sorry for that. But I know the only way I can prevent that girl from ever appearing again, I have to get rid of the threats. I have to do whatever it takes to ensure that no one else is at risk simply for having some sort of connection to me.” I reached over and took his hand. I couldn’t stay mad at him for long. I’m too in love with him. The part that hurts us is we’re both stubborn and hot headed. We’ve learned to compromise along the way, but that doesn’t eliminate the characteristics. We’re lucky that we built a solid foundation throughout my transformation. Had we not created that

stability of love and trust, we wouldn't still be together, especially given all I did and questioned with Kai.

"Very analytical," he stated with a chuckle.

"Ugh! Stay out of my head!" I went from three to five and now six people can read my thoughts. Unbelievably irritating! I can't read not one of theirs.

"Sorry baby," he kissed my hand that was wrapped in his.

"Uh huh. I doubt that." He kept smiling, unfazed by my doubt.

Kalel answered the door. I didn't want to barge in despite having a key.

"Teach me. I need you to teach me to fight them," I blurted before I was officially through the door.

"Is she serious?" he asked Kellan. They shared a few looks.

"Um, hello? I can speak for myself. And yes I'm serious." I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a drink. B Positive had quickly been becoming my drink of choice. Kai was right about time and taste.

Back in the living room a rumble had erupted. Kai and Gabi had joined and they all seemed to be in a heated discussion verging argument over my choice.

"I think it's great. We need to show these *pendejos* that we won't go down without a fight. And even if we lose; they will lose something," Gabi fired at the men.

"I agree. Leka shouldn't sit idle. We should fight with her. They are after one of our own, not a stranger," Kai added.

“Think about it. What vamp has ever hunted their assassin? Well, assassins in my case. We could gain the element of surprise. That’s got to be better than waiting for a hit,” I jumped in. By now the sides were obvious. It was Gabi, Kai and I against Kellan, Kalel and, the last to join, Rafi.

“It’s too dangerous. They could catch on and lead us straight into a trap. We don’t know how many are working together,” Rafi argued.

“I agree. It would lead us off our home turf into the unknown. We would be fighting blind,” Kalel continued.

“Not necessarily. They’re watching me. They’re already on our land. We just have to make sure to fight them here,” I offered. I chugged the remainder of my blood and set the empty bottle on the coffee table. I’m proud to say that most vamps recycle, partially because we will get to see what the items are remade into.

“Are you adamant?” Kellan asked shifting to look at me directly.

“Yes. I really want this done and over with.” I was half pleading, half stating my answer. I hate the whole cat and mouse chase thing; I didn’t even like Tom & Jerry growing up. (I’m indifferent now.)

“You are such a stubborn, impulsive girl but I adore your gumption.” Kellan projected the thought into my mind. I stopped fidgeting and smiled up at him. Everyone had quit chatting to stare at us.

“What?” I snapped. Kai cut his eyes at me. He wasn’t happy with my choice of man, but he cared about me too much to abandon me. That’s what he said to me on one visit during my dark days, as I’m now referring to them as.

“Clearly it’s four against two now. Kellan, do you know how to fight vamp style?” Kalel took charge.

“Of course.”

“Fine. Let’s divide and conquer. Rafi pull the area maps. Kai, you and Leka collect the weapons. Gabi, meet with the officers and high circles. We will need back up everywhere. Show them a picture of Leka and Kellan so there are no mishaps. Kellan, come with me so we can get clothes and gear.” We all dispersed according to Kalel’s orders.

“Before we go in there, I have to know. What is up with Ralph? There is something very off with him...” I figured now was as good a time as any to get the four-one-one.

“So I’m not the only one who thinks he’s a slimy bastard?” he checked.

“Nope. I get a very weird vibe from him...”

“I don’t trust him. We’ve had words before. I’m the only one who has a problem with him though. The others think he’s great. I’ll admit the man’s brilliant which is why I put up with him, but I question his loyalty.” It clearly was an issue that sat in his mind regularly; and it didn’t sit well from the sounds of it.

“Come along. Erase your thoughts. He has a few psychic powers,” Kai warned before we entered the warehouse. We gathered what felt like a little of everything. Ralph approached us of course.

“Why hello again Leka,” he greeted. A chill ran through me.

“Hi Ralph,” I waved lopsided since Kai was loading me up.

“To what do I owe the great pleasure of seeing you again?” He was smiling. It was a bit creepy. It’s like the movies where you know he’s the crooked guy in the good bunch but can’t prove it yet. I quickly shut down my mind to protect my mental notes.

“Just picking up some stock.” I nodded towards the pile in my arms.

“Quite a load. You planning to start a World War? Attack the Middle East? Because I’ll fight the front line with you,” he winked. Very creepy. He officially sucked at flirting.

“No. Just practicing. Kai’s planning to expand my vampire horizons via exploitation of powerful weapons,” I smirked, catching a glance at a hidden faced yet visibly amused Kai.

“Be careful. This one is a bit of a klutz sometimes,” he said smacking Kai’s shoulder with a loud slap. Ralph was grinning, but his tone was hard. You couldn’t cut the tension with my gold dagger. He was trying to make Kai look bad.

“I’m always careful,” Kai bit out. I remained composed.

“Not according to the tears I’ve seen you cry. Nonetheless the necklace has a built in shield for you that should come in handy.”

“I didn’t know it had a shield. How do I use it?” I tried to peer down at my new charm.

“May I?” he pointed to my neck.

“Sure.” I leaned my head back a bit to separate the necklace from the weapons I held. He lifted it over my head

and positioned it in front of him.

“You push inwards on these two short arms with your palms. If you did it right you’ll hear a tiny ping,” he explained.

“How big is the shield?”

“It’ll cover all of you but only if you’re wearing the necklace. It doesn’t work if it’s off.” He wrapped it back around and fastened it.

“Thanks.”

“We need to go,” Kai cut in.

“Nice seeing you again Leka,” Ralph waved.

“You too,” I replied quickly following the rapidly exiting Kai.

Everyone had already returned to the living room.

“You really made her carry everything?” Kellan growled at Kai.

“She’s vamp. She can handle it,” he teasingly punched my arm. Kellan narrowed his eyes at Kai; he was ready to attack.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about it. Let’s fight the enemy not each other,” I jumped in before things got worse.

“Give me those.” Rafi took the pile of weapons from my arms little by little to ensure he didn’t set anything off. It wasn’t until my hands were free and view unobstructed that I saw everyone’s coordinated outfits.

“Holy mother of muscles!” I exclaimed. They all wore camouflage cargo pants with black wife-beater tanks. Rafi, Kalel and Kellan’s bare arms were enough to make me

melt. It was a symbol of the strength that surrounded me. I walked over to Kellan and squeezed his bulging bicep. I didn't recall them being so big.

"Thanks babe," he smiled widely showcasing his signature dimple on his left cheek. He kissed me on the lips, a quick display of affection.

"Change. You and me have the same outfit. It's cute, right?" Gabi asked turning from side to side to model. She had on camouflage cargo capris that gathered tight just below her knees, a black tank layered below a hunter green tank and I finally noticed that everyone was wearing the same all black DC brand skater shoes.

A bag was tossed my way. I caught it and ran to the library to change. The capris felt tight over my butt; at first I didn't even think they'd fit, but they did... barely. They made me feel fat for the first time in a while. Thank God I wasn't out to impress anyone.

"I'm sure you look great." I nearly jumped out of my skin startled by Kellan's words in my head. I momentarily forgot he heard everything I thought. I sighed, threw on the no show black socks and shoes and made a mental note to book a pedicure for Saturday with Mel, if I lived to see Saturday that was.

I returned to everyone wearing a black vest with tons of pockets and slots that were clearly filled with weapons. Kai, dressed in the same outfit as everyone else now tossed me a vest. I put it on and waited for instructions.

"Come here and I'll load you up," he said laying out an array of mismatched leftovers. I walked past Kellan elbowing him along the way.

"That's for scaring me," I thought.

“It was worth it for this view. If we didn’t have an audience I would be all over you,” he projected. I spun around, glared for a minute to get my point across. What point I wasn’t sure, but I got a point across.

I was suddenly jerked backwards. Kneejerk reactions: I elbowed him and kicked his left foot from under him simultaneously all while facing away from him. The force of my elbow knocked him back and the push of my kick to his foot ensured he’d fall back. I swung around the moment I caught myself. He was pissed.

I extended my hand to Kai. He ignored it mumbling about impatience, arrogance, stupidity and a bit more I chose to not listen to. I heard the cackles of laughter behind me as Kai jumped up scowling.

“I’m really sorry. I just reacted...” I shrugged apologetically.

“Yeah well, I guess you don’t need a training course on self defense,” he said bitterly. He started flipping open pockets and filling them with an assortment of defense mechanisms. “Where’s your dagger?” he asked. I pulled it out of my pocket and handed it to him. He stuffed it in a side slot.

“Are you going to tell me what all these things do?” He looked up annoyed at me. “Just asking.” I held my hands up in mock surrender.

“Lighten up Kai and stop roughing up the girl,” Kaleb scolded. I looked back and immediately noticed Kellan’s body was stiff as he glared at Kai.

“Kellan, it’s okay.” I spoke softly. He was on the verge of exploding. I’d already seen these two fight once before; I didn’t want it to happen again.

“He’s outright disrespecting you; being rough because he’s mad that you’re with me and not him!” Kellan accused.

“Get over yourself! I could bang her if I wanted to!” he shot back. I growled, literally roared at Kai. I couldn’t believe he’d just said that.

“*Kunane!*” Kalel yelled. “Control yourself!”

Gabi had squared off with Kai beside me; her brows furrowed and hands clasped tight into fists ready to fly. “If looks could kill” popped in my mind. I sighed and backed away. I wanted to fight the assassins, not Kai. They were being childish. I’m not a piece of property they can claim. Glancing around, everyone had chosen a side and stood at attention ready to go at each other. Ridiculous is what it was, and I didn’t want any part of it. It made me miss my mother. She would have taken control of the situation and straightened everyone out in a snap... But she’s not here anymore. And neither was my father thanks to the guys outside.

I pressed my palms to the short sides of my necklace to activate the shield. As soon as I heard the tiny ping I made my escape. I was done puttering about; I was ready to fight for my parent’s honor and my own life.

“I’m out!” I announced on my way out the back door. I heard them call my name frantically, but I didn’t stop. I hopped over several neighbors’ fences and raced around the lake toward the South Forest. I didn’t hesitate or even stop to think about what I was doing; I just did it.

“Slow down Lexi! Wait up for me please. Don’t go alone!” Kellan pleaded from afar in my mind. The thing was I didn’t want to slow this down. I wanted all of it to be over with. I didn’t want fate to be halted... but I allowed it.

“Hurry up,” I sighed. If I were to die today, I would want it to be with Kellan. Moments later I heard them all approaching me.

“We have no choice but to divide up,” Gabi said adjusting her vest.

“Leka has to be in the center of us since she has to lure them,” Kalel added.

“Several officers have reported sightings but no kills; they’re too fast,” Rafi explained huddling in closer to Gabi.

“At least we know they’re here then,” Gabi continued. We were huddled in a circle but kept looking around anxiously.

“Take her to the Palace,” Kai instructed to Kellan. I guess any quandaries they had were over or at least set aside for the moment. “Any that you come across, try to lead them to that central point. Rafi, have all the officers branch out from there and abandon the borders.” He nodded and broke away from the pack. This was the first time I noticed the Bluetooth in his ear, his way of passing on orders.

“Gabi, go with Rafique. This is the one time we need to pair up for safety. Kellan, are you sure you can protect Leka? She is the prime target and will be hit the hardest.” Kalel was always the leader in the group despite the leadership qualities the others portrayed.

“Of course I can and will,” Kellan defended pulling me into his arms.

“Don’t get yourself killed over me; any of you,” I ordered. None of them even pretended to be listening.

“Lex, we’re doing what we have to do. This is as much about us as it is you. They gassed our home. We’re Republican vamps; we always fight back,” Gabi stated a bit snobbish in her delivery.

“Let’s go. Watch yourselves,” Kai interjected before taking off.

“Finally, thank you,” I huffed. I was ready to go the moment I ran out the door. I ran along the banks until I entered the brinks of the woods.

“Talk mentally from here on out. It’s safer,” he cautioned. I nodded my head in agreement. “Let me go in front...”

“I should be in front. I have the shield, not you,” I argued rushing past him.

“What shield?”

“It’s part of my necklace.”

“Fine, I’ll pull up the rear. Don’t forget to scan the trees.” I hadn’t. My eyes were everywhere searching high and low for signs of company.

“Crap. I forgot to ask them how I know they’re an officer or not...”

“Everyone’s an enemy right now babe. Better to be safe than sorry.”

“You’re right.”

We traveled northeast toward the Palace. The woods were eerily quiet. No birds chirped, no squirrels ran about and no bugs hovered. Though the forest floor was covered in leaves and pinecones, the trees were far from barren. Sadly it’s the perfect setting for a scary, predictable movie

where you know the action is coming so you're waiting and anticipating it. I was waiting for it, preparing for it as I ran with Kellan. The climax was just around the corner; I felt it.

We made it to the Palace with no obstacles.

"Should we go inside?" I asked moving quickly onto the porch. I pressed my back to the siding and peeked in the windows for any activity though I didn't hear anything but the creak of the wooden beams below us settling.

"It's a catch twenty-two. They could be in there waiting, could have set traps or they maybe didn't. Even though we're exposed, I feel safer out here." He thought it through detail for detail I could tell.

I nodded and hopped over the railing. I heard the tiniest click upon landing. I looked back just as Kellan whipped out a gun.

"It wasn't me," he warned.

I suddenly heard the whoosh coming right for me. I dropped flat on the ground stomach down forgetting the many sensitive weapons I carried. The dart shot straight into the wood deck beside me, the same sort found in my mother. It reminded me of what needed to be done and assured me I was dealing with the same bastards. Kellan started firing into the expanse.

I was back on my feet in one swift motion. I began tossing the few bombs I'd set off with my bad reaction to the direction the dart flew in from.

"Run! We have to run!" I raced into the forest at top speed. I didn't have to look back to know Kellan was behind me.

They're called silent grenades because they explode at an energy frequency beyond what a human and most animals can hear. But not vamps. Over a mile away I heard the high-pitched explosion. I was also conscious. If I outran it, then they could have outran it too. We kept running. I had no sense of direction; I was just running. I stopped when I ran into Kai. He took one look at my panic stricken face and knew.

"Which direction?" he asked.

"I set off a bunch of bombs back that way when a dart shot at me," I explained pointing in the direction we fled. I looked up at the sky. The sun was setting but the tree branches absorbed most of the light leaving the woods somewhat cavernous.

When my eyes were coming back down I caught a figure on the limb of an old oak tree. The eyes pierced me shooting a chill through my already cool body. When I settled in on them, I knew why. My breath caught and my pulse quickened. Kellan followed my eyes, Kalel and Kai copied. She hesitated. She knew what this would do to her daughter; Mel would be equally devastated but either way loss was inevitable. It's either her mother or me.

Kai withdrew a gun and shot the laser right at her. He missed and caused the branch to be sliced off by the beam. She jumped and disappeared.

I took off without a word or explanation. I could deal with the killing of strangers attempting to murder me in cold blood, but not the imposed death of my best friend's mother. I couldn't destroy her world like mine.

"Leka!" Kalel called from behind. I ignored him and kept traveling back to the clearing, back to the Palace. I was ready to face the other assassins. I was mentally

prepared to eliminate them all except for Melinda Hartford. I didn't know if I would ever be able to cut out Mel's heart like that.

I heard the shots fire and whip through the air. More than one assassin was shooting; they were flying past me in both directions from my sides. I yanked my necklace off cutting off my shield. I whirled the necklace by its chain in circles parallel in front of me. The laser bullets discharged in my defense in all directions, even up. When I caught a body flopping to the ground from a tree limb above me; I knew I was doing something right but I felt the familiar surge of guilt. My serum wasn't welling though, which spoke volumes for me. I was either gaining control or felt no anger; I chose to believe the first.

The firing abruptly stopped which should have clued me in to the mischief. I kept going idiotically and ran straight into the trap. My feet hit the ground with my tread, I spotted the cabin ahead but was suddenly flung upwards and spun in a web of nets that scored and burned my skin. Smoke rose from my body, proof that I was indeed being torched in some fashion. I cried out in pain, which caused the usually graceful brothers and Kellan to triple their speed and triple their pounding on the forest floor. I heard their steps approaching right as the gun was cocked.

I was spun in a tight hammock tied to two trees. I hung like a pig ready to roast over the fire on the spindle a solid twelve feet in the air. My head bobbed in every direction searching for the villain. Within I was fighting to activate the necklace whose chain I clung to in my hands. Mind over matter proved difficult. It's like searching for an exit when flames so high you can't see, as you're being burned alive, engulf you.

My fingers were gaining centimeter by centimeter on the string but it took all my strength. My temperature had to be scorching as my skin was burned below. My clothes miraculously weren't shredding, no doubt on purpose by design, thank God, but my arms, chest, neck and legs were offered no protection against the ropes.

I saw movement out the corner of my eye and froze. I breathed a sigh of relief to see Kellan. The moment I got sight of him I heard a multitude of guns cocked all around me below. Face up to the sky and entwined to my neck, I was blind to the action below.

"What's going on? Tell me something Kellan. Distract me from this pain!" I cried via thought to him.

"Don't worry babe. Stay calm. We'll save you. They've all gathered here. There are ten of them now. The guns are pointed at you so don't do anything stupid please." Even mentally he was choked up. He was a pillar of strength for me but internally I could tell he was a mess.

Ten against one because I only saw him. Kalel and Kai had disappeared. The net was getting closer to my bones. I felt my skin being scored off with the crisscross of a Christmas ham; the end was near. I felt the slice of my first vein and saw the red spot on the white net stretched over my right hand.

"I can't die," I thought. These *pendejos* killed my mother. They might as well have murdered my father too since his pain, the grief they inflicted, weakened him before his transformation. They've demolished my world and my death would please them more. But they wouldn't take me alone. Kellan was below me in the line of fire. If I went, he went. I would rather suffer a million strangulations than to allow him to be tormented as I have.

It's always about finding the strength, the gumption and willpower within to persevere. I was ready to gather all I had left in me to protect him. I could be taken just as long as he lived on.

As I stretched and pressed my fingers up the chain I felt the skin scraping off my hands. I bit my lip trying to hold in the scream I longed to release. My body was sending up a smoke stack to the tops of the trees by now. I pushed outwards on the web further baking my arm, but it was worth it as I finally gripped my charm.

This was it. I had no plan, only the prayer two could win against ten trained fighters. The laser activated and sliced the material freeing me with one swift flick of my wrist. I plummeted to the ground below but landed on my feet. The moment my feet planted on the dirt I began swinging. I had to start moving immediately because if I saw the chunks of my flesh I felt sliding off my body, I would be immobile and the strength I mustered to overcome the pain mentally would subside and cause me to fluster.

It didn't stop Kellan from crying out. I chanced a look at him. Tears were falling despite the angry determined expression on his face. He rapidly began yanking out weapons and shooting all around, but never took his eyes off me. He might as well have been defenseless since he didn't focus on anything else but me. They'd broken him. By hurting me they hurt him in the worst way possible.

I knew right then and there the impossible fight was left to me. Kellan was in pain and that affected me. I can suffer as long as he doesn't. It was only then that I felt the serum fill my mouth. They'd angered me.

It was one second, one glance at him, but it was the weak moment they needed to surround us strategically. I

spun around to find us in the center of their circle, their single target in the game of darts.

I stood with my feet shoulder width apart, bowing my head to collect the mustard seed of determination remaining and to send up a quick prayer. I made myself a solid mark as I clutched the gold rope of my necklace and prepared to fight till the death. I lifted my head and as if right on cue, they started falling from the sky. One by one then two by two they dropped behind the assassins. Officers armed with the weapons I recognized from the warehouse fell to my rescue. The last five to surround us were the ones I sought before: Kai, Kalel, Gabi, Rafi and the High Authorities mentor to me: Auggy.

It happened so fast that the assassins became disoriented. They didn't expect to fight such as war over one vamp. Alliances are common in our world, but armies are limited to the army, Bladangs and three other camps, two of which reside in Europe. No, they expected to take me out and collect. Instead it seemed we would collect them; it seemed.

The war cry sounded and bullets flew giving way to sheer mayhem. I withdrew my dagger, my skin flaking and crisping in the movement. I was afraid to injure the wrong vamp with my laser beams and would have to bear the pain a little longer. I wasn't irresponsible nor did I have a desire to murder ruthlessly. I only wanted to protect what I had left. I heard screams, felt wind as everyone caved in on the circle; I was the prize and the lure. They all were fighting to either kill me or protect me.

It was a first hand look, the same experience of a soldier at battle for his country. You're fighting for more than your life; you're fighting for principle, for freedom, for a cause greater than you with a bigger impact than you

could ever have fathomed, or so you hope. Not all wars have a purpose. Mine did. We were fighting for justice.

An opportune moment arrived. I jabbed the knife straight into his heart stopping him dead in his tracks. His eyes bugged out in shock for when I peered up at my victim a swarm of feminist pride shook through me. The vamp that attacked me in my car, that shot me into a window and covered me with shards of glass, was suddenly at my mercy. Sadly, I had none for him. I withdrew my dagger and in half a blink ended his life with a single slice of my necklace at his throat.

I stepped back as his head fell and Kai turned towards me. He looked between the fallen vamp and a burnt, half fleshy zombie looking me. He beamed with compassion and pride for me. I feebly smiled back but stopped when I locked eyes with her again; the only vamp I didn't want to see - Melinda.

I froze in place, torn by the option to kill her or not. She had the same contemplative glare. My peripheral view showed plenty of fallen vamps and one prepared to off her. Fear set in as I made my fatal move.

"Stop!" I yelled sending my hands in a flurry of painful waves to protect her. While I protected her for my best friend, she hesitated because of her but chose to complete her mission rather than secure that which means so much to her own.

Time stood still. Everything slowed dramatically as in the movies. My life flashed before my eyes. I saw the blood bath surrounding me; I felt like one of the few survivors of a serial killer gone mad. It took me back to the gory scene of my mother's death and then my father's crazy indulgence in the holding cell. I looked to Kellan who was running towards me yelling what I couldn't make out.

That's when I realized my hearing had disappeared. Everything had faded out except my vision; it was all paused in this moment.

Suddenly he hit me; he knocked me to the ground kicking the breath out of me as my back thudded against the dirt floor. It took me a millisecond to feel the pain. Strong pain surged in my chest and left shoulder. Kellan was a fury of cries over me. Then I noticed the blood covering his hands. He pressed on my chest. I winced, gasping for air. I finally felt the life draining from me. She shot me. My eyes darted straight ahead to witness the massacre imploding. Like a machine gun, knives, lasers and bullets sent her riling in every direction. Her eyes never left me. She deliberately shot me and showed no remorse.

Mel; I could only think of Mel. Not us both. She can't lose us both.

Chaos; flurries of movement engulfed me. I felt the hands all over me. I wanted to shout at them to stop hurting me, but I couldn't find my voice. I couldn't even find Kellan in my thoughts. This was it. I felt the dark cloud descending upon me; the weight of the world crushed me as I went under just as I had on my birthday. But it wasn't my birthday or anesthesia; this was death. It felt like death.

—

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I heard them moving around me. I heard their muffled whispers; familiar voices yet my mind couldn't place them, it couldn't place anything. I felt foggy, but that means I felt, that I was alive. Like numbing cream wearing off, I slowly began to feel my body again. The first thing I noticed was my hands. Both at my sides, they were being held by another.

"She's waking," I heard him announce.

The feeling gave way to soreness. My muscles felt weak, but my skin, it didn't hurt. I must have healed. I felt my blood coursing through my veins, but wait. It's being pushed, almost forced at my inner thigh.

My eyelids fluttered. At first I couldn't focus. For the first time since becoming a vampire, my vision was blurry. I began to blink profusely trying to take it all in. The room was full, jam packed with those I loved. The last one I thought about was the first one I clearly saw. Clasp my right hand with a red nose, bloodshot eyes and looking very disheveled was Mel.

"Poor girl. Lost both parents, nearly lost her life and all she cares about is making things right with her best friend," said a familiar voice; only one problem. A quick look around proved no one had spoken. The floodgates poured open and I suddenly heard a room full of murmurs.

"What's going on? She's freaking out."

"I wonder if I should go put a soothing hand on her and try to calm her down. She's breaking a sweat; very unusual."

“Oh Leka, I’m so sorry this has happened to you.”

“Dang. Everything happens to this girl.”

I shook my head vehemently, closed my eyes and cupped my hands over my ears. I knew I had stunned everyone with my abrupt panic attack. I was scared. The voices didn’t leave; they didn’t silence with my ears plugged.

“Stop!” I yelled.

“Oh God she’s turned into her father. I don’t know if I could kill her like we did him.”

“She’s lost it. I knew it would be too much for her.”

“Even as a total basket case she’s beautiful and yet I don’t think she’d ever believe me.”

I began shaking my head back and forth and humming to try and drown out the noise; to quiet the buzz that was so quickly overwhelming my sanity. I felt two strong hands caress my cheeks but stop my movement as well.

“Lexi,” I recognized that voice as Kellan’s instantly. I slowly opened my eyes and looked up at him.

“There’s hope after all. She’s conscious and respondent.”

“What’s wrong with her? She’s acted strange in the past but never quite like this.”

Abruptly Kai’s voice broke through the crowd. “You hear us.” It was a statement more than a question. Everyone shifted their attention to me entirely.

“I... I don’t know,” I stuttered.

“Can she hear me? Oh God I would definitely have no privacy then.”

“What are the odds? We all did donate blood to her. I suppose it’s possible but highly unlikely to derive such a side effect.”

“If she hears thoughts like them, then she’ll know I have a fondness for her. She’ll tell Gabi; they’ve bonded.” My eyes popped open in shock straight at Rafi. “*Ay dios miyo!* It’s true then. You can hear my thoughts. You can’t- Please don’t-”

I couldn’t stop shaking my head and wincing. They would come two or three at a time and I couldn’t understand a word of it; then they singled out and I heard more than I wanted. It was as if they were talking in my head yet it sounded like I was in a crowded room. Had I been human I would have accumulated a massive migraine by this point.

“I’m sorry but can everyone go?” I scrunched my forehead, furrowed my brows and buried my head in my knees bent up towards my chest covered by a thin sheet. I was shutting down. Whoever said it, or I should say thought it, was right; this was too much. I tried my best to ignore the new comments echoing from all over.

“Kalel,” I called as everyone trickled out the door obeying my wishes. I could handle one mind at a time and I felt he would be my best resource.

“I will never be number one in her life. She picks every one over me including my own brother. It’s enough to make me go mad.” I chose to ignore the dig obviously coming from Kai.

“I’ve put up a block. You shouldn’t hear me. How many voices did you hear?” I lifted my head to the empty room;

silence.

I glanced around and saw it looked like a bedroom but there were several monitors on my right. Hooked to a tall metal pole was a bag of blood draining down a tube that led down and under the sheet. I tossed the sheet away from me to reveal an IV in my inner thigh. Seeing my skin reminded me of my burns, but studying it, I seemed to have healed. Looking down the shirt I recognized my panties and bra but not the t-shirt. It was a bit big and long, almost to my mid-thigh. It dawned on me right as Kalel explained.

“It’s our version of a hospital gown since IVs always go in our largest vein.” He motioned to mine.

“I didn’t think vamps got IVs,” I bemused still trying to absorb everything. It was nice to have a moment of peace.

“We usually don’t. You were the third Dr. H has ever administered,” he smirked.

“Why are you smiling like that?” I was cautious yet curious.

“In the less than two months that I’ve known you, you have turned my world upside down. You scream drama though you don’t intentionally bring it.”

“Oh,” I frowned knowing he was right.

“May I?” he asked gesturing to the space beside me on the twin-sized mattress. I nodded and he settled beside me. In this moment he was the big brother I needed but didn’t biologically have; he cradled me in his arms protectively.

“How do you feel?”

“Umm, fine I guess. What exactly happened to me?”

“You were shot with a ten million dollar bullet that dispersed the moment it entered your body. It was supposed to clog all your arteries and essentially suffocate you to death since the oxygen in our blood circulating is our air supply. It works best if shot into your heart. Lucky for you she missed and hit just above it. Concurrently it carried a substance that knocked you out so you couldn’t drink and counter act the potion so you had to be drained and refilled this way to revive you,” he explained, his thumb circled my upper arm soothingly.

“And the voices?”

“I can only believe it’s a side effect. Hopefully it’s temporary; nonetheless I’ll teach you how to block it.”

“How... um,” I stammered trying to grasp it all. “How many of you donated?”

“Pretty much everyone. Your body absorbed a lot to heal on top of the normal twelve pints to supplement you. They collected thirty-six pints total from us. That’s what’s been flowing into you these last twenty-four hours.”

“A day has gone by?” I sighed in frustration. “I’m seeing very quickly that immortality only means we can live forever not that we’ll ever come close. I mean we’re vampires and yet everyday a new weapon is released that can kill us. I don’t care if it costs a trillion dollars; it’s out there. More and more I’m feeling as vulnerable as a human. Even worse, because we’re merely a fraction population wise in comparison, our statistics are a million times worse,” I rambled. I knew I rambled but couldn’t discard the fear and, surprisingly, the anger I harbored over the issue. He didn’t say a word; he listened diligently.

“Kalel, there is something majorly wrong with this picture. All this technology is erasing our description; it’s

morphing and skewing all the facts into questionable fiction. How, I mean why would we allow this to happen? We're increasing our odds of death daily. And this," I slung my hand towards my thigh, "It's not normal. I shouldn't be capable of being knocked out like that. There shouldn't be bullets that can kill me or gas that can force me unconscious for twenty minutes. Being in this world is almost worse than being in the human one because here it seems everyone is rich and can afford the expensive threats," I continued. At that he chuckled.

"We have a poverty rate too you know. In fact, many of us wander empty handed," he stated matter of fact. I cut my eyes at him.

"I've met more wealthy vamps than I believe human millionaires exist," I countered.

"You're just in a good location. Charleston is the Basque Country of North America. There are more vamps here than in any other area of the Western Hemisphere. Why do you think the murder rates have tripled over the last few decades?" I scowled at him; he took the hint. "A solid number is probably forty percent of vamps are multi-millionaires. And of that number, about thirty percent are vampeens."

"Why vampeens?"

"Because they tend to inherit their money. Usually vampires are single. They don't go around turning their family members like us," he offered.

"Makes sense," I whispered. We fell silent. I kept looking at the IV. I ran my finger over where it pierced my skin. "Is this still necessary?"

"Dr. H said he'd be by when this pint is done." I sighed tugging down on the shirt to conceal it. I caught sight of a

flash of red. I leaned down and pushed the rest of the blanket off my feet to reveal perfectly pedicured toes glimmering with bright red polish and white and silver snowflakes.

“Gabi and Mel insisted. They said you need a burst of holiday cheer. Apparently you get that with red toe nails and snowflakes,” he smiled but the sarcasm didn’t pass over me. I was touched by their gesture and couldn’t help but beam. Likewise though, I was saddened quickly at the thought of Mel.

“How is she?” My voice was barely audible.

“Better. Her dad, Scott, has stepped in. He explained everything to her along with Kellan. She was shaken but surprisingly mostly upset about you. I think she feels guilty for her Mom’s actions.”

“Do you uh... Actually, where am I?” I looked around but found no windows or indications as to where I was.

“You’re at the army headquarters. They insisted to ensure you were protected. That and they were grateful for your eleven assassin kills.”

“But I didn’t kill them all.”

“No but you killed the most and lead the rest of us to them,” he ruffled my hair. I patted my strands and cringed.

“God I must look like a mess,” I groaned.

“Far from it. Now I’ll go get Mel. She didn’t donate so you should be good,” he said. He killed my head and hopped up.

“Knowing her and her guilt I’m sure she tried.” He winked confirming my assumption before opening the door to page her. I assumed since she knew what she was to

become through these events that was why they permitted her presence on property before she was technically one of us. She walked in hesitantly; it took her a while to make it over to the bed. Just like Kalel said, I didn't hear her thoughts.

"Hey." I was fidgeting with my hands unsure how she would react. I decided to avoid the subject until she brought it up which coincidentally didn't take long. She immediately broke down.

"Oh Lex! I'm so sorry! I... I didn't know; I swear I didn't know! I never would have let her. I ... Oh, can you ever forgive me?" She burst into a river of tears.

"I..." I was stunned speechless. Her mom tried to kill me and failed yet got herself killed for shooting me. It's a messed up situation. Her mom was dead; I was alive, yet she's groveling for my forgiveness? I was so sure it would and should be the other way around. I shook my head trying to connect my thoughts which she took as hesitancy.

"Lex, please don't make me beg. You know I would never do anything to jeopardize our friendship. You're my sister for crying out loud. I... I found out I would even chose you over my own mother. That has to count for something! Please, please say you forgive me..." She was nearly choking by the end of her plea.

"Stop Mel. Don't be silly. Of course I forgive you but there's nothing to forgive. You didn't do anything -" She cut me off though.

"Whatever happened to guilty by association? If you never met me, if... if we weren't best friends, you never would have hesitated in killing her which means she never would have shot you."

“Who told you that?” I demanded, upset that they coerced a guilt trip on her.

“Well... I mean everyone told me but only because I couldn't believe my own mother, the same person who hosted sleepovers for us regularly and gave you birthday and Christmas presents, would kill you. I knew before they told me that you didn't and wouldn't hurt her because of me. And I'm so, so sorry that she didn't do the same.” She looked away wiping a few stray tears. She had managed to stop most of them a minute before.

“Of course now,” I sighed, unsure how to proceed. Once Mel sets her mind to something you have zero chance of altering it.

“They said you saved her right before she shot you...” She was thoughtful and reflective by this point; eerily calm and yet haunted as she spoke the words.

“Mel, don't torture yourself. It's done. I'm alive and I'm still really sad that she's not. I should be sorry, not you. Please don't do this to yourself.” She swallowed and sunk to the end of the bed settling at my feet. “How's Kyle?”

“Not so great. My dad took him on vacation to help him get over it.”

“Why didn't you go with them?” I asked, but the moment the words departed guilt filled me; I already knew the answer before she replied.

“I had to make sure you were okay,” she nearly whispered. Her head hung low as she focused on picking the remnants of polish off her fingernails.

“I love my toes by the way,” I offered trying to lighten the mood. She finally lifted her head and showed the beginning uplift of a smile. “Umm... How many days until

Christmas?" I was crossing my fingers that I hadn't missed my deadline for everyone's gifts to be ordered express. It seemed I had lost track of the days over the last few weeks.

"Three. Well, I guess technically four. Today's the twenty-first but it's like eleven already," she replied pulling out her cell to double check. "11:05pm," she amended.

"Knock, knock," Dr. H announced his arrival for Mel's sake. "How do you feel Alexa?"

"Fine. Ready to go home," I sighed reluctantly. Mel promptly stood from the bed and backed away towards the door.

"Well you appear to be alert and functioning well. What is your serum level?" He shined a light in my eyes and had me stick out my tongue like any regular doctor.

"Low, good." I would have said anything to get out of there. I was tired of missing, more like skipping, chunks of time.

"Wonderful. I have no reason to hold you at this point. Do you have any questions for me?" He lifted the sheet and in one swift motion removed the IV. The minute it was out I was already healed of the prick.

"Do I have any pants?" I didn't see a bag in sight.

"Kellan has a pair for you," Mel said. She looked uncomfortable in the room with the doctor. "I uh, I'll go get him." She quickly made her escape.

"Any other questions?" he pressed.

"What are you doing on Christmas Eve?" He was not expecting this question but seemed pleasantly surprised since a smile crept on his face.

“I’m always on call Alexa. Medicine takes no holidays and neither do most vamps.”

“Well, if you feel like celebrating, please feel free to drop by. There are some human traditions I’m not ready to give up.” And I wouldn’t be for a while, if ever. This year more so than others I needed tradition and normality to rule even if only for that one day.

“I appreciate the invitation,” he said packing up a few loose items around me.

“Hey.” Kellan walked over with a pair of leggings in his arms. He chose comfort over fashion in this instance I saw. “Her complexion is much better. She looks rested, beautiful. She’s so adorable when she first wakes up and is a bit of a mess. If it weren’t for the doctor I would kiss her now. I can’t believe this gorgeous vamp is all mine.”

“Well, I am,” I smiled.

“Have a good night,” Dr. H left on cue since Kellan appeared dumbfounded.

“You too. Thanks for everything,” I waved.

“You hear my thoughts now? As in all of them?” he choked suddenly nervous.

“So it seems. It’s only fair though since you hear all of mine,” I shrugged hopping out of bed.

“I don’t know if I like this,” he thought shifting awkwardly.

“Well whether you do or don’t doesn’t matter. Kalel knows how to block so we’ll just have to talk to him. Now hand me my pants so I can get dressed and go.” He chuckled at my matter of fact approach.

The next couple days I kept myself busy every second to avoid thinking about my parents and all that had happened. Kalel somehow got a hold of my guidance counselor. He got all my make-up work and scheduled a time for me to take my final exams before school was back in session. Mel flew out to meet up with her dad and Kyle after a lot of convincing from Craig and me; they were planning to come back New Year's Eve. Aunt Claire had a lot of loose ends to tie up in California. She was worried and called constantly; each time I assured her that I was fine. In all actuality, I was putting off the inevitable breakdown. I knew Christmas would be the hardest since so many memories revolved around that day. It was the one day where, vamp or not, it was celebrated the same.

Every year dad pulled out the Christmas lights the day after Thanksgiving. It was understood that there would be no shopping on that day, only decorating. He went all out; I'm certain our electric bill doubled that month. Outside was Dad's territory and inside was Mom's. My mother always had a Martha Stewart feel to her. Everything she did was simple yet it felt custom tailored. Each year she revamped the décor. One year she did all white and silver with popcorn strung in place of green garland around the banister. There were snowmen, crystal ornaments and regal silver candleholders adorned with white candles. It was very upscale yet homey. It was a simple palate of beautiful items. That was my favorite year and the only year Aunt Claire lived in Charleston.

This year was my turn. I was excited and nervous to take on the project. It proved daunting, but worthwhile. I strung the lights along the roof, without a ladder, in a matter of minutes. I wrapped the bushes and trees in the front yard and added beautiful red ribbon below the white lights around every beam on the porch. I framed the

windows and added the cute decorative snowflake clings to the glass. The outside was very welcoming, but my largest accomplishment was inside.

I stuck with a traditional cherry red and white but added my own funky twist of lime green in my décor colors. At first Kellan and Craig thought I had lost it with the green; by the end though, they were eating their words. All around the house in every room, bathrooms included, were chargers and candles. The dining table had a beautiful centerpiece in a large red glass bowl filled with muted lime green glitter pears. There were two large white candles flanking it. From rugs, to towels and linens, I tried to think of everything just as my mom would have. I wanted Aunt Claire to walk in and feel my mother's touch in all I had done.

My favorite tradition of all though was on Christmas Eve. I didn't know why then, but Dad was always in charge of the baking. Like clockwork, each year at exactly 8pm, he and I would bake Christmas cookies; he claimed Santa wouldn't leave me gifts if they weren't freshly baked. We would make hot chocolate, sit and watch classic Christmas movies while the oven worked its magic. Then, once the timer dinged, we decorated and made Santa's special cup of hot cocoa with whip cream and a dusting of cinnamon. Icing, sprinkles, marshmallows, even chocolate syrup; nothing was off limits on those cookies. It was a cavity's dream come true. Even once I knew about Santa Clause not being real, we continued the ritual. The only difference was when we were done we devoured most of them in a glutinous feast waiting for midnight to roll around. And once it did; we opened one gift each before going to bed.

Despite the secrets that surrounded my family, I was never impacted by them. My childhood memories were mostly happy ones. My parents loved me and it showed in

every event I recalled. My childhood wasn't conventional by any means; I was isolated a lot since they didn't socialize much. I didn't have the mass of family members, cousins and great aunts and uncles that most boast about, but I didn't miss them. My parents surrounded me with enough love for all of them. Perhaps that is what I missed the most: their love. Being in this house helped, but I missed their hugs and kisses, their voices with words of encouragement, and the little things they did for me. Ah yes, it's the little things that I missed the most. And sitting here at the kitchen island, waiting for 8pm to roll around, I felt this longing, the strongest I had since they passed.

The fire was going, for ambiance more than anything. It was something we always had on Christmas Eve. I stared blankly at the tree positioned in front of the windows showcasing the backyard. It looked enchanting, if I did say so myself. White lights twinkled against the lime green ribbon and red glass ornaments. The only non-red ornaments were the three we always had on the tree regardless of whether or not they matched; they were each of our names engraved on a gold plated holiday village scene. Instead of the traditional star on top of the tree, I decided to replace it with a white angel in honor of my parents. Regardless of what religion you believe, white is always a color of peace. And as for the angel, I felt like one or two had been watching over me especially with my close calls.

"Lex, babe, are you okay?" Kellan asked approaching with ease not wanting to interrupt my dreamlike state.

"I'm good thanks," I smiled up at him. He tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. He and Craig had been diligently glued to my side the past couple days. Kellan was more protective than ever given what had happened to me.

The Bladangs had made a point of checking in often as well though they didn't physically hover over me.

"I just want to make sure you're safe. I never want to risk losing you again," he whispered close to my ear. Hearing all of each other's thoughts was unnerving for him in the beginning. He's more detailed and deep than I originally experienced. There is a lot more inside Kellan than even I gave him credit for and it's made me love him all the more. "I love you too," he said kissing me gently. We were interrupted by the alarm signaling it's 8pm. I jumped up out of the stool and ran to the cupboard. "Uh... I guess cookies are more important than me?"

"Of course not. But you'll still be there to kiss when I'm done," I smiled pulling the ingredients out of the pantry.

"Come on mate. Let the chef work her tongue wagging magic." Craig came up behind Kellan and slapped his arm around him pulling him away from the kitchen. I mouthed a quick 'thank you'.

This was the year. Vampire, vampeen or human, you were going to not only eat, but absolutely love my holiday treats. I pulled out the Kitchen Aid mixer I purchased specifically for tonight and began adding the ingredients for my favorite homemade sugar cookies. Once I spooned them out in even scoops along three sheet pans I started on my newest addition to the evening, chocolate cupcakes with a blood custard filling. Yum! While the double ovens cooked the batter and filled the house with a heavenly, familiar scent, I pulled out the double boiler and began to make our hot blood chocolates. Mid-simmer, family and friends began to arrive.

"I absolutely adore what you've done with the place Lexi. Your mother would be so proud," Aunt Claire gushed,

tears immediately filling her eyes as she hugged me. “She’s just a baby and yet she’s all grown up doing everything that her mother did for her. Her mother, my sister... who’s... Oh not now Claire. Pull yourself together around the girl. She’s having a hard enough time without you blubbering. What she did though is amazing. She truly has her mother’s touch.”

“I was hoping you would say that,” I smiled trying not to fall victim to the waterworks. “Put your block up though please.”

“Sorry,” she blushed immediately putting up the wall. Kalel had shown everyone how to create a mental block and, aside from Kellan, everyone used it. Though he struggled in the beginning, Kellan claimed to like the open line of communication we shared in our thoughts. It strengthened our relationship and affirmed every feeling erasing all doubt when it came to our love. I never wondered anymore if he truly loved me and he never worried about Kai anymore seeing how I viewed him.

“Hey Lexi. How are you?” Beth asked extending her arms to hug me. She set a small gift bag on the island for me.

“Better each day, thanks. Are you missing Kellan yet?”

“Nah, you can keep him as long as you’d like. It’s nice not having the extra laundry,” she chuckled.

“Mom!” he groaned.

“Hey Al,” I greeted him with an embrace.

“*Ay muchacha!* I love this outfit!” Gabi gushed with a lingering finger that moved up and down. I looked down at little black satin dress covered with a red apron. I wore my white gold necklace, stud earrings and sky-high, strappy

black heels. I had even taken the time to curl my hair and do my make-up. Okay, so I only did the last two to pass the time before I started to bake...

"Thanks. You look super cute too," I motioned to her black pencil skirt, silver off-the-shoulder top and bright red heels. "Hey Rafi," I waved as he slid in behind Gabi.

"Don't I always though?" she did a mini-curtsey before walking over towards the sectional to greet everyone else.

I turned my attention back to the pot to give it a quick stir. I checked the timer and realized I needed to make the icing for the cookies and cupcakes. I poured 1.5 pints of blood in the mixer and added the powdered sugar little by little until it was of the perfect consistency. I then pulled out all the mugs I purchased the day before and lined them up ready to be ladled with the hot blood.

"Wow. Beautiful and she knows how to cook? Kellan is a very lucky man." I heard the voice before I turned to see the face - Kai.

"Hey stranger. How are you?" I asked wrapping him in my arms. Kai had been avoiding me, only talking to Kellan when he called. He was mad that I spoke with Kalel that day and not him. Given how he felt about me, I didn't worry too much. I knew it would pass.

"Much better now that I've seen you in that dress." I pulled back and frowned. "What?" He smirked. "It is a little leggy, don't you think?"

"It's approximately three inches above my knees; I'd hardly call that leggy," I rebutted.

"You always were feisty. I love that about you." Oh Kai, why must you always make things so awkward? Better yet,

why must he be so persistent, especially since he knows I'm with Kellan?

I was saved by the timer. "Got to finish these."

I skipped over to the ovens promptly turning each of them off. I pulled out the butter knife, which we always used to spread the icing. I grabbed the matching potholders I purchased for the occasion and began to remove the trays of baked goods from the racks. Upon icing everything I set them upon the decorative serving trays. I ladled the finished hot blood that was serving as our hot chocolate into the mugs. I completed each one with canned whipped cream and dark chocolate shavings.

"Come and get it everyone," I announced at the spread across the island. Looking around and seeing this as the final piece of the evening, I was proud of what I'd accomplished in my parent's absence.

"Looks like I arrived just in time," Kalel stated reaching to grab a sugar cookie. Everyone was right behind him picking up mugs and sweets.

"So it seems," I smiled. He took a bite and closed his eyes in mock bliss.

"This is delicious Leka," he praised taking another bite before grabbing a cupcake.

"These are wonderful Lexi," Beth said taking a sip of the hot chocolate.

"Best baked buggers I've ever had here love," Craig chimed in. I laughed a bit at the icing around his lips.

"Delicious babe. I love all of it," Kellan added. He gave me a kiss on the cheek before grabbing another cupcake.

“Oh my gosh Lex. I am in heaven. You so have to share the recipes! Move over breakfast and hello desserts!” Gabi gasped. Her eyes were glistening passing over everything unsure of what she wanted next.

“Really good. Really, really good,” Rafi spoke with a mouth full of food.

“I hope I’m not too late,” Dr. H greeted.

“Not at all. You’re just in time. Take a drink and all the treats you’d like.” I motioned to the island. It was strange seeing him out of his white jacket. I could see he was actually very well built in his polo tucked into khakis.

“Don’t mind if I do. I’ve always been intrigued by this eating of human food,” he offered.

“Hello Dr. H,” Aunt Claire sidled up to him. Hmm... Looks like old habits die hard. They’re not a bad match though he’s a little subdued compared to what she’s used to.

Everyone mingled, chatting friendly amongst each other while the music played softly in the background. I cleaned the counters and stuffed the dishes in the dishwasher.

“Babe, you’re supposed to be hosting, not cleaning,” Kellan interrupted.

“I am hosting and everyone is entertained. Isn’t that my main job?”

“Technicality. You’re not supposed to be cleaning while they’re here though.”

“Everyone is family. Plus I’m almost done. All I have to do is take out the trash,” I countered tossing out the final

plastic wrapper from a piece of décor. He gave me teasing look. “Stop,” I laughed.

“Okay. Trash and then you’re not lifting another finger the rest of the night,” he agreed, his tone a cross between authoritative and playful.

“Thank you,” I smiled, pleased that I had gotten my way. I leaned up and kissed him. I didn’t linger given the audience, but it was enough to let him know I loved him for being concerned.

“Hey mate, come check out Raf’s new gadget. It’s flittering awesome,” Craig called to Kellan.

“Go. I’ll be right back.” He hesitated a second longer before going to see what the fuss was about.

I lifted the bag out of the trash bin. I tied it off and held it out, careful not to mess up my dress with any loose mess. I sighed longingly as I looked around at everyone. They were all full of laughter and cheer. They were enjoying themselves in a way I was almost envious of. Despite my smile, I was suffering inside. The hollow hole inside me felt like it would never close. My parents were the biggest contributors in my life; I never realized just how much they added to my every day until they were gone. Now I was left with these wonderful people who, regardless of their efforts, would never fill the void.

I carried the bag to the garage. I lifted the lid on the large suburban trashcan the city provided and stuffed the bag in. Given my overly zealous purchasing the last few days, the container was nearly overflowing. I pushed down on the pile and was abruptly thrust backwards. The light was off, but I could see perfectly in the space and I saw only cars, a lawn mower and the trashcan in front of me.

Instincts told me to run, but I froze. Curiosity got the best of me. I was physically yanked backwards, yet no one and nothing was in sight that could have done so. I did a 360-degree turn surveying the area. I walked around searching high and low trying to find the cause. Just as I was about to give up and go inside my feet were pulled from under me. I hit the ground with a loud thud. I was on my feet in one swift motion but again, no one was there to fight. This time though, I knew I hadn't imagined it. Someone was in there with me.

With one stealth leap I was on the hood of my father's SUV. I looked around waiting, listening for a flicker of movement. Abruptly someone fell from the track above and knocked me backwards and the battle began. I tossed the assassin into the wall and was at their side before they could blink. Staring at the face, he looked familiar, but I couldn't place him.

It was a momentary distraction but it gave him an advantage. He kicked my chest sending me flying into the side of my mother's car. Before I could even bounce back he had the wire around my neck prepared to finish his mission. I took a risk. Instead of protecting my throat I clasped his forearms and tossed him over me. I didn't send him far enough though. He landed directly in front of me. He karate chopped my side successfully breaking a rib. I winced in pain. My mind scattered as I tried sending my thoughts to Kellan, but he wasn't responding. I was regretting the mental block we agreed to while everyone was around.

He pushed me against the closest vehicle and withdrew in one quick flash a dart I recognized immediately. The adrenaline kicked in at that moment. I knew it was fight or die. I kneed every man's most precious area and knocked his hand simultaneously. The dart went

flying. His eyes flew between me and the dart, which landed beside the back tire of my mother's car.

Without warning he began swinging the wire slicing my dress as if it were butter and cutting my skin beneath. I jumped out of the way. I was backing up towards the door to the house when he leapt onto me. We rolled around in a fury of motion. He was whipping me around in circles so fast I could barely keep up. I couldn't gain my footing to pull upwards or to knock him off of me. The moment I was positioned, he moved me over him. It was a dance but he was the one entirely in control. I finally gained enough leverage to knee his stomach. I hopped up immediately and ran for the door. Mere inches from the door I was thrust backwards again.

I went to yell but his hand swiftly covered my mouth as if knowing the move I was about to make. They were all in there, only a few yards away. The murmurs of conversations and laughter traveled through the walls. They were happy, too enthralled in the joyous gathering to realize anything was wrong. Had I not distracted them with cookies, cupcakes and cocoa, if music wasn't a backdrop enticing conversation, and if there weren't so many of them all together, maybe, just maybe someone would have noticed by now.

He held me in place welded to the wall with a hand firmly over my mouth. I fought hard but he had me in the right position and already had an upper hand in strength and speed. Up close I saw the scar running across his forehead to his hairline. I remembered that scar. I remembered this Hispanic vamp. From... I gasped beneath him. Rico. The same Rico who worked for the High Authorities, who I met on my first trip to the army headquarters without my mother, was trying to murder me. He's a double agent; an assassin.

He lifted his brow as if to challenge me. I was thrusting so hard he had to use both hands to restrain me. It's what I wanted. A free hand meant he could pull a fast one and I'd be gone in a second. He didn't like my attitude. But his speed proved invaluable. One flash and another dart was coming down on me. All my strength, all my adrenaline fortified in this one moment when I hopped up and kicked him with both heels.

He went flying and smashed into the side of my car setting off the alarm, but again was right back on me. He was quick, much faster than me. All I could do was try to stall him until Kellan or someone broke away from the party to come looking.

I heard them all come running. Kalel was the first to barge through the garage door. The assassin tried to escape through the side door leading to the back yard.

"Oh hell no! You are not getting away!" I chased after him. I was pissed. This guy attacked me in the comfort of my own home, smashed the side of my car, and ripped my dress. He was not allowed to run.

I wasn't the only one hunting him down. Me being the closest to him, the rush surfacing on every level, I reached him first. I snatched his arm and sent him flying backwards right into Kalel's arms. All the men were right at his side apprehending him like the criminal he was. They snatched the dart from his hand and were prepared to off him.

"Stop!" I yelled. They all halted. "Take him inside," I ordered. After a minute of no movement I added, "I'm serious. Now!" That got them moving.

Once inside everyone surrounded Rico. Beth wet a paper towel and wiped away the blood from my healing cuts. Not one person wasn't on edge.

“Thank you,” I said flinching when she dabbed at a cut along my rib cage. Kellan let out a primal growl at Rico. He snarled prepared to attack him; Craig had to hold him back.

“Oh my. I don’t believe I’ve ever witnessed such wrath,” Dr. H commented. He was the only male not in war mode.

“Rico, who hired you?” I demanded.

“I don’t talk unless you pay up,” he replied cockily. I had to remind myself that he came from the streets. His life and his word were only worth what he could negotiate in his next deal.

“How much are they offering you?” I asked knowing money was his language.

“More than you could afford.”

“I’m trying to be nice. We could off you in a millisecond. I want to work with you. But you have to be willing to work with me. Now how much are they offering you?” I got tough with him. My tone took on that of a drill sergeant; it was an unfamiliar range for me.

“Fifty mil,” he smirked.

“That’s all? Boy you got swindled. The other assassins were offered much more,” I grinned. Kai turned, eyeing me suspiciously. I winked and he suddenly caught onto my game.

“You’re bull shitting.” He called my bluff, but I wasn’t prepared to share it.

“Why would I? I don’t owe you anything. Now who hired you?” His face hardened. His eyes locked in on mine. He was trying to read me. He was waiting for me to look

away, to show a sign of weakness or admit I was lying with a quick glance. But I didn't falter.

"They call him Black Jack." I didn't recognize the name but I noticed Gabi stiffen immediately.

"Why did he hire you?"

"I don't ask why I just ask how much," he shot back. His expression held the same rough cockiness as his earlier tone.

"Bullshit!" I walked straight up to him. Kellan and Kai flanked me immediately. My tone was low and menacing. "Despite my innocent appearance I wasn't born yesterday and I'm not stupid enough to believe that hunk of crap. Now why did he hire you?"

"Good for you." He didn't cave. He held his ground. The serum scorched my throat for the first time all evening. Even fighting in the garage didn't spark it, which surprised me. Now though, now I was angry. He was mocking me. He threatened me, tried to kill me and now was mocking me. "Getting all hot and bothered over me?" he chuckled.

Kellan leapt for him. I flung my arm out in time. That combined with Craig's quick reflexes reined him in time. To show I wasn't playing though I gave him a swift kick to the groin. He let out a grunt.

"I don't have my dagger on me or the necklace. Can I please borrow someone's?" I held out my hand in the air. Kai handed over his gold dagger. "Thank you."

"Now listen up Rico. I'm really a nice person. But when you try to kill me and then turn around and mock me when I give you grace, well, to put it bluntly, you pushed the wrong button. So here's how this will work. Every time you refuse to answer my question I will slice off the body

part of my choice. And in case you're not familiar with this particular sword," I leaned in close to whisper, "everything I chop is gone forever. Vamp healing doesn't work with this one," I winked.

"So again, why did he hire you?" Nothing. Silence. He was testing me. His hard face yet taunting eyes proved it. I sighed in frustration. When you're dealing with a stubborn arse, you have to act like an equally stubborn arse. "Fine. Have it your way," I huffed. I removed his hand from Kalel's grip and was about to slice when he broke down.

"Don't! Stop! I'll talk!" He pleaded. Al grabbed his loose hand.

"Fine. Talk." I ordered.

"I, uh, well, I got a call from an unknown number. It was a guy, not Black Jack though. He was scouting for a few seasoned assassins and promised good pay. I agreed to meet him in an abandoned warehouse a couple nights later. It wasn't until I met him and signed the papers that I was told about the mission. He promised fifty million to the assassin that murdered you and a hundred mil to anyone who brought you back to him."

"Why did he hire you?" I cut him off.

"He... He didn't say specifically. All he said was that you had too much influence in the higher circles of our kind."

"Deadline?" He shook his head no. "How many did he hire?"

"I only knew about three of us."

"Anything else I should know?" I pressed, thoroughly repulsed and feeling sick. He nodded his head again.

Another perfect entrance. I heard the taps on the front door followed by Auggy, Laurence and Felipe waltzing in.

“What’s going on?” Auggy demanded recognizing Rico immediately.

“Your guard is a double agent. He’s a hired assassin who attacked Lexi,” Al explained.

“Who hired you?” Laurence demanded.

“Black Jack,” Rico sighed.

“Interesting. It seems you did a good job of defending yourself against this hooligan Alexa,” Felipe acknowledged. I guessed they were reading his thoughts.

“Well then. Please accept our apologies Alexa. It seems we need to further tighten our ropes and do a prompt investigation of all our hired ranks again,” Laurence added.

“It’s okay. I’m just glad no one got hurt.”

“While I don’t believe that one what with your broken rib, I will happily take over from here. We’ll remove him from the premises and ensure that he is locked away from a good century for what he attempted,” Laurence stated eyeing Rico with disgust.

“Of all the knuckle head things to do. Who the hell do you think you are soldier? You don’t run this army; you don’t decide who lives and dies!” Auggy yelled.

“Here Alexa,” Felipe handed me a small silver box with a bow tied around it.

“Oh, thank you,” I half smiled taking the gift from him.

“It seems that unfortunately we cannot stay. We have business to tend to. Please enjoy your evening Alexa. We will station guards outside the door for you,” Felipe added.

Auggy cuffed Rico officially removing him from Kalel and Al's hands. They turned to start to leave.

"Oh! Wait!" I called. They stopped abruptly and looked back.

"Yes?" Laurence asked.

I held up a finger motioning for one second please. I grabbed a Tupperware container from the cupboard and filled it with cookies and cupcakes as fast as possible. I raced over to them and gave the treats to Laurence.

"Thanks for coming and for taking care of him. And, Merry Christmas," I smiled.

"You are delightful Alexa. Truly one of a kind," he chuckled softly.

"Have a good night all. Bancroft, report for duty at 1200 hours," Auggy ordered.

"Yes sir," he nodded.

"Good night everyone," Felipe stated. Within seconds they were gone.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Lovely bunch of brick crackers. Now what do you say we get back to this shindig?” Craig was the first to speak. Everyone else I believe was still in awe as to what happened.

“Thanks Craig,” I broke into laughter. I could always count on him to break the ice.

“Can I just say that you thoroughly scared the dickens out of me Lexi? Don’t get me wrong, you were amazing, your mother all the way, but dear Lord I thought I was going to die any second,” Aunt Claire sighed placing her hand over her heart for theatrics.

“Sorry,” I smiled sheepishly. She nodded her head and pulled me into her, squeezing tight. “Ouch. Just a little sore. Not all the way healed yet.”

“Oh goodness. Dr. H, please look her over,” she urged me towards him.

“Unfortunately there isn’t anything you can do for a broken rib. It just needs time,” he offered with a pat on my back.

“Well, I believe it’s time for us to go,” Karel said.

“Wait. What time is it?” I rushed into the kitchen to the microwave clock. “It’s after midnight. Present time!” I grabbed his hand and motioned for everyone to take a seat. I always got excited about giving gifts, not so much about receiving them though.

“Lexi, why don’t you go change real quick. We’ll wait,” Beth offered.

“Oh,” I peered down at my tattered dress. Another one ruined by a vamp. I didn’t think I could ever get used to that. “I’ll be just a minute.” I started towards the stairs but stopped. “Would any of you mind if I wore pajamas?” I asked remembering that’s what we wore every Christmas Eve. We baked, ate, and opened gifts in our pajamas.

“Of course not,” Beth smiled.

I nodded and took off. I changed at the speed of light into my red checkered flannel pajama pants and a white tank top officially coordinating with my color scheme.

I returned to everyone settled in various spots around the room. I sat on the floor beside the tree in the official distributor’s position that my dad usually held. A deep feeling cut into me at the quick flash of him. I immediately tucked it away and one by one passed out the gifts.

They began to open them. Gabi nearly knocked me out when she saw the cocktail ring I got her. Rafi equally loved the antique Swiss army knife I got him. Dr. H got a chuckle out of the leather medical briefcase I got him to replace his 50’s style medicine bag. You always have to have a gag gift in the batch; naturally that one went to Craig. Beth and Al were appreciative of my thoughtfulness and Aunt Claire broke down when she opened the locket I gave her with a picture of my mom inside. The two I was most nervous about though were the ones I waited till the end to give.

“I have one gift for the both of you. I hope you don’t mind,” I said passing the large square bunch of wrapping paper to Kai and Kalel.

“Of course not,” Kalel said.

“As long as it’s a good gift,” Kai grinned.

I was on pins and needles watching them. I had spent a total twelve hours on their gift. I hadn't used this talent of mine in forever. I almost forgot I had it. But once the Prismacolor colored pencils were in my hand pressed to the large sketchpad paper, it all came rushing back. And thanks to my vamp vision, I saw and remembered more details than ever.

I looked up in time to catch their reactions. It was just the one I was hoping for. I touched some deeply rooted emotion that I now knew all too well.

"This is... Words cannot describe," Kalel choked staring at the hand drawn colored portrait of their father. Kai stood silently beside Kalel. He stared in awe at the photo for a long while before speaking.

"You captured him perfectly." A flicker of emotion hit his face but he quickly controlled it. "Thank you. It's perfect Leka," he said still engrossed in the gift before him.

"Thank you Leka." Kalel added.

"Thank you for everything that you guys have done for me. Thanks to all of you. You all have contributed to me being here in some way," I looked at every person in the room with me individually acknowledging them as someone I valued. I really wouldn't be where I was without these people. They were an amazing support system these past couple months.

Kellan came and sat beside me. He pulled me into him and kissed my forehead. I pulled one of the last few gifts from under the tree and handed it to him. "I really hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will," he smiled giving me a kiss on the lips this time. He ripped off the paper and opened the box

revealing the black tungsten watch I had custom made for him. "Wow babe. This is really nice."

"You haven't gotten to the best part. I had it made with a special feature. May I?" I asked extending my hand for the box. He passed it to me and watched me curiously.

I removed the pillow the watch was wrapped around from the box and slid it off. I flipped it over to reveal the inscription: To My Forever

"I love it," he whispered.

"I haven't shown you the special feature yet," I laughed.

"I still love what I've already seen," he replied.

"That's a fancy tinker mate," Craig commented on his way to the island to grab more cookies. I rotated the large wheel to the correct time and pressed it inwards to officially set it the clock.

"Here. Press this dial in a bit. If you want to stop it you pull out. I did this just in case you didn't like it..." I pointed to the smallest button along the side of the watch. Kellan reached over and pushed delicately. Suddenly we heard the sound of a heart beating. "It's to say regardless of whether or not my heart beats, you'll always be my forever," I whispered.

He looked straight at me as water welled in the corners of his eyes. I saw everyone couple up in the moment. Al cradled Beth, Rafi took Gabi into his arms, and even Kalel extended his arm around Kai with our intimate exchange.

"It's perfect," he voice was full of sentiment.

“I believe our beast has been tamed,” Al whispered to Beth. I looked up to see her crying.

“Oh gosh. I didn’t mean to get everyone into a mush,” I blushed. Perhaps I should have waited until we were alone given their reactions.

“No honey, I’m happy. I’m happy that my son has you. If you had seen how he was before,” she stopped overwhelmed by the thought. I rushed to her side and hugged her. “I never have to worry about him as long as he has you,” she said against my ear. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know what to say to that. I felt lucky to have him.

I gently eased back. She was wiping away the final tears when her breath caught. “Are you okay?” I asked suddenly panicked. She incessantly shook her head looking past me. I turned around and froze. My breath caught at the sight in front of me.

“Lexi, I know we’re young and we have forever to go but I want to make sure that my forever is with you. It doesn’t have to be right away or any time soon, but would you please do me the honor of promising to someday be my wife?”

I took a few unsteady breaths and just gazed at him in wonder. His dark hair fell perfectly against skin complimenting his beautiful green eyes; eyes that I could look into forever. His button up white shirt was tucked seamlessly into his black dress slacks, both of which hugged his physique in all the right places. This man, this gorgeous specimen before me wants me forever? It doesn’t seem possible. It doesn’t seem right. What did I do to deserve him? He was everything I could want and more. Of course he’s the one. As the Dr. Zhan predicted, we will do great things together even if it’s just to get married and spend every day of forever with each other.

“Yes. Of course,” I choked. Let the faucet run. Every woman in the room crooned as they burst into tears. Even the men gave a slight awe.

Kellan slid the ring onto my finger. For the first time I looked down at it. I had been so engulfed in him that I didn’t even think to look at the ring. The ring! I looked between the ring and him a dozen times trying to process everything.

Appropriately placed on my left ring finger was a spectacular 4-carat round green diamond set on a simple white gold band. I was in awe over the stone; had never seen one this color before. One look at it and I instantly thought of him and his emerald green eyes.

In one move he was on his feet and in my arms. I firmly placed my hands on his cheeks and kissed him passionately. I kissed him like I’d never kissed him before. The others faded away and all that existed was me and Kellan, my heartbeat and his eyes.

I slept safely and happily in his arms that night; I drifted away to the steady beat of his watch and awoke to it still thumping beside my ear. But it was the bright light streaming in from the sun on a cold December day that caught my attention. I kissed his cheek before going to pull open the curtains and blinds, to take in the calm of the morning.

“You completely surprised me,” I said lost in the brilliant shine of the sun on my beautiful ring. I held my arm straight out, turned and tilted my hand every which way observing the gorgeous striations of the stone glittering in the light. “It reminds me of your eyes,” I commented absently.

“I’m glad you like it. I was worried you wouldn’t,” Kellan offered snuggling around me as I stood at my window absorbing the morning rays.

“I’m not a diamond girl, but I love this.” I abruptly took a serious tone. I hesitated but curiosity got the best of me. “I didn’t want to ruin the moment so I blocked my thoughts. I have to know though, why now?”

“Aside from the fact that you have four other male vampires coursing through your veins?” he smiled lightly. I bit my lower lip anxiously unsure of what he would say. He turned me to face him. “I’ve almost lost you more times than I care to recall right now. That sort of thing really makes you think about what’s important in life but mostly who you can’t live without in that life. I can’t live without you babe. And what’s scary is I can picture my life without my parents, even Craig, but not you. I meant it when I said you’re my forever girl.”

He never ceased to amaze me, only continued to affirm my choice in him as the best one for me. A smile crept at my lips. He said what every girl dreams of hearing, but it meant so much more because it was heartfelt honesty pouring from him to me.

I slipped onto the tips of my toes, leaned upwards and kissed him.

“I love it and I love you. You do realize that you’re spoiling me though, right?” He gently pulled back. He took my hand and lifted it to look at the ring on my left ring finger.

“This is nothing compared to what I want to do.” A devilish grin caused his dimple to appear. He ran his fingers through my hair and lowered his head to kiss me

again just as my phone rang. He sighed but backed away so I could race to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Merry Christmas to my one and only bestie,” Mel cheerfully greeted me.

“Merry Christmas,” I chuckled.

“No fluff, no bushwhacking. Is it true?” she insisted, excitement filling her tone.

“Is what true?” I played coy. I was pretty sure she somehow heard through the grapevine about last night, but not knowing for sure which aspect of the evening, I pressed for more.

“Dear sugarplums. The ring, the bling, the bada bada bing!” she exclaimed. Even Kellan let out a muffled laugh at that expression. “Tell me every single detail,” she ordered.

I relived each second of the momentous event with Mel. She squealed like a pig, gasped and cooed in all the right places in my story. She forced me to retell it two more times before I heard a familiar accent around her.

“Gotta give proppers to my mate. He’s a brilliant burler. Romanced the echo out of even the chaps,” Craig chimed in. “And the ring. You need a heli dark shade or you’ll be blinded by the beaut.”

“Ooh! You have to send me a pic of it Lex! Ugh! I can’t believe I missed it!”

“Okay, but when did Craig get there? He was just here hours ago.”

“O.M.G. It was the cutest thing ever! Kyle came and woke me up. I go out into the living room and there under

the tree is Craig and the most adorable puppy. They both had a bow on their heads and a bone in their mouths," she giggled like a schoolgirl.

"Aw!"

"And that's not all. Around the pup's neck was the most gorgeous diamond teardrop necklace! I was totally surprised. It was so... so... perfect," she finished sounding exasperated.

"He did a good job. What are you going to name the puppy? What kind is it?"

"It's a girl. She's a border collie and she's a caramel color with a small patch of white around her face. And I'm already in love with her. I have no idea what I'm going to name her though. I keep thinking of designers, candy and jewelry. I don't like Pearl, Coco is too common, and somehow Lolly doesn't fit her."

"Hmm. I don't know. I've never had a pet before..."

"She needs a regal name but Diamond is too long; Lexus reminds me of you and I definitely can't compare you to a dog. I like Princess Di but everyone would call her Princess and that's again too common," she sighed.

"What about Ruby? It's a gemstone that was worn by royalty a few centuries ago," I offered.

"Ruby? Ruby. Ruby... I love it! It's perfect. Ruby!" she called. I heard the faint trail of nails trampling wood floors getting closer and closer to Mel. "Look at that! She even comes when you call her! Thanks Lex."

"Glad I could help," I smiled through the phone.

"Is Kellan there?" I cut my attention from the phone allowing my eyes to scan the room and lock in on him. He

was spread out on my bed flipping through movie selections on the muted TV.

“Yeah, he’s here,” I replied absently.

“Oh, well go spend some time with your future hubby and we’ll catch up later.”

“Okay. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” she repeated before hanging up.

I looked over at Kellan again. I got lost in him. From the exposed definition of his muscles through his ribbed long sleeve grey shirt to the sharp yet soft edge of his jaw and messy hair that’s bedhead but oh-so-sexy on him, I soaked it all in. But my favorites feature was a tie between his smile and his eyes. I glanced down at the ring on my finger, a reminder that this gorgeous man vamp wanted me forever. A smile crept upon my lips as I leapt onto the bed from where I was by the window. I was too slow though.

“Nope. You didn’t block your thoughts when you woke up,” he projected the thought which explained his actions. He caught me mid-air, floating, dangling me at arm’s length over him on the bed.

I waited, taking advantage of the new viewpoint. He grinned a devilish grin but maintained his bench press. I quickly blocked my thoughts.

“How long are you planning to keep me like this?”

“I’m planning to keep you forever. Like this though... Egh, I haven’t decided yet,” he winked.

“You know, you can’t kiss me when I’m up here,” I offered as a mellow enticement to put me down.

“Good point.” And like that I was beside him embraced by his arms and being caressed by his lips. And it was in this moment that I felt like everything would be okay. They would never be the same but nothing ever is. My parents are never coming back, that piece of my life is forever gone, but the memories will always linger.

Bit by bit as time passes and my journey unfolds before me, my views are changing with experience. Marcel Proust said, “The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” These last three months had changed me; they’d molded my opinions and opened my mind up to a greater expanse. My interpretation of life and purpose had been skewed. I was different now than I was three months ago and I was sure I’d be further developed three months from now.

Being vampeen didn’t exclude me from tragedy, heartbreak or any other human devastation; contrary, its pain was felt for a thousand lifetimes instead of one. Given this, I could only try to push past it all. I couldn’t wallow in sorrow and pity; we all have a purpose in being here. Should we fall into self-doubt and depression after each obstacle or loss, we may lose our chance in fulfilling our destiny. Whatever your dream, goal or mission is, you must arm yourself for the failures, successes and missteps along the way.

What I’ve found is determination amongst a crumpled, inhumane world will provide you with limited encouragement but limitless possibilities. While God maps out my fate, it is me separately that sets my pace. So the longer I stay down, the longer I sit dormant in a cellar of induced sadness, the longer it will take me to accomplish all I am fortunate to. And should I wait too long, should I never have found the will to lift myself up to start again, then life would simply pass me by as time faded away.

Death doesn't wait for you to fulfill a prophecy so should you settle where you are, you will have wasted a lifetime on an emotion; you will have sacrificed what many deem precious for what we label a pity party of self-deceit, laziness and selfish failure for purpose always carries impact.

If one member of the team fails to do their assigned task, it's not that theirs was unimportant in completing the mission; it's that others must do more to pick up their slack so nothing falls. Now picture that on a global scale: the bums versus the mission workers, the criminals versus the soldiers, the slackers versus the over-achievers. Balance is created not imagined.

I've endured loss, war and much more. The only way I could ever fulfill my predicted destiny with Kellan was to keep pressing onwards. It's a choice and I'd already decided: I was going to do it for myself, my parents, Gran, Kellan and everyone else's success that's dependent upon mine.

"I love your mind. Smart, sexy and determined," he said nuzzling my neck.

"I thought I blocked my thoughts," I replied scrunching my forehead at the realization.

"There are some things we must project to believe and acknowledge to achieve."

"How philosophical of you."

"We complement each other; we're the perfect team," he smiled.

"I'll drink to that," I smirked. His eyes lit up with excitement that matched my internal palate.

I was excited to spend all of eternity with Kellan and equally amped to see all we'd accomplish individually and jointly according to our maps of fate and diligent pace. We'd braced ourselves for loss, vamped ourselves for war and finally settled into the notion of a massive, important destiny. I felt I was finally what we all strive to be: prepared for anything.

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And now, please enjoy a sneak peek of the next book in the Vamp Chronicles series, Hit the Road Jack.

HIT THE ROAD JACK

Some hunt, and some are hunted.

With lives at stake, literally, Lexi travels the globe pursuing the element of surprise against her enemy. Unfortunately, it seems there's a mole in her tightknit group. Lexi is forced to reevaluate her relationships, old and new, as her target closes in on her. Can her friendships survive the pressure of the front lines? And can her relationship with Kellan survive a game of cat and mouse?

Predictions aren't always accurate, or are they?

—

Hit the Road Jack

Chapter One

“Ugh, school, again. I can’t believe the break went by so fast,” Mel groaned as we walked the crowded halls of Cooper River High School. The same reluctance was shared by most of the students catching up in stairwells, corridors and along locker lined walls.

“It went by fast for you. But then again you slept oh, a hundred hours or so whereas I passed only twenty that way,” I commented with a touch of sarcasm as we approached her locker.

“That’s not my fault Chiquita.”

“Yeah, yeah.” There was a pause of silence before we broke into laughter.

“Is this what I have to look forward to every morning?” Kellan cut in.

Absently, I lifted our entwined hands to peer at my gorgeous ring reminding me of my one true love, and vampire, Kellan. It never left my finger and he rarely left my side. The only exception was when Gabi and Mel came over for bonding time, boy chat, closet raids and makeovers. Lately the guys had made a habit of coming together and trailing us on our outings. I didn’t blame them or get irritated by their overbearing. Kellan, well all of them really, were shaken up over the last attack in my house Christmas Eve. Being vampeen doesn’t make me invincible despite being immortal. They all lingered around on edge. My only distraction was my schoolwork. So much so that outside my photographic memory I would have aced my exams still.

“Uh, Lex?” Mel passed a hand in front of my face as if to snap me out of a trance. I jolted my head and snipped at her hand. She jumped back. “Holy sugarplums Lex! I mean, geez Louise!” Kellan snickered trying to disguise his amusement. I on the other hand didn’t care. I was chuckling languidly, which set her off. “That was so not funny guys! Ugh!” She slammed her locker door and stomped ahead of us.

I shrugged. “I thought it was funny. Mortals,” I sighed mockingly shaking my head.

Halfway to first period she caved; her anger subsided and was replaced by shared dread.

“I hate this four-by-four system. The classes go on forever and are fast paced to get through a massive text book in half the school year,” she whined slowing her pace to catch our relaxed stride behind her.

“On the upside you don’t have classes you hate all year,” I added cheerfully.

She glared over her shoulder. “I don’t exactly consider that a consolation prize.”

“Someone’s a bit cranky today.”

We rounded the corner towards the science section of the building. With one fluid yank Mel was beside Kellan and I was pulled back to stay in place. He took a deep breath inhaling through his nose.

“What is it?” I whispered. My words ran together as my eyes filtered the hall for danger. Serum threatened to flood my throat.

“Vampire,” Kellan hissed.

“Dangerous?” I asked.

He cut his eyes at me. "We're all dangerous. You of all people should know that by now."

"This day just keeps getting better," Mel sighed. "I'm not standing here all day though so let's go." She freed herself from Kellan's grip, not that he fought to hold her.

"I'm going with her," I announced releasing his hand to pursue my hotheaded best friend.

"Why are you so on edge?" I pressed as we entered our new Chemistry classroom. It was a large room. All the desks were nearly piled on top of each other in the front to make room for the many lab tables and supply cabinets claiming the back seventy-five percent of the space.

"I... It was hard getting ready for school without my mom. The first outfit of each semester we usually picked out together. It was sort of our thing..." she trailed off. Just because her mom turned out to be a vamp assassin and tried to kill me didn't mean I was any less compassionate for my best friend, especially since I lost both my parents the month before. Truth was it had been hard on both of us but we rarely spoke of our similar grief. She wrapped her hand around the locket I gave her for Christmas; inside was a picture of Melinda, her mom.

"I'm sorry. I miss mine too." My voice was barely audible as we slid into seats side by side in the middle row.

The final bell rang just as Kellan whisked in. He settled beside me but never looked at me; he was staring straight ahead. I followed his emerald eyes to a pair of hazel eyes locked on us from the podium... from our new teacher.

I shifted uncomfortably and for peace of mind reached to stroke the chain of my necklace, a weapon capable of mass destruction and a gift from the Bladang leaders - Kai, Kalel, Gabi and Rafi. It was still intact hanging just below

my collarbone. The teacher grinned and gave a quick, unarmed nod.

“Hello class. My name is Mr. Jameson and, in the event you didn’t review your schedule or observe the lab in the back, this is Chemistry.” He stepped out from behind the stand exposing a lengthy, slink figure that looked like it belonged to a runner. He was fit but soft and feminine in a way. He ran a hand through his dirty blonde hair trying to force it away from his eyes. He appeared harmless enough dressed in a button-up shirt under a vest; it was the kind most ancient professors adorned; yet he could barely pass for thirty. That was clue number one that he was a vamp.

He began to pace the rows, weaving amongst us. He continued speaking of chemists, alchemy and future projects we could anticipate covering this semester. As he traveled down towards me, Mel and I stiffened and Kellan slipped releasing a low, territorial growl. Mr. Jameson stopped abruptly beside me and turned towards Kellan.

“Is there a problem Mr. Bancroft?” His tone held an innocent menace; concurrently his voice didn’t match his body. His gaze held Kellan’s for a solid minute, but he didn’t reply.

“Kellan, answer him. Don’t start trouble,” I projected the plea. He remained silent.

“Well, it seems we do have a problem then. Alexa, Kellan, both of you see me after class,” he ordered. At first I found it peculiar that he knew our names as identified with our faces, but given his demeanor I somehow knew that he had been aware of us for a while.

“But I didn’t do anything,” I rebelled.

“I’m afraid you’re guilty by association Miss Jackson.” His eyes danced devilishly. I suddenly felt uneasy. I would

have sworn the walls were closing in on me.

“Don’t worry babe. I’ll protect you,” Kellan’s thoughts entered my mind. I knew he would never abandon me, but hearing it silenced my anxiety momentarily.

Books were distributed, the roster was confirmed and unnecessary overviews shared despite the outline in the front of our textbooks. By the end of the period serum swelled my mouth in fear of what was coming, not only after class, but all semester.

Mel picked up on the threat and was a nervous wreck all through class; she was on the verge of a panic attack by the end to the point she texted Craig to come get her ASAP. I felt horrible. Granted she would transform as I did in March, but she wasn’t one of us yet and shouldn’t be subjected to the danger of it all.

“Call you later Lex,” Mel said as the bell rang. She followed the crowd of students scurrying out into the busy halls and safety.

Kellan and I were on our feet immediately. I tossed him my gold dagger. I pressed my palms to the sides of my charm, an upside down cross, activating my shield. I was grateful for the protection in this moment as I prepped myself for battle. Our eyes were glued to Mr. Jameson as heads bobbed between us; he was alarmingly attentive of our every move yet his expression was unreadable. He wasn’t intimidating but also not harmless.

As the last student fled, Mr. Jameson raised his arm up and out from his side. With the flick of his wrist the classroom door slammed shut and locked. I instantly tensed. Outside the buzz of conversations filled the air; in here it was silent tension. With one limber leap over the desk Kellan stood directly in front of me protectively. Mr.

Jameson paid him no mind; I was shocked as he turned away and in a half second settled in the office chair behind his desk.

“Sit,” he gestured his hand towards two seats in the front row. When we made no movement he added, “Keep your weapons out but please sit. I mean you no harm.”

“Then what do you want?” Kellan pressed, remaining in his spot.

“You are the chosen ones; the ones prophesized of, are you not?” He busied himself in a desk drawer searching for something.

“What’s it to you?” Kellan hissed between gritted teeth.

“Relax. He’s clearly not interested in fighting,” I said pressing a hand to his back to calm him.

“Sit and I will tell you.” Kellan refused to budge. Against his will I hopped into the next aisle over and made my way to the before suggested seats.

“I’m afraid we aren’t trusting due to some recent incidents so if you could just cut to the chase I’d really appreciate it,” I stated. He looked between Kellan and me for a moment. As the bell rang, officially making us tardy or absent from second period, I hadn’t decided yet, he removed a worn black book from his drawer. Gold embellishments laced the binding but no visible title was displayed. In fact, no words or symbols appeared anywhere on the cover. It was a solid black fabric stretched over hard ends offering no clue to its contents. He noted my curious observance.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am William Jameson and I am your Eislom or guardian of wisdom.”

“Eislom? What is that?” I interrupted.

“As I said, I am your guardian of wisdom; I am your guide, your assistant. My sole purpose is to ensure that you fulfill yours. I am here to provide you with the resources and knowledge you lack. Now have you read the prophecies?”

“Uh... um...” I stuttered trying to wrap my brain around what he claimed. Kellan was suddenly seated next to me.

“I figured as much; hence the journal. It’s written in Slavak, Old Russian essentially. I have taken the liberty of translating it for you.” He whipped out a large four-inch black binder filled to the brim with 3-hole punched paper. “This is sacred and confidential. You must guard it with your lives. It provides you the keys needed to unlock your powers together. Now we will need to meet regularly. There is much to teach and more to learn.” Kellan and I sat motionless with dumbfounded looks on our faces.

“Is he legit? Is this real?” I asked. *“Dr. Zhan never mentioned an Eislom.”*

“I don’t know. I’m reluctant to trust anyone right now.”

“Oh wonderful, you’re already linked! You’re right on schedule with that feature. As for your hesitance, please confirm my participation with Dr. Zhan and anyone else you deem necessary to trust me. It’s imperative that you trust me.” He pulled out a legal pad and began making notes.

“Now I see you’re engaged or at least promised to each other. Have you claimed each other physically?” He was businesslike, as if he were conducting a job interview.

“Huh?” we exclaimed simultaneously.

“You’ve swapped blood but it seems you carry the blood of many vamps Alexa so I need to know if you two have mated.” He didn’t hesitate; he was direct in his explanations and didn’t waste one second on questioning us.

“Mated?” I stumbled peeking at Kellan whose forehead showed the same worried creases and cheeks flushed with embarrassment and rage on the subject.

“Yes, mated. Oh for heaven’s sake. Have you two had intercourse?”

“How old are you?” I smirked, allowing the outrage to subside. It seemed to lighten his mood a bit.

“Three hundred and twenty-three. I suppose the reference gave it away. However, I must know if you’ve had sex. Is that the modern term?”

“Yes, that’s the modern term and no we haven’t done it,” I spewed the information trying to withhold emotion.

“Oh dear, now I am not an advocate for adolescent promiscuity; however, I must insist that you two do this as soon as possible.”

“You *insist*?” I didn’t know whether I wanted to laugh, cry or scream over the suggestion.

“I’m releasing you two at once. You must go home with the journal. Read through it. You must consummate your union in order to unlock the powers between you,” he babbled. He seemed overwhelmed by the thought; almost flustered by the parallel.

“Are you serious?”

“Do I appear dishonest to you? Would I, a professor of academics, typically promote such recklessness early on?”

No, of course not! Go home at once and study this journal. You will need it to bring all you ought to pass.”

“We have classes. We’re in a school you know?” Kellan chuckled. I could tell he wasn’t buying into the story. I didn’t know for sure if I was either. Given everything I’d heard, seen and experienced the last couple months though, I couldn’t just discredit it as nonsense.

“Go home. I will file all the papers for you and obtain your assignments. Meet me tomorrow morning at 7am here in the classroom. Come through that back door there. It will be unlocked,” he said standing to pass the binder and journal to us. I looked at Kellan. Our glances were similarly shocked and yet not shocked, both receptive and ejective. Mr. Jameson gracefully approached us and set the books on the desk in front of me. “I know you are uncertain at this time, but please hurry along. We have no time to waste. 7am,” he reiterated with urgency. I nodded my head.

“So do we leave or stay?” I eyed the books before me, shifting impatiently in my seat. Kellan seemed to be just as restless.

“We will take your word for what it is: possible truth. If we choose to believe you then we’ll be here tomorrow morning.” He stood and reached for the items. His gaze was on me the entire time expectantly watching my reaction.

“Very well then,” William agreed rising at the same time as me.

“You do realize that encouraging students to skip school doesn’t make you a very good teacher,” I stated and asked moving to collect my book bag slung on the back of my chair.

“I encourage traditional students to attend class daily however you two fall within another category. Your future success relies not on this nonsense. Quitting tomorrow would further expand your learning opportunities in fact. Alas, we will take one step at a time and the first step is to trust me,” he explained. He slid his hands in his pockets and relaxed his stance. He was calm and comfortable despite our threats.

“Where are you from?” I looked at him quizzically.

“Can’t you tell by the accent?” he teased with a grin.

“England?”

“Very good. London to be exact though the London of my time versus today is quite different I’m afraid.” He spoke but his lips pursed and forehead wrinkled showing signs that his mind was elsewhere. I simply nodded.

As we left I realized I wanted to trust him, this Eislom as he called himself. Without my parents, I was lacking an authoritative guide. Sure the High Authorities and the Bladang Leaders stepped in and out, but with them it was usually all business. With Mr. Jameson, I felt like he would be more like my dad. It sounded foolish, even now, but it’s the feeling I got with him. I was apprehensive to trust anyone, but the emotional side of me, the human part, was overwhelmed at the idea.

“It’s not foolish babe. I know you miss your parents. Just remember that in our world emotions are weakness. We need to be careful,” Kellan warned pulling me into his arms as we roamed the empty halls towards the parking lot.

“I know you’re right. I’m trying but it’s hard to go against what dominates me. I am seventy-five percent human, remember?”

“You’re still twenty-five percent vampire and have had more vamp blood in you than anyone I know.”

“Point made,” I sighed pushing open the doors to freedom.

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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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