

THE MELODY CHRONICLES



MISTGUILD
Archives

LEIGH FERGUSON

MIST GUILD ARCHIVES

The Melody Chronicles Book 1

Leigh Ferguson

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ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Art Painter

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

*To the hospital workers on Christmas day who challenged
me to write a book with vampires, volcanos, and forced
proximity.*

Thanks for the inspiration!

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1: Mrs. Webster](#)

[Chapter 2: Ashes Around Me](#)

[Chapter 3: Twenty-Eight Hours](#)

[Chapter 4: A Green Aura](#)

[Chapter 5: Tea Time](#)

[Chapter 6: Was, Not Is](#)

[Chapter 7: Heartless](#)

[Chapter 8: The Banyan Tree](#)

[Chapter 9: Take Your Time](#)

[Chapter 10: More Questions](#)

[Chapter 11: Security](#)

[Chapter 12: I Have Questions](#)

[Chapter 13: Curveballs](#)

[Chapter 14: A Pearl Ring](#)

[Chapter 15: A Rather Inconvenient Touch](#)

[Chapter 16: Semblance of Freedom](#)

[Chapter 17: Lune](#)

[Chapter 18: Vampire](#)

[Chapter 19: Innocent](#)

[Chapter 20: He Loved Me](#)

[Chapter 21: An Uninvited Guest](#)

[Chapter 22: Us](#)

[Chapter 23: Why Not?](#)
[Chapter 24: Tell Me to Stop](#)
[Chapter 25: Letters from Home](#)
[Chapter 26: Aim True and Swing Fast](#)
[Chapter 27: The Deed](#)
[Chapter 28: Savored](#)
[Chapter 29: Running \(or Not\)](#)
[Chapter 30: Mist Guild](#)
[Chapter 31: My Past and My Future](#)
[Chapter 32: Melody](#)
[Chapter 33: Feed](#)
[Chapter 34: A Surprise](#)
[Chapter 35: Moon and Darkness](#)
[Chapter 36: Phoenix](#)
[Chapter 37: A Distant Memory](#)
[Chapter 38: Every Emotion](#)
[Chapter 39: The Photo](#)
[Chapter 40: Call Buffy](#)
[Chapter 41: Sister Time](#)
[Chapter 42: A Mistake](#)
[Chapter 43: John Doe](#)
[Chapter 44: Safe](#)
[Chapter 45: Rules of Engagement](#)
[Chapter 46: Healing](#)
[Chapter 47: Sister-in-law](#)
[Chapter 48: Something Like Forever](#)
[Chapter 49: A Handprint](#)
[Chapter 50: A Distraction](#)

[Chapter 51: Compulsion](#)

[Chapter 52: The Best of Both Worlds](#)

[Chapter 53: I Belonged to Him](#)

[Chapter 54: Moon to the Darkness](#)

[Chapter 55: Just the Beginning](#)

[Chapter 56: Cursed Blood](#)

[A Note From the Author](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Books By This Author](#)

CHAPTER 1: MRS. WEBSTER

Click! Flash!

The camera snapped my attention back to reality. Tears filled my vision. I clenched my hands together, digging my nails in so hard that I nearly broke the skin. My chest squeezed painfully tight while I stared at the blood on the floor. How did this happen?

“Mrs. Webster?”

A man in a navy blue uniform entered my line of sight and blocked the scene behind him.

“Umm...Parker. My name is Parker,” my voice softly called.

The man cleared his throat.

“Okay, Parker. Can you tell me what happened to your husband?”

“My husband...”

“Yes, Mrs. Web—I mean, Parker. Do you know what happened?”

Tears streamed down my face. A small sob escaped, and I turned around and ran out of the villa.

24 hours earlier.

I stared at the white dress and wondered if I was making a mistake. It wasn't the dress itself that was the problem. The lace cascaded down over my chest and waist into a belt of cream-colored pearls. It draped dramatically over my hips and rolled down the floor in a short train covering my satin kitten heels.

It wasn't the brightly colored bouquet either. I loved sunflowers. They were my favorite, especially with the navy blue ribbons and my sisters' bridesmaid dresses. My mother's necklace sat against my sternum. That wasn't the problem either.

But something was off. It didn't seem quite right to me.

While I stood staring at the floor-length mirror, it finally hit me. It was my face. Not the makeup or the expression per se, but my eyes were the problem. It was the lackluster way they looked back at me. Their green with sprinkles of amber didn't hold the joy I was expecting this day would have.

My whole life, my sisters and I had been dreaming about the days we would each get married. I built up this perfect image in my head of how wonderful it would be. I expected joy, peace, and, most of all, epic love.

It's not that I didn't love Joseph. We met six months ago at the Emergency Room when I was working one night. He came in after being stabbed in the arm while on duty as a police officer, and the next night he came by again asking for my number. I guess I didn't know what to expect. He was sweet and kind and all I should want in a husband.

Right?

A shuffle behind me broke my trance. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Hannah, Eliza, and Brooklyn fussing over each others' dresses and makeup.

"Oh, so, you're done staring at yourself now, huh?" Eliza asked, while popping out her hip and crossing her arms.

"Only if you are done staring at your own reflection." Teasing my sisters was one of the best parts of my family.

"Stop bothering her. Parker, I don't care if you stare at yourself for the rest of the day. It's not every day that a girl is a bride. Although, I'm sure a certain Mr. Webster would be disappointed if you didn't walk down the aisle to him," Hannah teased.

I allowed myself a small smile at the thought of Joseph. Brooklyn put her hand on my cheek. “Are you alright? Do you need a few minutes?”

My lips curved up at her. She was always looking out for others, so compassionate. “No, I’m ready.”



Joseph and I walked hand in hand into the airport. I glanced at my husband. He looked down at me and smiled. “Are you ready, Mrs. Webster?”

“Ready for what?”

“Our lives together. What else?”

“Of course! The wedding was perfect. There’s no turning back now,” I joked with him.

He leaned down to me and placed a chaste kiss on my lips. “I’m ready, too.”

We wandered through the airport, and I tugged on his hand when I spotted a coffee shop. Thankfully, there wasn’t a line. We ordered, and the barista worked on our coffees. I hugged my arms around myself. Joseph put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. Apprehension was building inside me and I tried to tamp it down.

“Vanilla latte?” the barista called out.

I raised my hand. “That’s me. Thank you... Andrew,” I read from his nametag.

“First time flying?”

“Um...no. I just got married,” I told him as I wrapped my hands around the paper cup.

“Congrats! Where’s the honeymoon?” Andrew grinned at me and made me feel at ease.

“Mele Island,” responded Joseph, as he came up behind me and put his arm around my waist again.

“Oh yeah, Hideaway Island. The resort is beautiful there. Lots of culture,” Andrew rambled on.

“You’ve been there?” I was hoping my nerves were from the flight to an unknown location. Maybe it would help to know more about it.

“Sure. It’s great—lots of dancing and drinking. The locals mostly keep to themselves, but you can’t blame them for that,” Andrew called over his shoulder as he moved around.

“Sounds wonderful,” Joseph crooned next to me. “Come on, Parker. Our flight leaves soon.”

CHAPTER 2: ASHES AROUND ME

All around me, the clear ocean stretched out in every direction. We had taken our connecting flights and a boat to Hideaway Island, a resort that was every newlywed couple's dream honeymoon location. Humidity caressed my skin, and the smells were odd to me but not unpleasant. Joseph dropped the bags on the floor of the villa before stretching his arms above his head.

"This is lovely, Joseph. I can't believe we're here."

Spinning around and grinning at him, I brought my hands to his chest.

"Not as lovely as you, Parker." Joseph gathered me in his arms. Slowly, with purpose, he pressed his lips to mine. A warmth spread across my chest as he took his time. His tongue licked the edge of my lips, and I opened my mouth to him. My arms reached up and wrapped around his neck while he slid his hands around to my back and pushed me flush against him. I pulled him closer to me and enjoyed the taste of my new husband. I couldn't suppress the grin that crossed my face as Joseph backed us into the wall.

"Are you happy, wife?" His words were soft with a seductive undertone.

"Yes. Very," my reply was short, and I was back to kissing him.

Joseph pulled back. A part of me was disappointed, but he brought his hand to my cheek and stroked it softly. "I'm going to grab a quick shower. I feel gross from all the traveling. Why don't you go to the beach? I'll come and find you as soon as I'm done."

I checked my feelings before they reflected on my face and smiled at him again. I wished he had taken the kissing much

further instead of sending me on a stroll. We hadn't even had sex yet, and the anticipation was gnawing at me. Instead of voicing my feelings, I smiled. "That sounds great. Don't be long."

I changed into a white sundress and went down to the beach. The light yellow sand fell away under my feet, but I didn't mind. How could anyone mind when they were surrounded by such beauty? I walked directly to the surf and let the warm waves lap at my ankles. The breeze brushed across my arms and carrying a slight chill. A sweater would be nice, but Joseph was coming soon and he would wrap his arms around me to ward off the cold. I couldn't imagine a more beautiful way to start my new life than here in paradise. It was a little sad that we would only be here a week, so I would have to make the most of every moment.



He never came to the beach. I tried to reason with myself, but the overwhelming feeling of being 'not enough' chafed. Eventually, my anger swelled enough that I stomped back to the villa. Joseph owed me an explanation. It was our honeymoon and I expected to spend every second with my new husband. So why wasn't he at my side?

Two strangers stood outside the door to my villa, each with notepads and scowls on their faces. My steps slowed as I took in more of the scene. Yellow tape blocked off the area to my door. The two strangers were dressed in blue uniforms. Lights were flashing to the side of the villa.

I bent under the tape and approached. They were police. What were police doing at the villa? The officers looked up, and one of them put their notebook in the pocket of his uniform. "You can't come closer."

"This is my villa."

My feet carried me closer, and the man moved toward me.

"Ma'am, please. You cannot go in."

He did not reach me in time, and I pushed open the door of my villa. Blood. The blood on the floor stole my attention. I followed its path to a familiar form. Joseph. He was facing away from me, but it was him.

Click! Flash!

The camera snapped my attention back to reality. Tears filled my vision, and I clenched my hands together, digging my nails in so hard that I nearly broke the skin. My chest squeezed painfully tight while I stared at the blood on the floor. How did this happen?

“Are you Mrs. Webster?”

A man in a navy blue uniform entered my line of sight and blocked the scene behind him.

“Umm...Parker. My name is Parker,” my voice softly called.

The man cleared his throat.

“Okay, Parker. Can you tell me what happened to your husband?”

“My husband...”

“Yes, Mrs. Web—I mean, Parker. Do you know what happened?”

My honeymoon turned to ashes around me. Tears streamed down my face. A small sob escaped, and I turned around and ran out of the villa.

CHAPTER 3: TWENTY-EIGHT HOURS

“You’re going to have to come with us.”

I jumped and a startled sob escaped my throat. The voice of the man who tried to stop me earlier was directly behind me. I swiped my hands over my cheeks as I turned to face him.

“Excuse me?”

“Your husband was murdered, Mrs. Webster. We need to ask you a few questions at the station.”

“Questions?”

“Yes, Mrs. Webster.”

“It’s Parker.” My mind was having a hard time keeping up with recent events. “What kind of questions?”

“About your husband’s murder.”

Murder? Oh, God...Joseph.

“I need to make a call. Can I get my phone?”

The officer shook his head. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Web—Parker. This is a crime scene now.”

I allowed the man to gently take my arm and escort me to a marked police vehicle. As we walked, his partner discussed something loudly with a larger man in a suit. The suit had a permanent scowl, and his dark hair was tied back in a low bun. His beard was neatly trimmed around a perfectly cut jawline. The two men went back and forth in a language I did not understand.

The policeman gently guided me into the vehicle’s back seat, and as the door shut, I locked eyes with the man in the suit. His eyes seemed black in the setting sun, sending a chill up my

neck. He was staring right through me, like I would give him the answer to some question. I broke the gaze, but it didn't stop the chills running down my arm as I felt his eyes still on me.

After a few more moments, the policeman sat in the driver's seat and took me to the station. The tears stopped on the drive there, and I settled into a state of numb survival. My husband was dead, and I had no idea what the police could possibly want to ask me. I wasn't even there when it happened.

Oh, God! What if I had been there? Would I be dead too? Was I in danger?

My hands started shaking, and I clasped them together in my lap between my thighs, hoping the pressure would stop the tremors. Eventually, we made it to a small police station, and the officer led me into a room with a table and chair. He handed me a cup of coffee and left me in the room alone.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. Twenty-eight hours. That's how long I was married before I became a widow.

Before too long, two men I had not seen before walked into the room and sat across from me. My eyes darted between them and then back down to the coffee. I pushed it to the side and ran my fingers along the sides.

"Hello. I'm Officer Smith, and this is Officer Mageo. Can you tell me your name?"

I looked between them again before answering. "Parker Rhodes."

"Hmmm. Not Webster?" The officer looked down at a stack of papers he had brought into the room with him.

"I assume you want my legal name. I was only married twenty-eight hours ago. I haven't exactly had a chance to go to the social security office."

"There's no need for the attitude, Miss Rhodes."

"I'm sorry. My husband is dead, and I'm stuck here with you instead of calling my family and arranging a flight home," I

snapped.

The officer pursed his lips. He turned to his partner, who produced another picture from a file he held. He slid it across the table to me, and I picked it up. It showed a wooden stake with a rune in a circle emblazoned on the side. The stake had blood on it.

“Can you tell us what this is?” the officer asked.

“No. I have no idea what that is. Am I supposed to?”

“It was found in your room with your husband’s body.”

I settled back in my chair and crossed my arms. “Am I under arrest? I get the feeling that this is an interrogation.”

Officer Smith leaned closer across the table. “Where were you, Miss Rhodes? At the time of your husband’s murder?”

“On the beach. Joseph told me he was going to get a shower and that he would join me soon. When he didn’t show, I returned to the villa and found the officers already there.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, alone.”

The officer made a disgruntled noise in his throat. Silence choked the air out of the room. Finally, I uncrossed my arms and rose to my feet.

“Well, if you have no other questions, I’m going to find a phone and book a flight home.”

The officer rose and stacked his papers against the table. “You are free to go since we have no evidence to hold you at this time. However, you will not return to the United States until we can be sure you had no part in this murder.”

“Excuse me?” Surely I didn’t hear him right.

“You cannot leave. Not until we say so.”

CHAPTER 4: A GREEN AURA

“Where will I go? Where will I live?”

My anger rose with each question.

“We have made arrangements for you to stay with one of the locals, Sefa Peters. He runs a security firm and has a cottage where you can stay until this is all settled out.”

“So you can keep an eye on me. I didn’t do anything!”

“It’s just a precaution, Miss Rhodes.”

“A precaution? I’m not the one you are looking for! Someone killed my husband! What if they are looking for me too?” I ran my hands through my hair.

Officer Smith put his arm on my shoulder. I’m sure he was supposed to be comforting, but he could take some tips from my old nursing professors. His touch was too firm and felt like an iron grip. “I’m sure you will be safe. As I said, Sefa is a security professional. If the killer is looking for you, they will have a hard time getting into his home.”

He guided me to the front of the building, where a town car sat parked outside. A woman leaned against the side of the vehicle. Her driftwood skin glowed in the fading lights. Her clothes were hardly there. A crop top cut low down the front showed ample cleavage and a bare midriff. Her cut-off short jeans showed off her lean legs. Perfect makeup brightened her face, and gold hoops and studs lined her ears.

“Aroha, this is Miss Rhodes,” Officer Smith introduced us.

I shrugged his hand off my shoulder and extended mine to the woman. “It’s Parker.”

“What a gorgeous creature! Come on, now. Let’s get you out of here.” She took my hand and pulled me into her side,

wrapping her arm around my shoulder.

Aroha's presence was soothing. Something immediately brought a smile to my face with her words. "Yes, let's!"

I climbed into the town car with this perfect stranger and shivered as the officer's eyes traced my every move. Aroha turned the music up a little too loud and sped away from the station. She turned the music down when we drove out on the open road. "You must be so exhausted. How long have you been on Mele?"

"Less than a day. We had only put our bags in the villa when I went for a walk, and Joseph went to shower. Did they...Did they tell you what happened to him?"

Aroha waved her hand in the air dismissively. "They said he was murdered, and they think you did it."

"I didn't do it," I hurried to tell her.

"I know. I knew that the second you walked out of the station."

That gave me a little pause. How could she possibly know that I was innocent? The pop music beat along while I looked at her. "How could you know that?"

"Your aura. It's green."

"Green? A green aura, and you believe me not to be a killer?" I almost laughed, but Aroha said it with such certainty I held off.

"Mhmm. Do you mind?" Aroha reached for the radio and turned up the music again. The notes were more somber now, but some words were in English, or something like it, and I let myself get lost in it. We rode without conversation as she wound her way around an incline.

I turned and watched the scenery around me. This island was absolutely beautiful. So many variations of green mixed with colors I had never seen before, along with trees that seemed to stretch all the way to the sky. As the sun set, orange and purple collided in the sky like a painting from a museum. A tear

slipped down my cheek. Joseph really chose a wonderful place for us to begin our lives together. If only he had chosen a different island.

Aroha turned the car onto a small paved road, and we approached an iron gate between beige walls. She punched some numbers into a keypad, and the gate opened on its hinges. Pristine trimmed hedges and exquisite flower beds decorated the landscape behind the walls instead of the wild growth of the forest beyond the borders.

The home consisted of the same beige stone as the walls. It wasn't overly grand, but it still felt opulent. Hanging plants hung from the covered porch and fell in canopies close to the ground. Aroha pulled the car around and I took in the view. The ocean kissed the yellow sand below while the greens of the forest climbed up the slope to meet us. I could see in all directions around the island. It stole my breath.

Aroha stepped out of the car and I followed her. "Wow, this is..."

"Incredible, huh? I've gotten used to it, but I remember the first time. Come on. Let's go inside."

Aroha led the way and pushed open a set of doors. The inside was just as beige as the stone outside, but dark wooden beams hung along the ceiling. Green plants in colorful pots were scattered throughout.

"Come on, Parker. Let's go meet Kalina and Lono. Then I will take you to meet Sefa."

A deep voice behind us caused me to jump. "So this is the murderer I'm supposed to keep an eye on? Not much to her."

CHAPTER 5: TEA TIME

I turned around to see the same man who had talked to the police officers at the villa. He was still in his suit, his hair tied back, and his permanent scowl firmly in place. He stood in a doorway with his arms crossed over his chest.

Oh, I'd met jerks like this before. Working in the ER, you meet all kinds of horrible people. This one was clearly a demeaning, controlling man who lacked respect for those around him. I knew his type, and the ones before him taught me everything I needed to know.

I crossed my arms and lifted my chin. "I'm not a murderer."

"That's not what the officers told me."

"They're wrong."

"We'll see."

My eyes narrowed, and I hated that my face twitched under his gaze. "See what, exactly? Do you think I lured my husband into a quick marriage and convinced him to fly us on an expensive honeymoon so I could turn around and murder him? That's ludicrous. I would never kill anyone. I have no motive!"

"Everyone has a motive. Money, power, revenge. Yours will show up, I'm sure."

A single tear slid down my cheek, and red-hot rage flushed my face. I stomped up to the man and put my finger up in the space between us. "You don't know me. You didn't know Joseph. Keep your disgusting opinions to yourself. I'll show myself out."

Rushing out the same way I entered, I pushed through the door. Now where would I go? Exhausted and completely lost, I sat on the driveway's curb and buried my face in my hands. I

let the tears go—tears for my husband, for my situation, for the shock. I was so alone in a strange world, and a part of me was angry with Joseph for leaving me here.

“Why are you crying, lune? Come, come. I’ll make tea.”

I whipped my head up at the new voice. Raspy with age, it was almost musical and smoothed out with an accent. It belonged to a petite woman with gray hair braided down her back. Her eyes nearly disappeared beneath the wrinkles. She held in her hand a walking stick, but it appeared she carried it more than leaned on it for support.

“Come, lune.” She waved me toward her as she walked across the lawn to another building. The cottage matched the main building. I didn’t know why I followed her, but she seemed genuine. Her gait was quicker than expected, so I jogged to keep up. When we approached the door, I hesitated. The woman gripped me at my elbow and pulled me toward a small table.

“Lono! I found a guest. Fetch me the tea,” she called into the empty space. She released my arm and pointed at the chair for me to sit. I complied and studied the walls with awe. Art covered almost every inch.

“My Kalina, do we have tea? I can’t find it.” I startled again when a slim older man popped his head out of a pantry I did not notice before.

The woman left a kettle boiling on the stove as she shuffled to the pantry. “You are not wearing your glasses, Lono.” Sounds of items moving echoed about the area. I leaned in the chair to see them, wondering if they needed help. The couple emerged, and the woman held a canister of tea in her hand.

“Oh, she is beautiful, Kalina,” the man said. “But she is sad.”

“That’s why I needed the tea, Lono. Sit. Sit and talk to her.”

They spoke like I wasn’t in the room at all, and I found it endearing. The older man sat at the opposite side of the table. He smiled broadly. “I am Lono. This is my beautiful woman, Kalina. Welcome to our home. We are so glad you are here.”

I scrunched my nose. Perhaps they were confused. “Um. Thank you. Do you know who I am?”

Lono chuckled. “No, but you are welcome all the same.”

“Welcome?”

Kalina used a tea towel and poured the steaming water over three mugs. “Welcome, lunc. You are welcome here.” She brought over the mugs and set one in front of me. “Now, tell me why you are sad.”

I blinked at my tea. Anxiety climbed up my chest. Despite my circumstances, I was enjoying this reprieve and didn’t want it to end. I decided on a half-truth instead of the whole. “I miss my home and my family.”

Lono crossed an ankle over his knee and leaned back. “It is natural to miss one’s home. Do you want to tell us about it? Will that help?”

No platitudes, no attempts to make my situation better than it was. Somehow, it was comforting.

“I live in Phoenix, Arizona, in the United States. I love the dry air and the heat.”

“What do you like to do there?” Kalina asked.

“Oh, I’m a nurse in the emergency department. It keeps me busy enough.”

“A nurse! Did you hear that, Lono? She can help!”

A sinking feeling filled my chest. Once people learned I was a nurse, they often asked for free medical advice.

“Oh yes, Kalina, she is perfect!”

The elderly couple beamed at each other as if they had solved some problem.

A clang of the door opening caused me to jump again and spill some of the tea. Heavy footsteps came down the hall of the cottage. “Mother? Father?”

To my great dismay, the man from the main building stood in the doorway. His brows lowered as he saw me sitting at the table.

“What is she doing here?”

“Oh, Sefa. Good. We just hired her. She is our new caretaker.”

“What?” I exclaimed.

“No,” Sefa said sternly.

“It is already decided, son. Your mother insists. You won’t upset your dear mother, will you?” Lono asked.

“Father, she is here because she is accused of murder. I don’t want her anywhere near you.”

“Nonsense,” Kalina rose and walked over to the scowling giant. “She did not kill anyone. She has a good aura. Green. If you insist I need someone looking over my shoulder, I want it to be her.”

“She will not be here with you. How is she even qualified?”

I rose and crossed my arms. “I’m a registered nurse in the emergency department where I live. I have been a nurse for five years. Will that qualify me to be a caregiver?” Sarcasm bit my tone. I usually didn’t have this much poison in my words, but everything about this man chafed like sandpaper. “Besides, what else should I do while I’m on lockdown?”

Kalina laid her hand on Sefa’s arm and they shared a look. He glared in my direction before reluctantly bending and kissing the elderly woman’s cheek. Rising to his full height, he scanned me up and down. “As you wish, Mother. Parker can be your new caregiver as long as she is here.”

CHAPTER 6: WAS, NOT IS

“Get her out of here. I don’t care where you have to take her.”

I glared at Sefa across the table while he glared at the officers.

“There is no other place for her, Sefa. We’re just here to ask some more questions.” Officer Smith sat beside Sefa while his partner stood silently behind him. “Miss Rhodes, can you think of any reason why someone would want to murder your husband?”

The several hours of sleep and the coffee earlier cleared my mind from the travel and emotional fog. Today, I needed answers from these two, not the other way around. “I think you owe me a few answers first. How was my husband murdered?”

“We cannot discuss the case with you.”

“You are discussing the case with me by asking questions.”

“You are a suspect, Miss Rhodes. I cannot give you details.”

“Fine. When can you release his body?”

Officer Smith blinked and paused at my question before tapping his thumb against the table. “I will have to discuss this with the medical examiner. Usually, it’s around six weeks.”

“Six weeks! What about a funeral? What about closure?” My cheeks flamed hot while I leaned forward and slammed my hand down on the table.

“What about his life? I would think his wife would be more concerned about finding his killer.”

“Ugh!” I ran my hands through my hair, closed my eyes, and breathed deeply. Finding my professional composure, I started again. “I am concerned about who killed Joseph, but it is your job to find the person responsible, not me. I want to go home

to be with my family and friends to grieve. I can't do that until you release me and release his body. I haven't even had a chance to call his sister. I haven't had a chance to call anyone."

I continued to stare at Officer Smith, willing him to blink first while I crossed my arms over my chest. They had no reason to keep me here or to keep me from a phone. I was going to call my family. Today. Even if I had to steal one.

"Are you sure you can't think of anyone that may want to harm your husband?"

I let out a sigh and leaned against the table. "Joseph is a cop. I'm sure plenty of people out there didn't like him. I'm not sure of one here in Mele, though."

"I understand that your husband was in law enforcement. I'm asking of anyone who held a specific grudge. Can you think of anyone?"

My mouth parted, and I collapsed back in the chair. Of all his words, *was* rang in my ears the loudest. Joseph was a cop. Was, not is. Joseph was dead.

My throat burned with tears, and I wiped away the traitorous ones that escaped against my will. Joseph wasn't coming back. I was stuck in this giant mess and all alone.

Officer Mageo cleared his throat from across the room where he stood. "I think that's enough for today, Smith. Sefa, let the girl make her phone call."

"She may not use our phones. You are taking her with you," Sefa seethed.

"There is nowhere else at the moment," Officer Smith said as he stood. "Once the tourist season slows down and other arrangements can be made, we can find another place for her to stay."

Sefa scowled but rose to escort the officers out of the house. I let my eyes wander to the view of the ocean. If I had to walk this road and become a widow the day after my wedding, at

least I was surrounded by beauty. The early morning sun brought yellow and gold tones to the peaceful waves.

“Do you know the number?”

I startled at his gruff voice standing close. When did he come back into the room?

“Excuse me?”

“The number. For your phone call.”

In his hand, he held a cell phone. I reached for it, but he pulled it away. “The number? I’ll make the call.”

I tilted my head and frowned. This man obviously needed a vacation, which was funny considering where we were. I rattled off the numbers to him. After he tapped them into the phone, he handed it to me. “You have fifteen minutes. The call will be recorded.” Before I could respond, he stormed out of the room.

My mouth gaped open and I stared at the space where he was a moment earlier.

The call will be recorded. Seriously?

A voice from the speaker pulled me back to reality.

“Hello? Hello?”

“Eliza?”

“Parker! I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon. How’s the honeymoon? How’s the sex?”

“Eliza!”

“Are you having lots of fun? Are you drinking all the booze?”

“Eliza!”

“What?”

I bit my lip and paused, unsure of how to continue. “Umm...”

“Parker? What’s wrong?”

“I have to tell you something. Can you sit down for a minute?”

Rustling on the other side of the speaker told me my wild little sister was preparing to listen. “Okay, Park, I’m sitting. What do you have to tell me?”

I took a deep breath and told her everything that had happened since I got to Mele. Complete silence on the other end convinced me that I somehow ended the call. I held my breath for a few moments before finally breaking the silence again.

“Eliza? Are you there?”

“Yeah. So... Your husband was murdered. You’re stuck in a tropical paradise. You got married, but are still a virgin.”

A reluctant chuckle escaped me. “Of all the things I said, that was what stuck?”

“I’m sorry. Let me regroup. Okay, what do you need from me?”

“A few things. Do you have a pen?”

“Nope, I’m putting you on speaker and plugging it into my notes app, though.”

“Fair enough. I need you to call the hospital and tell them I’ll be gone longer than I thought. Then, can you go to the apartment and check on things?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Um, Eliza.”

“Yeah?”

“Can you tell Mom and Dad? And Brooklyn and Hannah?”

“Well, someone needs to. How will we get in touch with you?”

“I’m not sure yet. As soon as things settle here, I will be in touch again.”

“Is there anything else?”

“Um...yes. Can you see if you can call Kara?”

“I saw her at the wedding, and she said she was going out of town again. She kept rambling about wildlife and bears and

bats. I don't know if I can reach her."

"Can you try? She's Joseph's only living relative, and she's a marine biologist. That's why she was talking about wildlife and bears and bats. Please try, Eliza. I want her to know as soon as possible."

"Sure. Sure. Parker?"

"Yes, E?"

"I hate that you are out there all alone. Can one of us maybe fly out and join you?"

A smile softened the muscles of my face. "I wish, but apparently, the entire island is booked right now. That's why I have to stay with this security guy."

"Is he hot? Wait, don't answer that. You're in mourning. I'll scope him out and see for myself."

I groaned at my sister's antics. Nothing had changed since our teen years, but she was fiercely loyal, so I trusted her to handle things for me until I got home.

"Goodbye, Eliza."

"Goodbye, Parker. I love you!"

"Love you, too."

I tapped the red button to end the call and held the phone close to my chest. Eliza's energy and familiarity stitched back pieces of my broken heart. I missed her and the rest of my family so much. Getting back to them needed to be a priority.

"Hey there!"

Aroha's cheery voice was a welcome surprise. I turned around and saw her leaning casually against the table.

"Sefa sent me to tell you your time is up."

I handed her the cell phone. "How kind," I deadpanned.

"Also, he asked me to take you to Kalina and Lono. They are going out, and he wanted you to go with them."

The elderly couple were a ray of sunshine in my dreary life, so I welcomed the chance to spend time with them. “Lead the way.”

CHAPTER 7: HEARTLESS

“Oh good, lune, you’re here. Can you carry this for me?”

Kalina handed me a small red cooler.

“Aroha said you wanted to go out. Where are we going?”

“Oh, out. You’ll see.” Kalina patted my arm and headed for the door. I followed closely behind. Lono stood behind the car, shutting the trunk.

“Are you ready, my Kalina?”

Babysitting an elderly couple wasn’t exactly what I thought I would be doing today, but it beat sitting in the house with a grumpy Sefa. She smiled at her husband, and they climbed into the car. I slid in the backseat with my cooler and buckled in.

Lono drove down the mountainside and into the bustling town, where he parked in front of a marketplace. Kalina fussed about not having the right basket and nodded for me to get the cooler. Lono pulled his glasses from his shirt pocket and squinted at a handwritten list.

“Did you mean to write limes on this? I think we need lemons,” he muttered.

“We can get limes *and* lemons, Lono,” I suggested.

“Oh, good idea, lune,” Kalina said as she patted my hand.

“Can you go and get the lemons and limes? We will get the rest and meet you back by that booth. Don’t forget the cooler.”

I watched the couple shuffle off down the marketplace while I went in search of the limes and lemons. The citrus was easy enough to find, and my mind wandered over the events of the last couple of days.

Did Joseph have any enemies? Would they come looking for me?

An unexpected feeling that kept creeping up in my soul surprised me, although I supposed it was not that shocking. Joseph and I hadn't known each other for very long. I did love him, but the feeling that slipped to the surface when I was alone was *relief*. Brooklyn would have a field day with that. My sister always intuitively knew my mind. She asked me several times in the days before the wedding if I needed to talk, and I brushed her aside. How did a girl admit she didn't want to go through with it days before her wedding because she was scared it was a mistake?

Surely many brides had nerves and apprehension. But this had been different. This had felt like an internal warning bell telling me to turn around and go another way.

A shoulder bumped against mine and drew me back to the present. Where were Kalina and Lono? They should have met me by now. I scanned the marketplace for the couple but didn't see anyone I recognized. Maybe they were taking their time or talking to someone they knew.

I wandered around the market. It wasn't overly crowded, and after a few minutes, I turned down the last row of produce and realized they weren't there. A little flutter of nerves flew about my chest, causing me to spin too quickly. I collided with a firm chest and arms that gripped my elbows to keep me upright.

"Watch it!"

"I'm so sorry," I rushed to say as I pulled myself upright and knocked into a stand of melons. I reached for them, but the stranger moved faster than me and caught the fruit.

"I'm so, so sorry. I was distracted."

I saw amber eyes and a handsome face smiling down at me. His locs were tied back away from his face, revealing a strong jaw and full lips. Not that I was looking at his lips. Why was I

looking at his lips? My eyes darted back up to his, and a smirk twinkled in them.

“Hey, hey. It’s fine. Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I answered too quickly. “Yes. I’m fine. I should be asking you if you’re fine.”

“I’m fine.”

A moment paused before he cleared his throat and put his hand between us. “I’m Tiato.”

“Parker,” I said as I placed my hand in his. He shook it but lingered a moment too long before releasing it.

“Parker,” he repeated. “It’s nice to meet you.” He looked around the market before returning to meet my gaze again.

“Are you looking for something?”

“Someone, actually. Two someones. The couple I came here with. I can’t seem to find them.”

“Here, we can walk together and see if we can find them.” He waved his hand in front of him, suggesting I lead the way. I grinned and began walking. Tiato kept pace beside me. “What do they look like? The couple that you came with?”

“Oh. It’s a little embarrassing. I came here with this older couple. They asked me to find them some lemons and limes and wait at the front. I’m beginning to wonder if they wandered off.”

“They wouldn’t happen to be Kalina and Lono?”

I narrowed my eyes. “How did you know?”

“Call it a lucky guess. And if I had to guess where your charges disappeared to, it would be the pier.”

“The pier?”

“I can walk you there if you want?” His hopeful tone warmed me, and a tiny tingle of excitement ran up my spine.

“Sure.” I smiled and welcomed the fluttering of butterflies in my stomach.

We exited the market and turned down the sidewalk when a voice boomed from a few feet away. “Parker!”

I jumped as Sefa’s broad form appeared at my side. Tiato took a step away from me. I tilted my head up at the wall of muscles. He scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. My body immediately went on the defensive and I straightened to face him. I set my hand on my hip and raised an eyebrow.

“Parker, where are my parents?”

“I was on my way to find them. Tiato thinks—”

“Tiato thinks!” Sefa scoffed. “Unlikely.”

“He was kind enough to offer to help me.”

Sefa’s eyes darted to Tiato and back to me. “I’m sure he was.”

“It’s more than I can say for you. You’ve been nothing but... but...” My words failed me, and my cheeks flushed red.

Sefa continued scowling while I found my words.

“Heartless. You’ve been heartless.”

The giant man unfurled his arms, and for a split second, his face softened before returning to stone.

“I’d be happy to—” Tiato began.

“Leave,” Sefa ordered. “You can leave.”

The two men glared at each other until some unspoken agreement took place. Tiato glanced at me apologetically before he shoved his hands in his pockets and strolled down the street in the opposite direction.

Sefa placed his hand on my shoulder and steered me toward the pier.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Keeping an eye on you, apparently.”

“Then look.” I brushed his hand off my shoulder. “Don’t touch.”

A twitch in his cheek was the only indication my words landed.

“Where are my parents?”

“I don’t know. They told me to get lemons and limes and meet them at the front, but they never showed. And I ran into Tiato, and he offered to help.”

“Did he touch you?”

My mouth dropped open. “What? No! Why would you ask that?”

Sefa straightened and looked down the sidewalk before back at me. “Kalina and Lono like to fish, but they aren’t as steady on the pier, and it doesn’t have safety bars. I don’t let them come anymore.”

So many thoughts flew through my head, but with no time to process them, I turned and stormed off in the direction of the pier. The dock was unmistakable, and I continued my furious pace until I found the older couple standing at the very end. Sefa followed silently behind.

“Oh, lune. Did you bring the cooler?”

Looking down, in my hand there was a red cooler. A laugh exploded from my chest. How did that cooler make it through this little adventure? I had forgotten all about it.

“It’s time to go,” Sefa ordered from behind me.

Lono reluctantly pushed his fishing pole into Sefa’s hand, grumbling as he passed.

“Can’t a man get a little peace and quiet to enjoy the fish?”

CHAPTER 8: THE BANYAN TREE

My foot bounced restlessly while I waited on Aroha and Sefa to return from behind the office door. Kalina and Lono were safely returned to their home while Sefa ordered me back into the house to wait.

The chair was uncomfortable and I shifted my weight, wishing I could walk but not wanting to receive more harsh words or looks. I rolled my lip between my teeth while trying and failing to ignore a raging swell of guilt.

What was it about Tiato that had me practically swooning from the first meeting?

That wasn't me. Maybe it was the stress of the situation. Maybe it was the romance novel-style meeting?

He was very handsome and kind. What if I actually was attracted to him? Would it be so wrong?

And there was the guilt again. I was a widow. A new widow at that. What was I doing thinking about other attractive men? I should be thinking about Joseph.

I bit down on my lip harder, hoping it would distract from the overwhelming feeling that I was cheating on my dead husband.

The door flung open, and I jumped as Sefa stormed through the office space and out of the home. My eyes tracked him, but he never glanced at me even once.

Aroha's soft presence filled the room. She locked eyes with me briefly before going to her desk. After shoving a few things in her pocket, she crossed the space between us and pulled me up by my arm.

"Come on, Parker. Let's go for a walk."

“A walk?”

“Mhmm. I think it will help us both.”

Aroha slid her arm through mine and led us out onto the grounds. We followed a sandy path as she pulled me from my thoughts.

“It is not your fault that Kalina and Lono went on their little adventure. They would have found a way to find some fun with or without you.”

“I know. They are their own people and should be allowed to fish if they want to fish.”

Aroha chuckled. “Good luck explaining that to Sefa.”

“He is their child, not the other way around.”

“You are not wrong.” Aroha slid her hand along my forearm in slow, steady strokes as we continued walking. “Sefa plans for every contingency. It is his job, and he is very good at it. I believe that he only fusses with Kalina and Lono because he loves them.”

“Sure, but if you love someone, you also respect them. They deserve to make decisions for themselves.”

“Mhmm. This is true.” Aroha brought us to a stop. “Do you see this?”

The tree before us seemed to be made of many trees coming together as one. It stretched tall, and its trunk was so wide I could not encircle it with my arms. The branches grew wide and created a canopy of greens.

“It’s magnificent.”

“The banyan tree has spent hundreds of years growing and becoming this.” She extended her hand in the air to accentuate her words. “She is magnificent but often overlooked and passed by. The same is true of Kalina and Lono.”

I smiled, and a little weight lifted in my heart at her words. She understood what I already knew. Humanity had value, no matter the age.

I stood silently beneath the banyan tree while Aroha rubbed my arm and muttered under her breath.

When she finished, I couldn't help but to ask. "What were you saying? I couldn't hear."

"A prayer. Banyan trees are sacred to my people, if we remember. Come now. I have something else I want to show you."

Aroha moved to my other side and slid her arm into mine again. The familiarity of her touch was unexpected but not unwelcome. Only a few moments passed before we arrived in front of so many vibrant colors I stopped in my tracks, unable to sort all of it at once. The most pleasant perfume of flowers crept around me. The flowers were every shade of purple and pink mixed with greens and whites. Some yellow shone through in places, accenting the garden's beauty.

"What is this?"

"A garden, silly. What does it look like?"

"It's stunning! Can we go in?"

For the first time, Aroha released my arm and gestured to the garden. "Of course. Go ahead. I'll be right here. I have a little work to catch up on."

I followed the path quickly and reached out to touch the leaves. Every time the breeze lifted my hair, a new fragrance met me. I wanted to know them all. The path eventually led to a gazebo with a bench inside, and sitting there and soaking up the experience seemed like the best idea.

Everything was easier in the gazebo. There was no guilt, no worry, and no officers asking me questions about my husband's murder. I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. In this little moment of peace, I finally let my guard down.

Tears slid down my face, but they didn't overwhelm me. The emotions pulled on my heart but didn't crush it. Surrounded by beauty, it was easier to let them flow. I needed to try and plan

to find a way home. I needed a strategy to deal with this predicament I was in. But for now, this garden could stitch together the pieces that felt like they were falling away.

The sun was almost dipping below the horizon when Aroha came to retrieve me. “Oh, good. Your aura is green again. The gardens must have worked their magic.”

I rose and wrapped her in a hug. “Thank you. You have no idea how much I needed this.”

“Come on now. I have a surprise for you, and I think you will like it.” Aroha took my hand and tugged me along the path back toward the home. When we arrived, she brought me to the office where she pulled out something from the desk drawer and held it out to me.

“A phone? Really?”

“I think it will help you.” Aroha pressed it into my hands. “I programmed your sister’s number in so you won’t have to worry about the international numbers.”

“Thank you.” I stared at the phone, never realizing how much I depended on the connection to my friends and family.

“Don’t thank me. It was Sefa’s idea. I would use it sparingly though. The police are going to be very interested in who you talk to.”

“Oh.” The police were watching me. I was a suspect. The first part of her statement slammed into me next. “*Sefa’s* idea? That doesn’t seem like him.”

Aroha shrugged. “He asked me to get a phone for you and put this number and his in there, in case you need it.”

“His number?”

“Mhmm.”

“Oh.”

I glanced down at the phone in my hand and then back at Aroha. She chuckled and put her hands on my shoulders.

“Why don’t you go get some rest?” She spun me around and gently pushed me to the door. “You’ve had a big few days.”

“Do you know the time difference between here and Arizona?”

“Yep. I looked it up for you. They are four hours ahead of us.”

“Oh.”

Aroha smiled and waved me out of the room. “To bed. Tomorrow, you can call your sister.” She grabbed her keys and purse off the desk and strolled out the front door.

I crawled into my bed, laying the phone on the bedside table. With my head on the pillow facing my connection to my family, I couldn’t help but think about the *other* person’s number programmed in the phone.

CHAPTER 9: TAKE YOUR TIME

Something smelled absolutely amazing.

I stretched out my arms and pulled the covers away from my legs. Wrapping a throw blanket around my shoulders, I followed my nose to the kitchen.

My mouth parted and my eyes widened. Sefa stood shirtless in the kitchen. Miles and miles of tattoos covered his back and arms. His hair was pulled up in a bun on his head while he hovered over the stove with his back to me. I ran my hand through my hair and tugged on it, unsure if I should tiptoe away or say something.

Sefa turned, reaching for something on the counter, and our eyes met. I had no choice but to say something. “Um, you cook?”

He stared for a beat and then turned back to the stove. “Most of us need to cook to eat.”

I pulled the blanket closer around my shoulders. My will was divided between going back to hide in my room and sitting at the counter. Instead, I remained frozen in the same spot while I tried to avoid staring at the tattoos on Sefa’s back.

“Oh, lunc, good. Breakfast is about ready.” Kalina shuffled in from the dining area. “Go and keep Lono company. I’ll bring you some tea.”

I nodded and scurried to the dining room, watching Sefa out of the corner of my eye.

“Beautiful Parker, will you join an old man?”

Unable to help myself, I smiled at Lono. He slid his glasses off his face and patted the seat next to him. I slid into it and pulled the blanket closer.

“I hope you rested well.”

“I did. What are you doing here? I usually join you at your home,” I asked.

“Once a week, my Kalina insists that Sefa cooks breakfast for us, and we have a meal as a family.”

“Aw, that’s really nice. My family does dinner together sometimes.” Geez, I really missed them right now.

Lono chuckled. “Kalina used to make him cook dinner, but after so many times missed for his work, she changed it to breakfast. She started showing up before the sun, and that boy cannot tell his mother no. He can avoid her, but he cannot tell her no.”

The softness that Lono described was in direct contrast to what I knew of Sefa. Well, except for maybe the phone. I was spared from having to respond when Kalina brought the food in with Sefa close behind.

The plates were piled high with pancakes, sausage links, and fruit. My stomach rumbled in anticipation.

“Sefa, I left lune’s tea on the counter. Can you fetch it for her?”

My eyes met Sefa’s without meaning to. “I can get it, Kalina.”

“No.” Sefa turned and retreated into the kitchen.

Kalina placed her hand on my arm. “Sit, sit. I’ll serve you.”

“You don’t need to. I can help.”

The older woman lightly smacked my arm. “Sit.”

She piled so much food on my plate that I could not possibly eat it all. Sefa returned and silently placed the mug in front of me. I whispered a thank you and kept my eyes on my plate, unsure where to look or what to do since I was crashing their family meal.

Kalina sat on Lono’s other side, leaving the seat beside me for Sefa. I pulled my blanket tighter around my shoulders,

clutching the fabric like a lifeline. I ate quickly, trying to avoid being forced into conversation.

Sefa remained silent during the meal while Kalina and Lono carried on in morning chatter. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye a few times, needing to remind myself of where he was. His behavior was unpredictable, and I didn't trust that he wouldn't start another verbal barrage like he did at the marketplace.

"If you will excuse me, I'm going to make a call to my sister." I pushed the chair back and wrapped one hand around the mug while the other gripped the blanket like a shield.

Three sets of eyes followed me as I jogged back to my room to retrieve the phone and back out the front door. Finding a seat on the covered porch, I opened the phone to find Eliza's number. Two contacts were listed. Hers...and *his*.

I pushed the uncomfortable emotions away and dialed my sister.

"Hello?" My sister's voice soothed my heart.

"Eliza. It's Parker. I finally have a phone."

"Oh my god, is that her?" My heart sank at my mother's voice.

"Baby! Are you okay?"

"Mom, I'm fine. I'm safe."

Words and emotions flowed out of the phone as my mother sobbed. It was hard to make out her exact thoughts over the phone. I sighed and waited for Eliza to rescue me.

"Give that back, Mom. I need to talk to Parker."

"Eliza, this is my new number. Can you hold onto it?"

"Sure. Sure. I've told everyone except Kara. I can't get in touch with her, but I will keep trying. The hospital was completely understanding."

The crunch of gravel caught my attention. Police cars pulled into the long driveway. "Eliza, I don't have a lot of time, but I will call you later, okay?"

“One thing before you go. I went by your apartment, and there were four letters addressed to Joseph from a Mist Guild. They look very official. What do you want me to do with them?”

I gripped the phone while I watched the officers park. “Put them in a box. I will look over them when I get back stateside.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

The front door opened at the same time I ended the call. Sefa stood at the steps of the porch with his arms crossed over his chest. The officers eyed me as they approached. “We need to ask Miss Rhodes some more questions.”

“You need to call ahead. This is a place of residence.”

“It couldn’t wait.”

I stood and clutched the blanket closer as my heart raced.

“You can wait in the living room while Parker gets dressed since you gave no notice,” Sefa said. He backed toward me, opening the way for the officers to enter the home. Once they passed, he turned to me, and his eyes carried a softer look than I had seen from him before. “Take your time.”

My eyes widened. Was he giving me space to gather my thoughts?

He moved into the doorway, and I stepped closer. “Wait.”

His eyes met mine, his scowl already back in place.

“Thank you. For this. And for the phone.”

He nodded and went to entertain the officers while I escaped to my room.

CHAPTER 10: MORE QUESTIONS

What did the officers need so early in the morning?

I scrambled to get my clothes and shoes on and ran a brush through my hair. My shoulders began to tense, but I rolled them out. I had nothing to hide. There was no reason to worry.

My hand trembled on the doorknob, so I pulled it back, dragged my hands through my hair, and held the back of my neck. Taking several deep breaths, I closed my eyes and pictured home. My apartment had the perfect view of the mountains, and if I concentrated really hard, I could feel the heat from the dry desert air while standing on my balcony.

Noises from down the hall broke my train of thought. I dragged in one more breath before steeling myself and walking to the living room. Sefa stood at the only door that led outside with arms crossed and his face on alert as if he were on duty. His eyes tracked me to where I sat on the sofa across from the officers. If I were not so rattled, I would have returned his stare so he knew I was strong. But I wasn't strong right now. I was...alone.

"Miss Rhodes, we have some more questions." Officer Smith pulled out a notebook and flipped it open.

"So you said." I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned forward

The officer cleared his throat and pulled a photo from his file. "Do you know what this is?"

I took the photo and looked at it closer. It was another wooden stake. It wasn't the first one they showed me because it wasn't covered in blood. It had the same circle with a rune inside of it. I handed the photo back to the officer.

"It's a stake. It looks like the other one you showed me."

“Do you know why your husband would have it?”

My face betrayed my confusion. “I’m sorry? You found this with Joseph?”

“It was found in his luggage, along with several others. We can only assume it was his. Do you know what it means?”

“I’ve never seen this before.”

“What about this carving on it? Do you know what it means?”

“I’m sorry, did you not hear me? I said I’ve never seen them before. I don’t know what it means. I don’t know what they are. I don’t even know why he had them.”

“Miss Rhodes, do you expect me to believe you didn’t know what was in your husband’s luggage?”

“Do you pack for your wife? Do you know what’s in your partner’s pockets right now? I didn’t pack his bag. I didn’t know they were there.”

“You shared a room. Did you not see them?”

“No! I did not see a wooden stake with carvings on it in my honeymoon villa!”

The officer slid the photo into the file and stacked it on the coffee table between us. “I understand that you are upset.”

“I’m sad! I’m lost! I have every right to be upset. Don’t you dare diminish that!” I rose and paced behind the sofa. “You keep asking me questions that I have absolutely no answers for. You believe that I’m responsible for my late husband’s death. You won’t let me go home. Just...Just leave me alone!”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Miss Rhodes, but we have a murder that needs to be solved. A man who needs justice.”

“My husband! Mine! Don’t you understand?” My voice was unusually harsh for me. I lowered my tone as I whispered, “I loved him.”

The officer gestured to the sofa across from him. “Why don’t you take a seat? We can continue our conversation.”

I almost didn't sit, but did I have any other choice? I glared daggers at the officer and hoped he felt them.

"Now, why don't you tell us how you met your late husband?"

"No." I narrowed my eyes at the officer. What was he getting at?

The officer looked up at the ceiling before returning his eyes to me. "Miss Rhodes, this is not a test. I'm trying to do my job and gather information. Please, can you tell us how you met your late husband?"

My teeth ground against each other while I considered their request. "Joseph was hurt at work and came into the ER while I was on shift. I'm a nurse. That's how we met."

Officer Smith jotted down a few notes in his notebook. "And what was the nature of his injury? Was he injured frequently?"

Heat rose in my chest. I knew my cheeks were flaming. None of these questions were helping to find Joseph's killer. I rose from my seat, my voice dangerously steady as I addressed these fools disguised as officers. "I'm done with this. If you have any real questions for me, feel free to come back."

I walked toward the door with purpose, pushing past Sefa who made no move to stop me. I pulled the hair tie from my wrist and pulled my hair back and up in a ponytail as I walked. The officers called for me, but I ignored them. I was done with this nonsense. Smacking the door open, I jogged down the steps and sprinted down the path.

The warm breeze of the morning air caressed my cheek while the burn of my muscles released some of the tension that wanted to snap inside me. I pumped my arms and followed the sandy path, hoping it would lead me back to the gardens.

Tears streamed from my eyes, and my throat wanted to close up, but I ran harder, faster.

Joseph left me here. Alone. How could he?

Did he know he was in danger? If he knew he was in danger, why come here in the first place? Is that why he had the

stakes? And why would he bring stakes? Why not a knife or a gun? Did he just need it to get through security at the airport? Where did he get them? What was that rune that was carved on the side?

Could I even say I really knew him?

I clenched my fists as I ran, and my brows furrowed.

Joseph knew at least that he might be in danger. He had those strange stakes. And he still brought me with him here.

On our honeymoon.

My feet slowed as I approached the gardens. The scent of the flowers sang to my heart and coaxed it to slow the rapid pace. Sweat dripped down my neck and I swallowed, placing my hands on the back of my head to help my breathing.

I wanted to bring Joseph back from the grave to smack him. He left me a mess to deal with. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

Either way, I had no choice, and I needed a plan.

I had to find out who killed my husband.

CHAPTER 11:

SECURITY

I rolled my shoulders as I walked up the path to the gazebo. The flowers and beauty of the garden were in direct conflict with my inner turmoil.

Oh god. I ran away from the officers. I literally ran from the cops.

What was wrong with me?

I collapsed on the gazebo bench and held my head in my hands.

“That’s one way to get out of questioning.”

The deep, baritone voice startled me. I jerked my head up, and Sefa stood on the path a few feet from me.

“Ugh, how much trouble am I in?” I leaned back against the bench and patted my cheeks, making sure they were dry from the tears that escaped on my run here.

“They weren’t happy about it, but I asked them to leave.”

The silence drew my eyes to his. His gaze locked mine in place. He stood with his arms at his sides. His expression was softer than before, like on the porch. The wind caught pieces of his hair and pulled them around his face, but he remained perfectly still.

He was probably waiting to see if I was going to run again. Ugh, I internally scolded myself for my actions.

“Thank you. I just...” I turned my head from his intense stare. Flowers were safer companions to deal with my embarrassment and anger.

“You don’t have to explain it.”

My head whipped back to his. I watched him with wide eyes as he moved closer and sat on the bench beside me. He had

never been this close to me before. Sefa's large frame made me want to scoot away. I held perfectly still, unsure of his actions but refusing to back away.

Minutes passed, and he stared out over the gardens. When he didn't move or begin to talk, I relaxed further on the bench. I remained hyper-aware of the inches between us and watched the space from my peripheral vision.

Broken fragments of my anger fell away, and I let the tropical breeze cleanse my heart. I chewed on my lip and rolled it between my teeth.

The silence broke as Sefa spoke. The volume of his voice was soft, and the hard edges smoothed out. "Do you like to run?"

When the shock wore off, I swallowed and held my hands in my lap. "Yeah. I usually run a couple of miles a week."

"Your form is good."

My eyes snapped to him.

His scowl deepened. "I mean, it's clear that you run regularly."

"Oh."

"Would it help you to run?"

I squeezed my hands together. It would help me to run, but what was he doing?

"Yes. Running has always helped me."

He nodded. "I'll make arrangements to show you the running loop here tomorrow."

"There's a loop?"

"Yes."

"That would... That would be great." I smiled gently at him, hoping he would see my gratitude. He may not want me to live under his roof, but this new kindness was a nice reprieve from the anger he usually held for me.

Sefa returned my smile with a scowl. He rose and went down the gazebo steps before returning to me. "Kalina and Lono

have appointments in town today. Make sure you don't lose them. And don't talk to anyone you don't know."

I scoffed. "Seriously? You can't tell me who I can and can't talk to. It was not my fault that your parents ditched me."

"Do not lose them. Do not talk to anyone, Parker." Without another word, Sefa strolled quickly down the path.

My mouth gaped open as I watched him walk away. Heat climbed up the back of my neck at his audacity. He may have gotten the last word this time, but that wouldn't be the norm between us.

I pulled myself up and walked back to the main house. Kalina called me from the little cottage. "Lune! We are going to miss the show if we don't get there early. Get cleaned up. Quick, quick."

She shuffle-ran back into the house, leaving me concerned about what the rest of my day held.

I hurried into the shower and changed clothes. I'm not sure why I needed to get cleaned up again. With the humidity of Mele, I would end up sweaty with frizzy hair in the first hour of being outside.

Before I left the house, I sent a quick text to Eliza. 'Can you look through Joseph's boxes and see if you see his laptop?'

Maybe if I could get into his computer, I would have a better idea of who might want him dead. All of his things were packed up at my apartment. I didn't want to put the burden of unpacking everything on Eliza, but I had no other choice.

What were you up to, Joseph? Why didn't you tell me?

I slid the phone into my pocket and opened my door. I practically smacked into a person standing in the hallway. I pulled up and glared at the giant man in front of me. His face was scarred on the side, and his head was practically shaved bald. His arms remained crossed over his chest.

"Who are you?"

“I’m your security.”

My hand still rested on the doorknob, and I fought the overwhelming urge to slam it in his face. “I didn’t ask for a bodyguard.”

“Sefa sent me.”

“Like hell he did.”

I pushed past him and walked down the hall. The man matched my steps, so I spun and faced him. “What are you doing?”

“Ma’am, I’ve been hired to watch you.”

“We’ll see about that.”

CHAPTER 12: I HAVE QUESTIONS

I stormed down the hall, straight past Aroha at her desk, who was chatting on the phone. Her eyes tracked me, and she began to move to get up, but I kept going.

My hand slammed against the door as I pushed it open. Sefa sat at the desk. His eyes remained trained on the computer in front of him. Screens of the house and the property lined the walls.

It only increased my rage when he didn't make eye contact with me. I crossed the distance to the desk and slammed my hands on it, leaning into his face even when he kept his body angled away from me and his eyes on the screen in front of him. "You're having me followed?"

Sefa clicked his computer mouse before he swiveled in the chair to face me. "I'm securing both your safety and your location."

I scoffed and straightened to cross my arms over my chest. "That's a bit excessive. I'm not a murderer."

"I didn't say that you were."

Narrowing my eyes on him, I leaned down and hissed, "I don't need a babysitter."

Sefa rose from his chair to his full height and I straightened, hating that I was forced to look up at him. "I have to disagree with you. You managed to lose two elders moments after leaving the property."

"That is not my fault, and you know it."

His scowl deepened, and he moved around the desk. I turned so that he was always at my front. Stepping close, his hand shot out and took my upper arm in his grip. His touch

completely shocked me into momentary silence as he maneuvered me back to the door.

“You absolutely need a babysitter. It’s for your protection. Someone murdered your husband. You will listen to everything Asher says, and if you don’t, I’ll restrict you to the property.”

“You can’t do that.”

He steered me through the door of his office before releasing my arm. “I can and I will. Don’t test me, Parker. Aroha, see that I’m not disturbed.”

Sefa slammed the door, and I jumped at the brusqueness of the action. A part of me wanted to bang on the door and demand that he face me, but I swallowed the impulse. I spun around and dropped my hands to my sides while Aroha and Asher both stared at me. I ran my hands through my hair, still wet from my shower.

“Um, okay. So I guess you’re going with me,” I said to Asher.

I turned my eyes to the ground and hurried out of the room. Asher’s heavy steps echoed behind me. My shadow and I crossed the property to the little cottage.

Kalina met us on the porch. “Oh, lune. Good. We have plenty of time. Hello, Asher. Are you joining us this time?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Kalina took my arm. “Oh, dear. I’ve gotten you in trouble with my son. You’ll have to forgive his controlling nature.”

“Oh.” I wanted to say so much, but I also didn’t want to offend one of the few people who had been kind to me.

“Lono, are you ready?”

“Why do you insist on taking me to that quack doctor? My heart is perfectly fine.” The man closed the door slowly.

“You are losing the pep in your step. And the blood drive starts tomorrow. You need a checkup, my love.”

“Where are we going?” I asked as I guided Kalina to the back of the car.

“My Kalina insists that I see the doctor about my heart.”

“Yes, yes. And then we are going to the opening day for the festival.”

Asher sat behind the wheel while the rest of us found our seats. “What festival?”

Kalina patted my arm. “For the tourists. It happens for about a week now and again closer to the end of vacation season.”

As we descended to the town, I stared out the window, the jungle greens blurring together as we passed. Kalina and Lono talked, but I couldn’t hear them. Sefa’s actions still burned in my mind. His fingers seemed imprinted on my arm. I ran through all the words I could have said to him in those moments. Things I should have said.

A small part of my mind whispered that maybe it was a good thing to have a tank of a bodyguard nearby. I didn’t kill Joseph, but someone did—someone who was still out there somewhere.

We arrived in front of a small building, and our party filed inside. Looking around at the photos and diagrams on the lobby walls, I realized we were in a cardiology office. A bolt of familiarity ran through me. Who knew that an anatomy drawing of blood flow would be comforting?

“Is something wrong with your heart, Lono?”

“That is what I said, lune. Did you not hear me?” Kalina patted my arm.

“They tell me something is wrong. They have a pill for this and a pill for that. It would be better not to have any of them. They make me so cold. I’ve never been cold before in my life. The island is always warm.” Lono put on an exaggerated shiver and grinned.

“So they have you on blood thinners?”

Kalina tapped my nose. "I knew you were a smart one, luno."

I shrugged. "Lots of patients complain of being cold on them."

"My Kalina makes me take them every day, even when I tell her that living cold is not a way to live."

"Your Kalina is a wise woman, Lono. You could have a heart attack or stroke if you don't take your blood thinners."

The older man slapped his hand in the air and guffawed. "You young folk don't understand. That could happen anyway. Better to live well than to shrivel away like rotting fruit."

I smiled at his strange analogy. "Speak your mind to your doctor. Remember that you are in charge of your healthcare."

"I'm not sure about that. My Kalina thinks that she is."

Kalina put her hand on Lono's cheek. "I don't know what I would do without you, my love. Let me keep you a while longer, hmm?"

Lono laid his hand on hers. "When you put it that way, how can I say no, my Kalina?"

The nurse called Lono back, and Kalina followed. I settled in my chair and grinned. Sefa wanted to make sure someone watched over me, so I would flip that to my advantage.

"So, Asher. What exactly is in your job description?"

"I'm to watch you and to protect you."

"Did Sefa say anything about not talking to me?"

"No."

"Excellent. I have questions."

CHAPTER 13:

CURVEBALLS

Asher shifted in his seat. “I’m not sure—”

“Nonsense! All we are doing is chatting. I don’t bite.” I smiled at him, but Asher’s glare started to look very similar to Sefa’s.

“How long have you worked for Sefa?”

Asher took a moment before he answered. “Three years.”

“Oh, so a while now. What did you do before?”

Asher relaxed slightly, and the scowl almost disappeared. “I was a bouncer.”

“That’s cool! Have you always worked in security?”

“Yeah. It’s honest work.”

“Seems like it would be a hard job to do for a long time.”

He shrugged. “It’s what I know.”

“So you would be able to keep me safe? If the murderer shows up?”

“I can assure you that you will be safe.”

“What if I’m the murderer?”

Asher’s eyes narrowed for a moment. “You’re not a murderer.”

“You don’t know that. I have specialized knowledge of the human body as a nurse. I could be a murderer.”

“Forgive me, but you don’t have the physical strength to drive a stake through a rib cage once, much less multiple times.”

My mouth parted and I blinked. “I...I didn’t know that was how he died,” I whispered. “Oh, god...”

I leaned forward and covered my mouth with my hands.

Nausea rolled up in my stomach as I remembered the blood on the floor. There was so much blood.

“Ms. Rhodes. Are you alright?”

Asher put his hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged out of it.

“I...I just didn't know. I thought that since he had the stakes in his luggage, the blood on it was someone else's.”

My phone rang from my pocket, and I was never more grateful for the distraction. I rose and stepped outside the building, my shadow right behind me.

“Hello?”

“What's wrong? Are you okay?”

I sucked in a breath and closed my eyes. Eliza knew me well enough to pick up on my mood from a single word. “Yeah. I'm fine.”

“I don't believe you. But I just called to say that I came to your apartment, and someone broke in. The whole place is in shambles. I already called the police and told them you were out of town.”

My shoulders drooped. “Of course it was. Life keeps throwing me curveballs.”

“I looked for the laptop, but it's not here.”

I shook my head and momentarily pulled the phone away from my ear. Eliza was sure to recognize my frustration even across an ocean. There was nothing she could do. No need to worry her further.

Bringing my phone back to my ear, I ran my other hand through my hair. “It's fine. Thanks for looking. And for... taking care of everything on that end of things. My life is unraveling at the seams, and I don't know why.”

Asher shifted back and forth on his feet, drawing my eyes.

“Any word on when we can get you back stateside?”

“No. The investigators have been less than helpful on that end.”

“What about packages? Can you receive packages on the island? I want to send you a care package until we can get to you.”

“Hold on.” I put my hand over the speaker and addressed Asher. “Can I get mail here?”

Asher’s scowl deepened. “We have to ask Sefa.”

I rolled my eyes and brought the phone back up to my ear. “I’ll have to get back to you on that. Apparently, I have to ask my warden.”

“Oh my gosh, are you actually in jail? I thought you were staying with that sexy security guard.”

“Stop, Eliza. It was a bad joke. I’m still where I told you I was. Hey, I’ll let you know about the address thing soon.”

“Parker. Stay safe for me. I don’t like that all of this is happening around you.”

“I will.” Silently, I wondered if that were possible. Staying safe was becoming a full-time job. I slid the phone into my pocket and faced Asher. He remained silent, and I was thankful for that while I processed what was happening in my life. I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed. “So, apparently, someone broke into my apartment in Phoenix. I figured that was something you wanted to know.”

Asher nodded once and then gestured for me to return inside the clinic. “I’ll be in in a moment,” he murmured as I walked by.

I took my seat in the lobby and gripped the armrests of the chair. A glance outside showed Asher on the phone, likely with Sefa. I drew in a long breath and let it out slowly as I focused on the anatomy drawing on the wall. In again and out slowly, I coaxed my heart rate to slow so I could think.

What had I wanted to get out of Asher earlier? Answers about Joseph’s death but also answers about Sefa. I hadn’t even had a chance to ask why he wanted security on me and why he even cared in the first place.

The office door opened, and Kalina and Lono walked hand in hand into the lobby. Lono went to check out with the receptionist, and Kalina came to my side. I stood, and she took my arm, patting it as we walked.

When we emerged from the clinic, Asher locked his gaze on me, his hand still holding the phone to his ear. "I understand" were the only words I heard before he disconnected the call and placed the phone in the pocket of his cargo pants.

He followed closely behind as we made our way to the car. I helped Kalina into the seat and closed her door. When I turned around, Asher gently placed his hand on my shoulder to stop me. "Sefa wants to know if you would like to return to the house instead of going to the festival."

I closed my eyes and rubbed my hand on my temples to relieve my aching head. "No. There's nothing I can do about my apartment from here, and Kalina and Lono are so excited about the festival. We might as well go."

Asher removed his hand and nodded once before taking his seat. Once Lono joined us, he drove further into town. My mind numb, I stared out the window, attempting to find the bright spot in the messy situation that was dumped on me.

I smiled as the rainbow colored flora came into view. At least if my life were going to fall apart, I would be surrounded by beauty.

CHAPTER 14: A PEARL RING

Kalina was right to be excited about the festival. There was so much activity. I had a hard time distinguishing everything that was happening. A purple lei was placed around my neck the moment we entered, and Kalina insisted on a crown of purple flowers for my head. She placed white flowers on her own head before touching my cheek and smiling. “So beautiful, lune. I’m so glad you are here.”

“Thank you, Kalina. You’re too wonderful to me.”

“Nonsense. I bet you made a beautiful bride.”

My face dropped a little at her comment.

“What is it, lune?”

“Can I share something with you?”

Kalina took my arm and patted it while steering me down the pathway. “Of course, lune. What is it?”

I faced my eyes forward. It was easier to speak secrets when I wasn’t making eye contact. “I think I made a mistake getting married to Joseph.”

“Hmm. Did you love him?”

“Yes, I think so.” We continued down the path, and Kalina’s unusual silence drew out my confession. “I don’t think I really knew Joseph, Kalina. He was so charming and caring with me. I knew things about his life, like his sister, what happened to his parents, and what he did for a living. I don’t think I really knew *him*. What does that say about me? I married a man I didn’t really know. And Eliza never liked him. She held it in when we announced our engagement, though.”

“Who is Eliza?”

“My sister.”

“Oh, lune. Sisters are a good measuring tool for life. They are the most honest with us.”

“She thought he was trying to make me into something I’m not.”

“Was he?”

I hesitated because I wasn’t sure of the answer. “Maybe. He preferred for us to go to dinner and a movie or for us to read together. I wanted to go and do and see and experience. And when he chose Mele, my heart was happy because there was so much for us to do together.” I paused and wondered if his choice had anything to do with me. Shaking the thought from my head, I glanced over my shoulder, seeing Asher following close behind.

We reached an amphitheater and took our seats near the back for Kalina and Lono’s sake. The dancers walked onto the platform and the music started. I stared, completely enraptured by the movements and the colors of their clothing and how it tied perfectly with the music. Having never experienced anything like this before, I wondered how I could adequately describe it to my family when I returned home.

Home. Where my apartment was in shambles. Where I would bury my husband. Where I was a widow.

I rose from my seat to give my body something to do with the nervous energy that crept in every time I thought about my life back at home. Asher rose behind me, but I waved him off. “I won’t be far. I just need a moment.”

I wandered a short distance through the festival tents, pausing to look at this and that as I passed. My eye caught on some of the most beautiful shells I had ever seen on display. They had been turned into rings and necklaces and all sorts of jewelry. I picked up a ring with iridescent oval pearls for petals and a single cream pearl in the center.

“A lovely choice for a lovely lady.” The smooth voice was familiar. I lifted my eyes, and Tiato stood just a few paces away.

I set the ring back on the display. “I’m not sure that it suits me. It is lovely, though.”

Tiato closed the distance between us, our shoulders almost touching. He picked up the ring and studied it for a moment. “I believe that it suits you well, Parker.” He summoned the vendor and paid for the ring. My heart rate climbed as he turned and took my hand. He placed the ring on my middle finger, his hand lingering as he began to speak. “A light shining in the darkness. I think it is a perfect representation, don’t you?”

A blush climbed up my cheeks. I blinked and pulled my hand back, embarrassed that I allowed this intimate touch with a stranger in the first place. I gave Tiato a small smile and turned to leave, but he took hold of my elbow. His amber eyes shone brightly as he spoke. “You feel this too, Parker? This pull between us?”

I raised my eyebrow, and while I didn’t want to admit it, there was something strange between us. When I didn’t pull out of his grip, he gently turned me and took my hands in his. “Let me see you again.”

“I...”

“Parker!” Asher’s voice broke the moment, and Tiato dropped my hands as if they were hot irons.

“Asher. I was just—”

Asher put himself between Tiato and me, even though there was hardly any space, and Tiato backed away.

“I don’t want to see you near her again. Sefa already warned you.”

Tiato shrugged, unaffected by the threatening tone. “Sefa is not here. If he were truly concerned, he would be.”

“Sefa sent me.”

Tiato turned and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I am not concerned. But you should be, what with a killer on the loose.”

Tiato slowly disappeared into the crowd, and Asher did not move until he was out of sight. The instant that Tiato was gone, Asher turned and took hold of my upper arm. He pulled me along the path toward the car.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

Asher ignored me and pulled out his phone with his other hand. “Sefa. We have a problem. I let Parker out of my sight for a minute, and Tiato found her again.”

There was a deep rumbling on the other side of the phone, but I could not make out the words. “Understood.” Asher continued guiding me until we were at the car.

“What is going on? What about Kalina and Lono?”

“Parker, listen to me. You are going to get in this car, and we are going to drive as fast as we can.”

“What about Kalina and Lono?”

“Sefa is sending Aroha to collect them. They aren’t the ones in danger. You are.”

My heart clenched and all the blood drained from my face.

“What do you mean?”

Asher opened the door and guided me into the seat. He rounded the car, slammed the door shut behind him, and started it in a flash. My breathing picked up and my mind swirled with a thousand unanswered questions.

“Where are we going?” My voice was pitifully soft and the words quivered out of me.

Asher pushed the car to its limits, his eyes never leaving the road. “Back to Sefa, where you will be safe.”

CHAPTER 15: A RATHER INCONVENIENT TOUCH

Sefa met us in the driveway. He pulled my door open with more force than was necessary, scanning my body first and then meeting Asher's gaze. "What happened?"

"I'm fine, thank you very much." I unbuckled my seatbelt and gripped the door frame to push past Sefa, but he remained very much in my space.

His eyes darkened to a dangerous level, and I swore they turned completely black for a moment. With our eyes locked in a silent battle, Sefa addressed Asher again, "Did he touch her?"

"Oh, hell no!" I pointed my finger directly in his chest. "You do not get to say who I talk to or who touches me. I am not your property. I'm not even sure why you care."

Sefa rose to his full height, and his shadow fell over my face. I jumped from my seat in the car, pushing past him and straightened myself, brushing my hands down my shirt. He crossed his arms across his chest, his shirt straining to contain his biceps.

"What's your problem?" I muttered as I walked with purpose up to the porch. At first, I was going to go to my room in the house, but I changed my mind, not wanting to give Sefa the satisfaction of hiding, so I swerved at the last minute and sat in one of the chairs there.

What in the world was his problem? And why did I want to see Tiato again?

I crossed my arms and rolled my head around, loosening my neck. My shoulders felt heavier like the weight of everything happening was coming down on them. An unsettling gross feeling settled in my gut. Maybe I ate something wrong at the festival. Food poisoning would be the absolute icing on the cake for my life right now.

Sefa stood as still as a statue in the driveway while Asher reported...whatever had happened at the festival. I still wasn't sure what the big deal was.

I ran over the events in my head again.

Answers about Joseph—my body instinctively flinched at that memory. The leis and flowers with Kalina. The dancing at the amphitheater. Thinking about going home and all the ways my life was crumbling. Seeing the jewelry maker's stand and running into Tiato.

It had to be Tiato.

What was the deal with them? And how in the world did I end up in the middle of it?

Asher nodded and returned to the car before speeding down the drive again.

Slowly, Sefa returned my glare and marched up the steps to the porch. He leaned over the railing, his hands gripping the wooden beams tightly as he looked out over the grounds. I braced myself for the next ridiculous thing to come out of his mouth. I didn't have to wait long.

“You will stay with me at all times. Consider yourself attached to my hip.”

He didn't look at me as he said it, but surely I was hearing things. A laugh burst from me at the absurd statement. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Sefa pushed off the railing and stood over me. “I'm very serious, Parker.”

“That's not reasonable. You can't be everywhere that I am.” I tightened my arms across my chest.

“I can and I will. This is not a request.”

“What in the world are you talking about? I’m not your prisoner. In fact, I’m not okay being here anymore.” I gripped the armrests of the chair and leaned forward to stand, but he was there before I could. Sefa clutched the same armrests, his hands millimeters from mine, and his body stooped so his face was in mine. His hair fell over his shoulder, threatening to tickle the skin on my arm. I pressed my back against the wood of the chair.

“Parker, you can not leave.”

“Doesn’t mean I want to stay.”

“Either way, while you are on this island, you will be at my side.” His voice softened and somehow broke through the shields I placed all around me.

I bounced back and forth between his eyes, trying to decipher some hidden meaning that was just below the surface. “Why do you care?” The words were barely a whisper, but I wanted the answer.

Sefa straightened and held his hand out. “Get up and get your shoes. Let’s go for a run. We will both feel better after that.”

I stared at the hand before me like it was a snake about to strike.

A run would do me good, but could I really trust Sefa? He was hardly honest with me, avoiding my questions and giving me more at the same time.

I guess I had to trust someone here, even if it were only a little.

I took his hand and let him pull me to my feet. The heat scalded a memory against my palm in a rather inconvenient way considering all that was happening in my life.

“Okay. A run sounds like a plan.”

CHAPTER 16:

SEMBLANCE OF FREEDOM

I stretched my thighs in the fading afternoon light. I ran my hands through my hair and pulled it back into a ponytail and off my neck. I changed into my running clothes, turning over the events in my mind..

A run would put things back into perspective.

Things I needed to ask Sefa kept piling up in my head. If he wanted me at his side, then I was going to pester some answers from him.

The vault of secrets appeared at my side, his long hair tied up in a bun piled on his head. I still wasn't sure how he managed to appear so silently. He glanced at me for a moment before jogging down the path at a moderate pace.

I sprinted to catch up and then matched his rhythm. "Why do I have to stay at your side?"

"You don't waste any time, do you?"

"There's not exactly a lot to do around here. Are you going to accompany me with Kalina and Lono now? I still have responsibilities to them."

"Aroha can take them to appointments. She was doing it before you arrived."

My heart sank for a moment, realizing I would not be leaving the grounds of Sefa's property.

"Besides," he continued. "My mother will be thrilled at the new arrangements."

"Oh." My feet pounded down the path, and a little sadness swept into me at the idea of Kalina preferring someone else to

me, even if that person had been here before. I thought she and I had a strong connection.

We continued past the banyan tree and the gardens, turning down a path I hadn't been to before.

“Tell me about your husband. What did he do for fun? Hobbies?”

Sefa's question took me off guard. No one had asked much about Joseph—especially not his extracurricular activities.

“Um...he used to watch movies, read a lot, and write some. I'm not sure what. He never showed me.”

“Is that something you like to do?”

I shrugged as we jogged down the path. “Not really. I don't mind reading for fun, but it has to be an adventure, something that will draw me in.

“What do you like to do?”

The question was so unexpected that my feet faltered, carrying me to a halt. Sefa stopped a few paces ahead and turned to face me. “What is it? You're not tired already, are you?”

“No. No one has asked me that question in a long time.”

Sefa silently remained where he was on the path ahead of me. His breathing was so regular. It was as if we hadn't run over a mile already. I chewed on my lip and tried to escape his gaze, turning around so my back was to him. I chose my words carefully since vulnerability did not come easily between us, but I could see him trying to make this not quite as hard.

“I love to go on an adventure. It doesn't have to be anything too big. I like climbing to the top of a mountain. I like experiencing something new. I like to meet new people and see how they live. I love...helping people, even if it is small, like a smile on a bad day.”

“So that's why he brought you to Mele?”

I shook my head and ran my hand over my ponytail. “I don't know why he chose here. It wasn't like him. We didn't do any

of those things. We did the things he liked to do.”

Spinning around, I forced a smile onto my face. “How long is this loop?”

Sefa watched me, and I wanted to shift my weight under his gaze but held still. The air was thick with unspoken words between us. He kept his secrets. I would keep mine.

“Four and a half miles.”

“Cool, let’s finish this.” I took off down the path, not waiting to see if Sefa was with me or not.

We continued our run, and I did my best to let my mind empty. Running was a release. One that usually allowed me to escape the stress of my life. Doing it with Sefa had me on edge. I didn’t want to cry or feel elated or anything with him around. I didn’t want to appear...weak.

When we finally returned to the house, I was drenched in sweat, my body fully used and tired from our run. The last of the sun’s golden rays were dipping behind the horizon, creating a comforting glow on everything around us.

“I’ll start on dinner,” Sefa said as he passed me going up the steps.

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me, and went to my room to shower. The hot water relaxed my muscles, and the steam cleared my thoughts to a comfortable void where none of the chaos of my life existed—just me and the endorphins from my run.

After I dressed, I reached for the pearl ring on the dresser but it wasn’t there. A quick search of my room revealed that it was nowhere to be found. Odd. I thought for sure I set it on the dresser when I got ready for my run.

Sefa stood in the kitchen, and his eyes met mine when I entered the room. I played with the nail on my thumb for a minute before I ran my hand through my hair, looking for an escape.

“Do you want me to go and get Kalina and Lono? I’m sure they would want to join us. Do you think they are back from the festival?”

Sefa’s dark eyes pierced mine, and I knew he knew I was looking to escape his side. The tether created between us by him nearly threatened to choke me. His brows furrowed slightly before he returned to cutting the pineapple on the counter.

“They are back. Go see if they are hungry.”

I didn’t pause a moment or hesitate. I took the opportunity and jogged out the door to some semblance of freedom.

CHAPTER 17: LUNE

The lights in the cottage were off. That was odd. Sefa said they were there.

I jogged across the lawn in the moon's bright light with the stars scattered across the navy backdrop. A chill from the breeze skated across my arms making me wish for a sweater. My hand gripped the handle of the door, but something seemed off.

Where were Kalina and Lono?

I pushed the door open, and there wasn't a single light that was on. Maybe they had already gone to bed? Or maybe they weren't actually here? My hand still held the doorknob, and I was a step inside the cottage, wondering what I should do.

Should I go in? Or go back and get Sefa?

A small noise brushed across my ears. A feeling in my gut grabbed ahold of me, and wouldn't let go. It was an ominous, foreboding feeling that I could not ignore even if I wanted to.

My hand released the knob, and I stepped further into the cottage. I didn't call out, worried I might frighten or wake them if they were only sleeping. I would just check on them and leave.

With the moon's light to guide me, I put one foot in front of the other. The kitchen's countertop was slightly darker than everything else, and out of habit, I placed my hand on it as I passed by. My foot caught on something on the floor, but I kept myself upright by the counter. I looked down, and my eyes shaped the darkness until I recognized the body before me—Asher.

I dropped to my knees beside him and pressed my fingers into his neck. My hands trembled, but there was no pulse.

Leave. Leave, Parker.

I rose to my feet and turned to leave but was stopped when I saw something I could not see.

A large man with corded hair and copper skin held Kalina as she slumped against one of the chairs. His arms encircled her in an awkward embrace, his head buried in the crook of her neck.

“Kalina?” My voice shook. Something in my soul knew that this was wrong. I couldn’t piece together the picture in front of me, but I had enough awareness to realize the mistake of my single word.

The man dropped Kalina against the seat and turned to me. His amber eyes were filled with black in the moonlight. Something red fell from his chin.

Blood.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his arm and looked me up and down. A shiver worked its way up my spine.

Run.

Adrenaline pumped in my chest, and I sprinted with everything in me to the front door. An iron arm wrapped around my waist, and I screamed in frustration. I was fast, but he was faster. The man slammed me against the wall.

“I almost caught you when I got the vampire hunter,” the man whispered. I kicked and scratched at his face, but he pinned my hands above my head. “He was foolish to bring such delicious bait to his hunt.” The man dragged a finger down my cheek, and I twisted and kicked against him. “I’ve got you now.”

The man smiled at me in the moonlight. His eyes went completely black, and then he bared *fangs*. He lowered his mouth to my neck. I screamed louder and fought harder than before.

A second later, the pressure on my wrists disappeared, and I stumbled away from the wall. Sefa stood with his hand around the man’s neck a few feet away. His muscles bulged as he

squeezed the man's neck. Where had he come from? He wasn't there a moment ago.

The intruder reached behind him and pulled a wooden stake from his back. In a flash I could hardly see, he sliced into Sefa's ribs. Sefa's eyes turned obsidian, and his lips pulled back over fangs that were not there before. He growled low. Then both men moved fast. Sefa pushed me against the wall, and the intruder sped out the open door.

I crossed my arms over my chest as they shook. My stomach churned, and my blood turned ice cold. Sefa turned to me and ran his hands over my shoulders and arms. I was too numb to retreat from his touch.

"Parker," he brushed a stray lock of hair from my face. "Stay here."

I met his eyes—eyes that were dark but no longer obsidian—and nodded. Without a sound, he was gone from my sight. Just gone.

Blinking, I collapsed against the wall, sliding down and pulling my knees to my chest.

Sobs choked me, but I pushed them down. There was too much to process and...I wasn't safe.

I wasn't safe from...vampires. There was no other word for that kind of monster.

My mind would have spiraled out of control, trying to sort the events except for a small noise—a gasp. The kind that every nurse knows. The kind that signals death is near.

Kalina.

I pulled myself up and wiped away the tears that had already escaped. I placed everything happening around me in a box and put on the nurse persona that allowed me to separate myself from the trauma around me.

My hand hit the wall several times before it connected with a light switch. Asher's body was on the floor near my feet. No

blood, though. His neck was at an odd angle—a small blessing to die quickly.

Kalina pressed her wrinkled hand against her neck on the chair, stemming the blood flow. I assessed her as I moved to her side. Some blood was running down her neck and on her arm, but not enough to cause her pale coloring. I replaced her hand with mine. Her breathing was too shallow and too fast. My fingers went to her other wrist, and I found her pulse thready and rapid.

“Lune.”

I released her wrist and held her hand while putting pressure on the bleeding with my other one. “Kalina, don’t try to talk. It will make things harder.”

“Lune.”

Tears formed, and fell earnestly against my will. “Kalina?”

“Lune. I’m dying.”

Dread formed in my soul. There was no greater confirmation than a person’s belief that they were dying. “Kalina...”

She squeezed my hand. “Do you know why I call you lune?” Each word followed with a pause to accommodate her breathing.

I shook my head.

“It means moon. You are the moon, and he is the darkness. Opposite in every way yet no better match exists.”

“Who, Kalina?” I knew who she meant. Why was she saying these things? Was it the trauma?

She placed a hand on my cheek. “He will be lost without you, lune. There is no light in the darkness without the moon.”

Her hand drifted down and fell gently against her chest. I wrapped my arms around her and held her while her heartbeat to its last. Minutes passed, and eventually her breathing stopped completely. Tears fell from my face across hers.

Lono.

I released her body and gently positioned it against the chair. Standing, I looked around. Where was he? He wouldn't be far.

There.

A hand laid against the wooden floor behind a couch. I sprinted to the other side of the room and pushed the couch out of the way. The older man's temple was bleeding, but not much, and he was breathing. I checked his pulse and ran my hands over his body, looking for obvious injuries. His heartbeat was strong but irregular. He did not regain consciousness when I called his name or touched his shoulder. I was afraid of moving him and injuring him further, so I sat and held his hand.

Holding Lono's hand was safe—an anchor to the world I was familiar with while the chaos of this new world threatened to swallow me whole.

“Parker.”

My head snapped up, and Sefa crouched on the floor close but out of reach. His eyes scanned me before looking over Lono.

“Are you hurt?”

“I...I want to go home.”

“Parker.” Sefa's voice was soft, like he was coaxing a frightened animal out of danger. Oh god! That was exactly what was happening.

I jumped to my feet, searching for an escape. “I need to go. I have to go home.”

Sefa rose to his full height, and he put his hands out slightly in front of him, palms up, in a nonthreatening position.

I ran my hands through my hair and tugged on the ends.

“Kalina is dead. Asher is dead. Lono's hurt. I don't want to be here anymore.”

He stepped closer to me. “Parker, you can't leave.”

“No, I don’t have to stay. You can’t keep me here. Everyone dies here. Everyone dies around...me. I have to go.” My breathing increased as each horrible truth started to settle in my bones. “Joseph knew. He knew about vampires. He...he brought me here. Vampires! Actual vampires, Sefa. Did you...” I backed away as the next awful truth slammed into me. “You’re one of them. Oh, god. I’m going to die!”

The next moment, Sefa was in my space. His hand tilted my jaw so my eyes met his. My lungs seized in my chest, and my heart raced, tripping over itself. His other hand touched my temple as his eyes turned obsidian. “Sleep.”

Against my consent, my eyes fluttered closed, and every muscle relaxed simultaneously. Strong arms stopped my fall as the obscurity of sleep took hold.

CHAPTER 18:

VAMPIRE

Warmth from the sun fell across my face and I squinted against the light.

Every memory from the night before crashed into me. My eyes shot open. I sat straight up, letting the covers fall into my lap. Scanning the room, I ran my hands through my hair.

He sat in the chair next to the window, his eyes watching me, silent. I took in his scowl and loose hair around his shoulders before looking at his hands clenched around the armrests.

I threw off the covers and turned my back to Sefa while I sat on the side of the bed.

“I want to go home,” I whispered.

I wasn't sure if he heard me, but I wasn't going to repeat the pitiful plea twice. I bit my lip before going to the bathroom and giving myself space from him.

Standing in front of the mirror, I wanted to scream. It wasn't fair. Joseph dragged me into a world I didn't know existed and had the audacity to go and get himself killed in the process.

Hurt swirled around my chest, and I wanted to be angry at everyone around me, but there was only one person to blame—the one staring back in the mirror.

How did I miss so much? I was trained to notice tiny details in the human body. He lied to me. A lot. How did I ignore it? What did that say about me?

I swiped everything off the counter in one swoop and screamed as I ran my hands through my hair and tugged.

“Parker?” Sefa's voice on the other side of the door spiked my anger.

“Go away!”

“Are you hurt?”

I stomped to the door and ripped it open. “Of course, I’m hurt! The world, as I knew it, does not exist. My dead husband lied to me for our entire relationship and used me. Kalina died. And you! You are...”

“What? What am I, Parker?”

His eyes challenged me, and I stepped closer to him because what did I have to lose? “Besides a broody pain in my ass? A vampire. You’re a vampire, Sefa.”

Sefa’s face relaxed for a moment before he raised his brow. “I may be a pain in the ass, but you owe me a word of thanks.”

I scoffed and brushed past him and into my room. “Thank you for what? Not eating me? You lied to me just as much as Joseph did.”

I jumped when Sefa appeared in front of me. His eyes disappeared into obsidian for a flash, and then they returned to their normal dark appearance as he spoke. “I saved your life. And I never lied to you. I’m not like him.”

My feet were rooted in place, and I didn’t realize my heart was racing until I crossed my arms over my chest. I took a deep breath to cool the anger rising in my chest and closed my eyes. I let out the breath and stared at the monster before me.

“Thank you. Thank you for keeping me from getting killed. This is not an invitation for us to get chummy. I don’t want anything to do with you or this world. As soon as I’m cleared from the ridiculous idea that I murdered my husband, I am leaving.”

A thought raced across my mind that if Joseph were alive now, he definitely wouldn’t be for long. I would kill him myself, the selfish, lying bastard.

Sefa took one step closer to me. “I’ll give you the space you need, but you do not leave the property. Do you understand?”

An involuntary shiver climbed my spine as the mystery vampire from last night crossed my mind. “Fine.”

Sefa backed away and left the room without another word. I swallowed and let my arms fall loose. Did I really just go toe to toe with a vampire? What in the world was wrong with me?

After a few moments to pull my thoughts together, I left the sanctuary of my room and entered the living area.

Lono stretched out on the couch with a comfy blanket over his lap. He adjusted his glasses as I approached.

“Parker, won’t you sit with me?”

I nodded and sat on the couch across from him. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, it’s just a few broken ribs. That’s not what hurts the most.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I bit my cheek to keep them in check. “I...I tried...”

“My dear, it was her time. I will be lost without her, my Kalina, but it was her choice.”

I picked at my nail until his last words registered. “Her choice? Lono, you both were attacked.”

“Yes, but she did not fear death. She told him not to save her when the time came. She was very brave.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Lono leaned toward me. “She did not want to be changed.”

My eyes widened. “A...a vampire? She didn’t want to be a vampire?”

“Mmmm.” Lono set his glasses back on his face and picked up a book he held in his lap.

The silence between us was a comfort—no words needed to fill the space. At least not until questions began to pile in my head, and I couldn’t contain them any longer.

“You know what he is?”

“My son? Of course. I took him to the talamaur with Kalina.”

“Talamaur?”

“A kind of vampire here on the islands. They, of course, were the ones to change Sefa in the first place.”

“You took him to...to change him?”

Lono set his book down and adjusted his glasses again. “There are no limits on the lengths a parent will go to to protect their child.”

“So you chose this life for him, but Kalina did not want it for herself? I don’t understand.”

“Parker, child, life is far more complicated than that.”

“Lono, everyone deserves respect. They deserve to have a choice.”

Tears filled the old man’s eyes and spilled down his face. “My Kalina was a witch, blessed with a special connection to the earth. If she were changed...if she were to become a vampire, she would lose that connection. She said losing the vibrancy of auras and the hum of magic would be worse than death.”

I collapsed back against the couch and stared up at the ceiling. So now there are witches? What else did I not know about this world?

“Parker?”

I lifted my head, and Lono watched me intently.

“Parker, are you alright? I take it that you were not aware of vampires’ existence.”

“No, Lono. No, I didn’t know that vampires are real. I didn’t know that my husband was a vampire hunter or that he brought me here to use as bait—”

“Hush!” Aroha appeared in the doorway and moved toward us both. “Hush, don’t say another word, Parker. The police arrived moments ago. Sefa is talking with them now, but they insist on taking you for more questions.”

Fear froze my blood. Aroha latched onto my arm and tugged until I forced my body to follow. She rubbed her hand up and down my arm and led me to the door.

“Don’t tell them anything you learned last night,” Aroha whispered. “Sefa will accompany you there. You will be safe.”

“Why do they want to take me from here? They asked their questions here last time.”

“I do not know. You are innocent. They cannot keep you.”

We exited the door, and I reached for Aroha’s arm, clutching it like a lifeline. “I can’t...”

“You must, Parker. He won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Why?”

When she didn’t answer, the silence pulled my eyes to Aroha. She smiled. “Because you are innocent. Now go.” She jerked her head in the direction of the officers and Sefa.

I took two steps down to the gravel and planted my feet there.

Would the nameless vampire find me? Did he know that the police were bringing me in for questioning? He said I was the bait. Was he coming back?

Sefa was at my side in moments. He placed his hand on my lower back and guided me to his car, away from the officers. I locked eyes with them as we passed, wondering if they were vampires too.

He maneuvered me into the passenger seat, and I fastened my belt out of habit.

When he sat in the driver’s side, I couldn’t help the most pressing question from leaving my lips.

“What’s going to happen to me?”

Sefa met my gaze. “Nothing. Nothing is going to happen, Parker. I promise.”

CHAPTER 19:

INNOCENT

We followed the police down the winding road back to town.

“What do you think they want?”

“You’re a suspect in a murder, Parker. I’m sure they want to ask you questions about that.”

“What do I tell them about Joseph?”

Sefa kept his eyes on the road but gripped the steering wheel tighter. “You don’t tell them anything that you learned from last night.”

“So they aren’t vampires then?”

“Who? The officers? No. They aren’t vampires. Most of them don’t even know that we exist.”

The scenery flashed by and I used the distraction to ask my hardest question. “What if he shows up? The one from last night? The one that said...I was bait?”

Sefa glanced in my direction, but I didn’t meet his eyes. I kept mine down. “Parker, I’m not leaving you there. I will be there the entire time.”

“They won’t let you in the interrogation with me,” I said softly. I didn’t want to say it, but fear had a way of loosening my tongue.

“You really know nothing of vampires, do you?”

I glanced up at him. “What do you mean?”

A smirk formed on Sefa’s face. “I will be in the building. If I choose, I can hear everything that is said in that room. You don’t have to worry. I’ll be listening the whole time.”

Why did that make me feel better? I scolded myself for being comforted by a vampire.

We turned into the police station, and Sefa parked the car. I wanted to look away when he turned to me, but I stayed steady.

“When you’re in there, Parker, you are not the girl you are now. You are the girl you were before you knew about vampires. Do not let on that you know anything, or they will suspect you of this murder even more.”

I nodded. “And you promise that he won’t get to me? This mystery vampire?”

Sefa reached out and laid his hand on my arm. “You won’t be harmed under my protection, Parker. I can promise that.”

I stared at the connection, his hand on my arm. This was strange, right? Should I allow this?

Either way, his words gave me more confidence and strengthened my heart. I moved out of Sefa’s reach and slid out of the car door. With his hand on the small of my back again, he guided me to the entrance of the police station. Officer Smith directed Sefa to a waiting area and me to a sterile room with one table and two chairs.

“Miss Rhodes, I assume you know why we called you down here?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“We need to get a detailed statement from you.”

“I’ve already answered all of your questions. What more could you possibly have?”

Officer Smith opened the file and spread papers across the table.

“Can you tell me again where you were at the time of the murder?”

I sighed and ran my hands through my hair. This wasn’t going away any time soon, so I might as well dig in and answer all the stupid questions they had.

“I was out walking on the beach. Joseph said he would join me after he showered.”

“And you didn’t find this odd, that your new husband wanted to shower...alone? That he wanted to be alone?”

My face flushed at the implication, and I shifted in my chair.

“No. We had been traveling the entire time since our wedding. If he wanted to shower, that was fine with me.”

“And can you describe the nature of your relationship with Mr. Webster?”

I narrowed my eyes at Officer Smith. “He was my husband.” I bit off each word.

“Can you please expand? Were you friendly? Did you have disagreements often? Did you ever get violent in your arguments?”

“No. We were always friendly. We never fought. Are you asking me if I was a domestic violence victim? Joseph never hurt me.”

At least not while he was alive.

“Are you aware of his will, Miss Rhodes?”

“His will? No. We were hardly married.”

“Are these not things you would have discussed? What about his financial holdings? Are you also not aware of those?”

“I’m sorry. I know the bank that Joseph uses. Is that what your asking?”

“No, Miss Rhodes. I’m asking if you are aware of the substantial sum of money that your husband held in his lifetime.”

Was Joseph rich? Was that what he was saying?

“No, officer. I’m not aware that my husband had any substantial amounts of money.”

“Were you aware that you are not named in his last living will?”

“I already told you that I didn’t know he had one. How could I know who he did or did not name?”

“Well, Miss Rhodes, you are not listed in his will. All of his financial holdings will pass to his sister, Kara.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “So you think I killed him because my husband had money?”

“You said that not me, Miss Rhodes.”

“Well, you are mistaken. I didn’t kill Joseph. I had no reason to kill my husband.”

Officer Smith began to collect the papers back into the file.

“You will need to wait here. Can I get you anything?”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying I can’t leave?”

Officer Smith rose from his seat. “For now.”

I watched him as he left, wondering what more they could need from me. I was innocent. However, the same couldn’t be said of my late husband. Not that I would be sharing that.

CHAPTER 20: HE LOVED ME

I drummed my fingers on the table at the police station, waiting for the officer to return. When I glanced at the clock, another hour had ticked by. Three hours, I had been sitting here. How much longer could they hold me?

My heart pounded in my chest and thrummed in my ears. Anger wasn't the cause of my distress. It was fear.

Would Sefa keep his promise? Was I really safe?

I needed to talk to Eliza. She would ground me. Even if I couldn't tell her about all the nonsense happening with Joseph, at least she was safe.

The door burst open, and I jumped at the abruptness. Sefa crossed the space between us and laid his hand on my lower back, guiding me out of the room.

“What’s happening?”

“We’re leaving, Parker. Now.”

The increased pressure on my back motivated me to hurry. “Is he...?”

“No. But the officers can’t keep you. They aren’t happy about it, but we are leaving.”

As we passed the front desk, the officers scowled, and I felt their eyes follow us to the car. Sefa guided me to my seat, and I struggled with the seat belt. My hands shook and slipped against the buckle twice. On the third attempt, Sefa’s hands engulfed mine, and I snapped my head up to meet his gaze.

“Parker. Breathe.”

He pulled the belt from my grasp and clicked it into place. I ran my fingers through my hair and looked at the police station. Something unsettled me, and it was more than just

difficult police. Taking a few deep breaths, I let my mind go blank and reset.

The scenery changed out the window, and I was exhausted when we got back to Sefa's home. Sefa opened his door to leave but stopped when I spoke.

“Wait.”

He turned his head, and his lips formed a firm line. It wasn't quite a scowl, but it wasn't pleasant either.

“I need help.”

I struggled to find the words, but I knew I needed something. Sefa remained silent and waited for me to continue.

“I need...answers. Information. About this...this vampire world.”

Sefa scanned the area around us. “Go inside. I have to check the property, and then I will answer what I can.”

The next instant, he vanished from sight. I blinked, and my eyes darted around the landscape, wondering where he had gone. I pulled myself from the car and up the stairs to the house. Even though I was almost out of energy, I peeked in on Lono, who slept on the sofa, before going to my room to shower.

The heat and steam relaxed my tense muscles but did nothing to clear the fog settling in my mind. How was all of this real? Vampires, vampire hunters, my completely unfortunate situation. I wished I had never met Joseph. I wished I had taken the job in Texas rather than Arizona. Maybe then I wouldn't have met him. The question circling the edges of my mind finally came to the forefront.

Did he ever really love me?

The dead didn't speak. I shook my head and turned off the water. Best not to ask questions that only they could answer.

I dressed and made my way to the kitchen. As I passed Lono, I pulled the covers over his shoulder. Sefa stood over the stove

and he turned when I sat at the counter, handing me a mug of tea. Sadness overwhelmed me at the gesture. Kalina won my heart and trust at the beginning this way.

Sefa retreated to lean against the counter across the kitchen. “Aroha just left, but she is safe to speak with on these things.”

“The...vampire things?”

He nodded. “She is like my mother was. She’s a witch.”

“Oh.” I cradled my mug in my hands and brought it to my lips. This tea was different but not unpleasant. There was a twinge of bitterness along with the sweetness.

“What do you want to know about this world?”

I met his eyes and dropped my mug back to the countertop. “Everything. I need to know how it works. How much danger I’m in. All I have to go on are myths and bad TV shows.”

He crossed his arms over his chest before he began. “There are a lot of variances with vampires, but a few things are always the same. It takes vampire venom to change a human. Vampires are impossibly fast and have incredible hearing.”

“And the blood? How does that work?”

Sefa smirked at the shakiness in my voice. “Yes. We crave blood, but not like you see in the movies. We won’t go feral at a drop of blood. It’s an impulse that can be controlled.”

“Do...do you need it?”

“Yes. All vampires require blood. Some more than others.”

“You?”

His eyes darkened. “Yes. I require more than others.”

“But I’ve never seen you...how are you getting it?”

“Careful, Parker.”

“I am just trying to understand.” I ignored his warning and continued. “Where are you—”

Sefa stood behind me the next moment, so close I felt his breath ruffle my hair. “There are those that are willing.”

I tilted my head so I could see his face. His hand rested on the countertop and the other on the back of my chair, crowding me. “Willing to be bitten?”

“It doesn’t have to hurt. I decide how it feels.”

“How it feels?”

Sefa brushed my hair over my shoulder, his fingertips brushing my neck. With the back of his finger, he traced my pulse. His eyes met mine, and I leaned toward him. He tilted his head, and I wanted him to touch me, to kiss me, to... *bite* me. Shivers raced down my spine, and warmth flooded my core. A moment passed, and Sefa glanced down at my neck again before retreating from my personal space.

When he did, my head cleared, and I ran my hands through my hair. I swiveled away from him and picked up the mug again.

Sefa walked to the other side of the kitchen, leaned against the countertop, and smirked. My blood raged.

Whatever he did, he did it on purpose.

“Don’t do that again.”

“Do what?”

“Whatever you just...that thing...the thing you did that...”

He crossed his arms over his chest, and his grin expanded.

“Parker, I didn’t do anything supernatural.”

Blood rushed to my cheeks, and I averted my gaze. “I don’t believe you.”

“Trust me. You are nearly impossible to compel.”

My eyes shot up to his. “What do you mean compel?”

“Do you need a dictionary?”

“I know what the word means, Sefa. Did you compel me?”

His face turned serious. “The only time I have compelled you was after the attack to sleep. And that nearly didn’t hold.”

“How can I trust you?”

He shrugged. “You don’t have a choice.”

Silence filled the air as I judged his words. My instincts weren’t saying that I should fear Sefa, but those didn’t serve me well with Joseph.

“What do you know about my late husband?”

Sefa’s eyes darkened. “He was a vampire hunter. I don’t recognize the rune on the stake. I’m still working on finding more information about that.”

“Why did he bring me here?”

“From what the talamaur said, you were bait. I’m not sure why he felt the need to bring bait here when plenty of tourists would be available. He was despicable, bringing along someone who didn’t know about this world. Completely pathetic and atrocious.”

A sudden need to defend Joseph rose inside me. I’m not even sure where it came from. “Hey. That’s my late husband. Show some respect.”

Sefa was in my space again a moment later, leaning across the island’s countertop that separated us. “You would defend him? After he nearly got you killed?”

“He...he loved me.”

Sefa scoffed. The scowl on his face deepened. “Maybe he loved you, but his love was shallow. He didn’t share your interests. He didn’t care about your needs. He dragged you to a remote location to slaughter you as bait to further his agenda.”

Sefa straightened and smacked his hands down on the countertop. “That’s not love, Parker. That’s manipulation.”

A tear tracked down my cheek. His words echoed my inner thoughts, and I hid my face by staring at my mug until a whisper at my ear startled me.

“You deserve more, Parker.”

Sefa’s words cut through to the heart of the matter. I looked up to see his face, needing to see the expression that went with those words, but he was gone.

CHAPTER 21: AN UNINVITED GUEST

I hadn't seen the vampire who lived in this house in days. I focused my attention on Lono and getting him healed enough for Kalina's funeral. The funeral I was informed I would not be attending.

"You seem distracted, Parker."

I turned my head from the window to Lono. "It's been a lot to process."

He patted the seat next to him at the kitchen table. "Sit. Sit. It would do you well to have some tea with me."

Lono poured the water from the kettle over the tea leaves and slid the mug to where I sat. "What is troubling you most, Parker?"

The warmth from the tea was always welcome, despite the humidity that permeated the air in this place. "Honestly, Lono, I want to go home. The officers aren't giving me any indication as to when I can leave. I'm...nervous about staying here."

"Can I ask you a question?"

I nodded my head as I nursed my tea.

"What makes you so sure you will be safe at home?"

Lono's words cut like ice down my spine. I set the mug on the table and ran my hand through my hair.

"I hadn't thought about it."

"Your late husband was a vampire hunter. Surely he would have made enemies along the way. I still cannot understand how you didn't know, and he didn't tell you."

I shrugged and looked out the window at the flora, distracting myself from the never-ending stream of concerns arising. "He

needed me for something. I'm just not sure what."

"Have you asked Sefa?"

When I looked back at Lono, his eyes were kind, prompting me to continue. "He doesn't know."

"Have you talked to him about your late husband?"

"Some. But not much since the attack."

Sefa's words rang loud in my mind as they had over and over the last few days. *You deserve more, Parker.*

I shook away the thought. Changing the subject seemed safer.

"Are you ready, Lono? Aroha will be here soon to collect you."

A shiver ran up my spine at the deep voice behind me. "Aroha will be staying here."

I turned in my seat, and Sefa stood in the doorframe leading to the kitchen. His dark eyes met mine, and I didn't look away, even though my heart beat faster.

"I thought—"

"Aroha will stay with you. I will accompany my father."

I stood and helped Lono out of his seat, his gait still showing the extent of his injuries. Lono wrapped his arms around me and hugged me close. "You will be safe with Aroha. And we will not be long."

Lono shuffled toward the front of the house, and I crossed my arms over my chest. "Where have you been?"

"Keeping you safe."

I narrowed my eyes. "I haven't seen you for days."

Sefa took his time as he closed the distance between us. "I have been here."

He stopped a few steps in front of me, forcing me to lift my eyes to meet his. "What if that vampire comes for me?"

“He might.” Sefa stepped closer again, but I refused to back away. “If he does, Aroha can deal with him, and I will know.”

The air thickened with tension in the silence. I wanted him to give me some indication of what he was thinking but his scowl remained in place. After a few moments, Sefa turned to leave. I surprised myself when I reached out and touched his arm. Sefa’s eyes whipped back to mine.

“I’m sorry. About Kalina. She was really special. And Asher. I...didn’t know him well, but he was kind. I’m sorry they’re gone.”

Sefa placed his hand over mine and squeezed it before giving me one last glance. I watched him disappear through the door and wondered what had come over me. I didn’t have long to ponder it because Aroha came sashaying into the house.

She wrapped me in a hug as soon as she got close. “Parker. I’m glad to see you doing better. How about we settle in for a movie?”

“Um, sure. That sounds fine. What movie did you want to watch?”

“Let’s see.” She dug into the purse on her arm and produced a handful of DVDs. “We can watch Twilight, The Vampire Diaries, or my personal favorite, Interview with a Vampire.”

An unexpected laugh erupted from me. Aroha’s smile widened at my reaction.

“Nothing like calling out the elephant in the room.”

I hugged her this time and held on. Her demeanor always seemed to calm me.

“I’ll make some popcorn for the movie then,” I said.

“Which one should we start with?”

A knock sounded at the door, and I froze in the kitchen. I looked at Aroha and waited to see what she would do. She held her hand up for me to stay where I was, and I nodded. Aroha’s expression hardened into a fierceness I hadn’t seen

before. She left for the front door, and I wrapped my arms around my waist.

The mystery vampire wouldn't knock. Why was anyone coming here now? Shouldn't they all be at the funeral?

Voices approached from the front door.

“I figured that Sefa would be here with Parker. I came to pay my respects.” Tiato strolled into the kitchen with Aroha close behind.

“You need to leave. Now.” Aroha came to my side and looped her arm through mine.

Tiato settled at the kitchen table and grinned. “Well, since I’m here, I might as well enjoy the company of two lovely ladies until he returns.”

CHAPTER 22: US

Aroha held on to my arm and I halted in her vice-like grip.

“Come, sit.” Tiato waved his hand at the chairs.

“Leave.” Aroha’s voice was low and hummed in her throat. I looked, and her face was all stone and cold.

“No. Not until he comes here. I have a message for him.”

“I’m his secretary. I can certainly take a message for him. Give me this message and leave.”

The two were locked in a staring match. I was missing something. Sefa didn’t care for him, but Aroha’s reaction surprised me.

Tiato’s eyes left Aroha’s. He looked my body up and down. For the first time, his gaze was unwelcome. I leaned into Aroha, hoping to put her between us.

“You’re not wearing your ring,” Tiato commented. “Wonder how that happened.”

I glanced down at my hand. I hadn’t thought about the pearl ring since it went missing. “I lost it.”

Tiato scoffed and leaned back in his chair. “I’m sure that’s what happened.”

I didn’t like his condescending tone. “It’s true. What does it matter to you?”

Aroha nudged me ever so slightly and cut in before he could answer. “The message?”

A smirk crossed his face, sending the wrong kind of shivers down my spine. He put his hands behind his head and kicked the chair back further. “I’ll wait. In the meantime, Parker, are you enjoying your stay on Mele?”

“I can’t say that I am. I’m a widow now because of it.”

“Such a shame about your husband. My condolences.”

I allowed the silence to swell. There was nothing to say, especially since his tone indicated that he neither cared nor needed a response.

Tiato let the chair fall back to the floor and stood to look out the window. “You are young. You should be able to go out and experience Mele during your time here.”

“I’m a suspect in the murder. I’m not allowed to leave.”

Tiato smiled and crossed the space between us. He took my hand and gestured with his other at the view out the window. “That doesn’t mean that you can’t enjoy the sights. The nightlife. You might even enjoy yourself.”

“Um...” I pulled back my hand, trying not to be rude but also not wanting the physical contact.

I glanced at Aroha because what Tiato said was technically true. I didn’t want to leave now that I knew about the vampires. I wasn’t safe.

When I didn’t respond, Tiato studied me. “Unless there is some reason that you don’t want to go out.”

“Uh...I don’t think...”

Aroha rubbed her hand up and down my arm. “Parker is still grieving, Tiato. Her husband died.”

Why didn’t I think of that? Why did I feel so unsteady and unsure of myself? There were a hundred plausible reasons that I wouldn’t want to go out, but the only one that came to mind was the mystery vampire who called me bait.

“Tiato, did you have a message?”

“I’ll give my message directly to Sefa.”

Relief flooded me when the familiar deep voice sounded behind me. “I’m here, Tiato. Give me the message and get out.”

My head whipped to see Sefa in the doorway. I didn’t care how he was here, only that he was. I took a small step in his

direction but stopped when the scowl on his face deepened more than normal.

“Ah, there you are. I was keeping Parker company while you grieved.”

“Aroha was here. She was not lonely.” Sefa crossed his arms over his chest. “What is your message?”

Tiato moved around the table and put himself close enough to reach out and touch Aroha and me. “I was here about the deed to this house. As you know, Kalina was the sole owner. It must be returned to her...family now that she is gone.”

“I will ask for the deed. Now, leave.”

Tiato locked eyes with me. “It’s good to see you, Parker. So strange, not seeing you around the island now. I hope to see you again. Soon.”

He reached over to squeeze my shoulder, but I pulled away into Aroha. His hand hovered for a moment before he dropped it and shoved them both in his pockets. Sefa followed him to the door.

Aroha rubbed her hand up and down my arm again, but it didn’t prevent me from shaking.

Sefa returned, and I looked up to see him staring at me. His eyes didn’t leave mine as he spoke.

“Tell me what happened, Aroha.”

“He came here and said he had a message. He said he knew you would be back. That was it.”

“Did he touch her?”

I shook my head. He was looking at me but talking to Aroha still.

“No, he didn’t,” she answered.

“Wait...what is...is he a...”

Sefa approached and leaned down so he was closer to my eye level and placed his hand on my shoulder. “He is not a

vampire. He's a warlock. One that desperately wants to get his hands on this property. I only hope Kalina solved that little issue before she died."

"What? What issue?"

"Vampires cannot hold property, at least not in terms of the supernatural world. Kalina could not pass this land on to me any longer. The local coven wants to get their hands on it." Sefa rose to his full height again and dropped his hand. "That's not the only issue that is on the table."

"No. Sefa, it would be too risky," Aroha began.

He held his hand up. "Parker will be safe, but if Tiato noticed that she is not around the island, others will have as well."

"I don't understand." I ran my hand through my hair as I spoke.

"The coven could take an interest in you because of your husband. Hiding you away makes them curious."

"What are you suggesting?"

Aroha let go of my arm for the first time. "I'm not strong enough, Sefa. This will be on you." She quickly kissed my cheek and gathered her purse. "I'll go collect Lono."

I watched her walk out the door, confused. "What does she mean?"

Sefa crossed his arms and leaned against the countertop. "She doesn't want to be responsible for keeping you alive, but we will have to go out on the island."

"Out?"

"Yes. You and I."

"Us? You and me?"

A smirk formed on his face. "That's what I said. Is that going to be a problem?"

"No. If that's what we have to do, that's what we will do."

“Good. I’ll see you in a few days, and we will start our little adventures.”

The flutters in my stomach and the heat that rushed to my cheeks at the idea of spending more time with Sefa grew without my consent. I wanted to shove the feelings away, but they would not be ignored...It was rather unfortunate.

No future of mine included Sefa.

CHAPTER 23: WHY NOT?

“You want to go out? Now?”

Sefa nodded. “Now.”

“It’s almost midnight. You have to be kidding.” I pulled the blanket up on my lap and returned to my book.

Sefa snatched it out of my hand.

“Hey!”

“Now, Parker.”

“I don’t understand why it has to be tonight. It’s been days since Tiato was here. Can it wait?”

“Parker,” Sefa growled.

“What about Aroha? Can she come with us?”

Sefa stood straighter and crossed his arms over his chest. God, the way those biceps strained against the sleeves should be illegal.

“Aroha will meet us at the club.”

“*Club?*”

“Yes. Where else would we be going in the middle of the night?”

“Uh...no. No, thank you.” I pulled the blanket higher and picked up another book from the coffee table.

He snatched the book from my hand again and leaned over me. I retreated, my hands clutching the blanket like it would help me somehow. His dark eyes locked on mine.

“Parker. You can’t avoid this. We are going out. Tonight. The coven leaders and the officers will be at the club since it’s Saturday. It’s the perfect time for you to be seen.” He stood up

and held his hand out to me. “This is the best way to keep you safe.”

I stared at the hand and then back at the man—*vampire* waiting for me.

I had trusted a man. Trusted him enough to marry him, even. And that turned out to be a mistake. But trusting an actual monster? This was probably a mistake too, but what choice did I have?

Placing my hand in Sefa’s, I rose to my feet. He held on to it even after I was up, sending blood rushing to my cheeks. “Give me a minute. I need to change if we’re going to go to a club.”

His eyes followed me—I didn’t have to see them to know. In my room, I scanned my clothes for something appropriate for a club and settled on a white halter top dress. After I was dressed, I picked up my phone. An alert showed a missed text from my sister asking for my address again.

I carried it out to where Sefa waited. “Can you give me your address? For my sister. She wants to send me something.”

When he didn’t answer, I looked up. His expression was not like I had ever seen from him before. He looked like he could devour me whole and, at the same time, see directly into my soul. My eyes darted around the room for anywhere to land other than his face. I settled on the phone in my hands and bit my lip.

A breath of wind rustled my hair, and Sefa was in front of me. His hand guided my chin up so he could look into my eyes. His thumb pulled my lip from my teeth. I stilled completely. No one had ever caused my heart to race like this or my emotions to stir so violently. Sefa tucked my hair behind my ear before pulling my phone from my hand. I waited for him to speak but he remained silent.

Sefa typed something into the phone, an address I assumed, and set the phone on the counter. Taking my hand, he led me to the car.

I stared out the window and let silence comfort me. When we arrived, Sefa finally spoke. “I will be close when we go in, but you need to mingle.”

“I...I don’t...”

“Parker. If I’m at your side the entire time like I want to be, it will only bring more suspicion on you with the supernaturals.”

My eyes snapped to his. “You *want* to be?”

“Aroha will meet us inside. I won’t be far.”

Sefa got out of the car and came around to open my door without another word. I stepped into the humid night air and shivered despite the heat. A club full of supernaturals and unsuspecting tourists didn’t sound like a good idea to me.

The heat from Sefa’s hand on my lower back returned me to reality. I glanced up at him, but his gaze was on the club before us. He guided me through security and to the bar on the far side of the open room. Dancers crowded each other on the floor, and the music made it nearly impossible to hear my thoughts, much less anything else.

I relaxed when Aroha waved me to a seat at the bar next to her. I barely reached her side when I realized Sefa was already gone. I took a deep breath and calmed myself. Aroha was here, and he wasn’t far.

She kissed my cheek in greeting and pulled a chair close.

“Sit!” She shouted above the crowd. I climbed onto the bar stool, so close to Aroha that our knees pressed together, and she slid me a pink drink with pineapple on the rim.

“Oh no. I can’t.” I waved her off. Despite our closeness, I had to lean into her ear and yell to be heard above the music.

“Why? It will help.”

I glanced around the bar and dance floor. I supposed it would be unusual for me not to drink. I hardly ever drank alcohol at home. Maybe this was a chance for me to reclaim my honeymoon-turned-disaster.

“Okay. Why not?” I lifted the glass to my lips and sipped on the drink, surprised that I enjoyed the taste of strawberries and pineapple. This wasn’t so bad. I could pretend to be calm and enjoy myself at a club full of supernaturals. Right?

CHAPTER 24: TELL ME TO STOP

“What did you say?” I shouted above the noise of the crowd.

“How are you feeling?” Aroha glanced around and watched the dancers.

I sipped on the last of my drink. “Okay. I’m relaxing, I think. It’s just hard to. Because...you know.”

She leaned closer to me with a conspiratorial smile on her face. “Look around. What do you see?”

My eyes bounced around the room. People dancing. People along the walls, playing barroom games. People in dark corners wrapped around each other.

“People. Everywhere.”

Aroha waved the bartender down and purchased another drink for me. She reached into her purse, sprinkled something in the drink, and handed it to me.

“Oh, I shouldn’t.” I pushed the drink away, unwilling to try any drugs with my alcohol.

“Trust me.” She pushed the drink into my hand. “It will change your vision. You will be able to *see*.”

I tilted my head and ran my hand through my hair. Without meaning to, I scanned the area for the hundredth time for Sefa but did not see him. I sipped on the drink, unable to detect whatever Aroha had added.

I ran my fingers up and down the glass waiting for something to change. Aroha tapped my arm, and when I looked up she gestured to the dance floor. I looked around and blinked. Did that woman have wings? I looked at Aroha, and she grinned before pointing to the guys playing darts. They began to scuffle, and one’s face completely changed into a snarling

monster with fangs. I almost dropped my drink as I stood. He pushed the man next to him and they both growled, their features stretching and pulling to grotesque proportions. After a moment, they appeared human again, laughing and beating each other on the back.

“What was that?”

Aroha leaned closer. “Gargoyles. They have tempers but like to have fun more than anything.”

I took another drink, and she looped her arm in mine. I set the glass on the bar, and Aroha pulled me to the dance floor. The woman with wings strutted by us and turned her nose up at Aroha.

“Pixies are the worst. They believe they are superior to all other supernaturals.”

I giggled at the insanity of what I was seeing. Aroha pulled me into the middle of the dance floor and began to sway her hips.

“How come you aren’t different with this vision?”

“Witches and warlocks are human, dear.” She grabbed my hand and began to move me to the beat.

“What about...vampires,” I whispered the last word.

“They were once human too. They can’t be detected this way.”

“So, how do you know?”

She shrugged as she danced. “We try to keep track of these things. It’s not possible to know everything.”

I continued to sway to the beat, stiff and awkward next to Aroha. I hadn’t spent much time dancing in clubs, or anywhere else for that matter. Aroha noticed my discomfort when the song changed and snatched my hands again. “Move, Parker. Dance. Feel the music.”

“This is not something I do often.”

Aroha swayed her hips and turned in a circle. “It’s like making love.”

A flush stole over my cheeks. Aroha turned her head over her shoulder, and her mouth gaped open at my expression.

“No. You were married.”

I lifted one shoulder. “There wasn’t exactly...time.”

“Time? You were engaged, were you not?”

“Aroha...I don’t want to talk about...”

She stopped her dancing and raised an eyebrow. “You’re still a virgin.”

There it was. Plain and simple. Why was I embarrassed? It was no one’s business.

She sighed and moved behind me. “You need a partner. Move like this.” She grabbed my hips and tilted them in an unfamiliar way. “Feel the beat of the music and let it guide you.”

After a few beats, I understood what she was talking about. The warmth from the alcohol in my system begged me to release control of my mind, but I was unused to letting go. Aroha moved in front of me again and grinned. “A natural. Keep that up, and we will find you a partner in no time.”

A man came up behind Aroha and snaked his arm around her waist. He matched her movements as they danced together. Unfamiliar hands landed on my hips. A glance behind me revealed a handsome face and shaggy blond hair.

“I’m Chad. What’s your name, sweetheart?”

Maybe this was good for me. The dancing. The alcohol...The strange men.

“Parker.” I spun in his arms and placed my hands on his shoulders.

“You here on vacation, Parker?”

“Mmhmm.”

Chad’s hand slid from my hip to my ass as he pulled me close, his fingers pressing into my flesh so hard I expected there

would be bruises in the morning. I didn't like it.

I put my hand on his chest and pushed him back. He pulled me tighter and leaned closer.

The next second, nothing held me up and I collapsed on the dance floor. Sefa held Chad by the shoulder and pushed him in the direction of the exit. "Leave now."

Chad looked at me and then back at Sefa. "Not worth it, dude." He raised his hands and left.

Sefa scooped me up and set me on my feet so quickly that my head spun. I stumbled, but he held me upright. "Are you alright? Damn, shifters. They never know when to take a hint."

I gripped his forearms, unable to answer. He pulled me closer and placed my hands on his shoulders. "People are staring, Parker."

I looked around, and he was right. The commotion had caused quite the scene. Aroha subtly nodded her head toward Sefa. I gripped his shoulders, and his hands found my hips. He leaned his head down to my ear, his hair tickling the bare skin of my neck. "Relax, Parker. I don't bite—unless you ask me to."

I laughed out loud and matched my movements to his. The small smile on his face caused my breath to hitch. Why didn't he smile more?

His hand moved to my lower back, and I molded my body to his. Everything else faded away. Nothing else existed in this bubble but our bodies pressed together. Heat rushed to my face, and I turned around in his arms, trying to relieve the tension between us by facing away from him—but that only made it worse.

I looped my arm around Sefa's neck as I moved against him. His hand drifted down the underside of my arm and across my ribs. I shivered at his touch, though it set me on fire. His hand settled on my stomach, fingers splayed wide. I closed my eyes and kept dancing. I dropped my hand from his neck and interlaced my fingers over his on my stomach. With his other hand on my hip, he pulled me completely flush with his body.

At my back, a large bulge that could only be one thing. Heat crept into my face and my body clenched in response.

His hair danced along my neck again, and I gasped as Sefa nipped my earlobe. He hummed as he ran his lips over my neck, his breath hot on my bare skin. I arched my neck to give him access as his tongue glided down my shoulder. He rewarded my compliance with nips and kisses along my racing pulse as he made his way back up.

The spark he had ignited blazed like an inferno inside me. I turned in his arms, and he buried his face in my neck, holding me tighter than before. “Sefa,” I whispered.

He put his forehead to mine. “Tell me to stop, Parker.”

I opened my mouth to tell him no, but a flash at the entrance caught my attention. Tiato walked into the club. Ice ran down my spine. What was he doing here? Was he looking for me? As if in response to my silent question, his eyes met mine and a smile crossed his face as he started to move toward us.

“Sefa.”

“Parker, I need you to—”

I gripped his shoulder, and my tone sounded almost frantic to my ears. “*Sefa.*”

He took one glance at my face and scanned the area. Spotting Tiato, he took my hand and guided me to an exit.

“What was he doing there?” The humidity settled on my skin as Sefa pulled me behind him.

“We’re not staying to find out.”

CHAPTER 25: LETTERS FROM HOME

The throbbing in my head made it hard to open my eyes. I squeezed the lids shut and tried to block out the light. The alarm on my phone made a noise that was way too loud, and my hand smacked the nightstand to make it stop.

My phone crashed to the floor, forcing me to sit up and hold my hands to my temples. I needed a banana bag after the alcohol last night. A rustle at my side pulled me from the musing. My eyes snapped open, and Sefa held my phone out to me. I glanced from him to the phone and back before taking it gently. “What happened?”

“You passed out in the car.”

“And...”

“And I put you here.”

“Oh.”

I felt hot all over as memories of Sefa’s mouth on my neck and his tongue tracing my shoulder slammed into me. How much did I drink last night?

I reached up and touched my neck. I glanced back to Sefa trying to piece together the blank pieces in my memory. I was still wearing the same clothes.

“And you? You...sat in here?”

Sefa nodded.

“And we?”

His eyes darkened for a moment. “Parker, what do you remember about last night?”

I glanced down at my hands and rubbed the blanket between my fingers. “I...uh...dancing. I was dancing with Aroha, and this guy got handsy.” My eyes snapped up to his. “And then you were there. And we...” I gestured between the two of us.

“We danced, Parker. That’s it.”

“No, your mouth was on my neck—” I stopped myself suddenly as the blood rushed into my cheeks.

Sefa raised a brow, and his lips lifted into the slightest smirk. I buried my face in my hands, trying to escape the heat of his gaze.

The bed dipped, and warm hands pulled mine away from my face. Sefa’s eyes were soft and not full of the condescension I expected. He tucked my hair behind my ear with care. “Parker, I heard you last night with Aroha. We did not have sex.”

My eyes widened, and I quickly looked down at my lap, realizing that he heard me admit I was still a virgin. Could this be any more awkward?

Sefa’s fingers gently guided my chin up, so I was looking him in the eyes. “Parker, all that means to me is that you decide how things happen between us. If you want something, ask. And if you are not ready, know I have an eternity to wait.”

My heart raced in my chest. No one had ever said anything like this to me before. I had no basis for how to respond.

His calloused thumb traced the edge of my jaw before he dropped his hand. He swallowed and rose, turning to leave the room.

“Sefa?”

He stopped and turned his head to see me, resting his hand on the door frame.

“Thank you. I...feel safe here. Thank you for that.”

There was no change in his expression, no small indication of what he was thinking. After a moment, he dipped his head once before leaving the room.

I let out the breath in my chest and collapsed back on the bed, throwing the covers over my head. What was that? Thank you? Ugh. We went from awkward to downright humiliating.

I tossed the covers aside again and picked up my phone. Eliza's text flashed on the screen. *'I sent you a care package. I paid a ridiculous amount of money to ensure you get it today. I love you.'*

A real smile broke through my embarrassment. Eliza always knew what to say and do to make me feel better. 'I can't wait! Thank you! Love you too!'

Dropping the phone on my bed, I got myself ready for the day, going slowly so I had more time to sort through my rising feelings for Sefa.

When I finally got the courage to emerge from my room, the smell of bacon and coffee hit me so hard it was tantalizing and I paused to take it in. After a moment, I followed the smell straight to the kitchen. Sefa stood over the stove with his back to me once again. It hit me how normal being in the kitchen together had become and I mentally chastised myself. Home was back in Phoenix, not here. He pushed a mug full of coffee down the counter without turning around. It was still strange to me that he knew when I approached without seeing me. I picked up the mug and moved to the dining area, not brave enough to risk being there when he turned around.

Aroha and Lono sat at the table, speaking softly. They both turned as I entered the dining area. I paused with my coffee in hand sensing I was interrupting a private conversation.

Lono patted the seat next to him. "Come, Parker. Sit with an old man. Then I will be in the best place ever—between two beautiful women."

I smiled at him and slipped into the seat next to him. "You're such a flirt, Lono. Have you always been that way?"

"Only with the pretty ones." He laughed loudly at his own words. I loved hearing his laugh and how joyful he was, even

though he must be hurting still. Would Sefa's laugh sound like that?

"How are you feeling?" Aroha pushed some fruit in my direction as she spoke.

"My head hurts a bit, but nothing that a little aspirin and water won't fix."

She pushed her chair back and rose from her seat. "I'll get you some. I feel mostly responsible. The sight herbs can be brutal if you aren't used to them."

Aroha disappeared, and when she returned, she had a big brown box under her arm. "Hey, this was on the doorstep with your name on it." She deposited the box in front of me on the table and handed me the pills and a bottle of water.

My eyes welled up as I recognized Eliza's handwriting. I snatched it up and jumped to my feet to leave, nearly knocking Sefa over in the process.

"Oh, I'm...sorry." The package nearly slipped from my hands, but he stopped it from hitting the floor.

"Take your aspirin. Then you can run off and open this."

I glanced at his face with another flush to my cheeks. As quickly as possible, I took the meds and retreated to my room with the box. I could feel three sets of eyes on me as I left, but I needed some sanity. Some connection to my old life. And sweet Eliza had sent me a lifeline.

Tearing into the box, I pulled out a letter from my sister first.

Parker,

I hope this will hold you over until I can come and get you myself. Don't think that I have forgotten you. I'm still trying to find a place to stay over there. As soon as I can, I'll be there with you. Here's a few snacks and treats for you. I also put any of the important mail in here so you can try and handle some things if you want. Miss you. See you soon!

Eliza

I held it to my chest, hoping it would feel like a hug from my sister. Sadly, it was not nearly close enough to what I needed.

I pulled out postcards and tourist trinkets from Phoenix. She included a coupon for my favorite coffee shop and a pool membership. Eliza had a flair for the ridiculous. Under that was a blue box. I pulled it out and dropped it immediately when I realized it was condoms. Seriously, Eliza? I set the box aside and pulled out the stack of mail.

A letter addressed to Joseph from the Mist Guild was on the very top. I held the letters up, and a bitter taste filled my mouth. Anger flared in my chest. I didn't want to deal with anything having to do with my late husband. Especially here. Where he left me. Where he brought me as bait.

No. He doesn't get to control my life anymore. He dragged me into this mess. I needed to find out more about him and this world. I tore open the letters and began to read.

CHAPTER 26: AIM TRUE AND SWING FAST

There were three letters.

The first one was very brief.

Joseph,

Thank you for your submission to the Mist Guild Archives. We will be reviewing this information for the research database.

Aim true and swing fast.

Charles Elster

That didn't tell me anything.

I tore open the second one and scanned the words.

Joseph,

There are some concerns we have about the melodies you found. It seems that there are complications to this assignment, and we need for you to cease all communications at once.

Please carry your stake with you at all times. We suspect a breach in our data. Be on the lookout.

Aim true and swing fast.

Charles Elster

Of course! The Mist Guild hunted vampires. What would a song have to do with vampires? That didn't make any sense. What complications had come up?

And why had we come here if he was supposed to stop the assignment?

Or was our honeymoon just a coincidence and the assignment somewhere else?

There were too many unanswered questions. I lifted the last letter and opened it slowly. This was the last information I would get from them.

J,

They know you are coming.

C.E.

The talamaur. They knew he was coming. He never stood a chance.

My stomach clenched.

It was an accident that I was still alive. It was by chance I was not with him when he was attacked.

I gathered up the letters and clenched them in my fist. What should I do? This didn't tell me much more than what I knew before. It confirmed that Joseph was a vampire hunter. That he worked for this Mist Guild. It confirmed that he was tracking the talamaur. That's why we were here. Why did he include me? Why did he bring me on this monster hunt?

My phone rang, breaking my racing thoughts.

I set the letters down on the bed and ran my hands through my hair. Eliza's name appeared on the screen, and I picked it up to answer it.

"Hello?"

"What's wrong?"

An exasperated sigh escaped me. "Eliza, I'm trapped on an island. My husband is dead, and I'm a suspect in his murder."

"I don't think that's what's bothering you. But keep your secrets. I just called to see if you had the package yet?"

"Did you track it or something?"

"Of course I tracked it! I spent a lot of money to get it to you ASAP. So do you have it?"

"I do. I'm just opening it."

“Oh! Did you get the condoms?”

I rolled my neck to stretch my shoulders. “You know I did. You packed the box.”

She giggled. “Good. I thought you might want to lose your virginity on your honeymoon.”

“My husband is dead, Eliza.”

“Yes, yes, it’s very sad. But you are still on your honeymoon in a tropical location. It seems like a great place to have your first experience.”

“Liza,” I dragged out her name like I had when we were kids. “Please. It’s not been on my mind.”

The lie slipped from my lips with ease.

“On that entire tourist island, you didn’t find anyone worthy of your first?”

“I’m not talking about this with you.”

“I’m sorry, Parker. I’m only trying to make you smile a little. Did you get the snacks? Oh, and the mail I sent?”

“I did. Thank you. It was a really nice thought. I appreciate it. I miss you. I miss home. This helped a little.”

“When can you come home?”

“I haven’t been released yet. I can check again but these officers are taking their sweet time with everything. There’s no way to know how long it will take.”

“They need to hurry up. I need my sister home.”

“I agree completely.” My traitorous thoughts drifted to Sefa and what it would be like to be stateside again without him.

“Okay, I have to run, but I wanted to check on you. I have a cleaning company coming today to get your apartment in order. The police are done with collecting evidence.”

“Oh, Eliza. Thank you. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Stop. I love you. Come home soon.” She ended the call without letting me get another word in. I smiled despite the heartache. We lived in the same city for a reason. We loved being close to each other. Hannah and Brooklyn lived in Seattle, so they weren’t terribly far, but when I took the job in Phoenix, Eliza followed.

I loaded all the items back into the box, placing the condoms at the bottom and out of sight. I grabbed the letters and headed out to find Sefa. Maybe something in them would make sense to him. Maybe he could help.

CHAPTER 27: THE DEED

“Have you seen Sefa?”

Lono looked up from the book he was reading and slid his glasses off his face.

“He’s out for now. What did you need, lune?”

I smiled at the nickname. He said it so easily, as if he named me and not Kalina.

“I have a question about some letters addressed to my late husband that arrived at my apartment.”

“Well, you can ask Aroha, or you can wait for Sefa and keep an old man company.”

I took the seat across from Lono. “I’m always happy to spend time with you.”

“That makes me happy to hear, Parker. I noticed my son is enamored with you.”

Oh, this was not a conversation I wanted to have with Lono. “Oh...Lono...I don’t—”

He held his hand up. “I’m not here to dive into your personal business with my son. I’m glad that you enjoy my company because family is so important to him. To both of us.”

I ran my hands through my hair. “Oh.”

“How about I tell you a story instead? Hmm?”

I gave him a small smile and nodded.

“Has he told you the story of when he was turned?”

“Umm...no. Should I know that? Is it...isn’t it personal?”

Lono waved his hand in dismissal. “Nonsense. It is as much my story as his.”

“Okay.”

“Sefa was ambitious as a young man. He attended medical school and planned to become a doctor.”

“He did? That doesn’t seem like him.”

“He wanted to help people. He always has. He was driving here from the airport, and there was a storm that night. A tree collapsed on the road, and he crashed into it. Somehow, my Kalina knew. She knew something was wrong and dragged me down the road where we found him. Sefa was alive but only barely. She tried all her charms and herbs to slow the bleeding and give his body a fighting chance, but he continued to fade.

“Kalina made a decision. She called the talamaur, a local group of vampires, and offered them her services in exchange for saving him. I asked her later if she ever regretted it. She said she never regretted saving her child. But Sefa was less enthusiastic after he transitioned.”

“He didn’t want to be a vampire?”

“No. He didn’t. He wouldn’t be able to be a doctor.”

“Wait. I thought he told me that blood doesn’t make him feral. Why would he not be able to be a doctor if he can handle blood?”

“He didn’t want to risk coming across a melody.”

“A...melody?” My ears perked at the word, recognizing it from the letters to Joseph.

Lono nodded. “He is right. Vampires may become gluttonous and go on feeding binges, but the sight and smell of blood does not compel them. Not unless that person is a melody. It is very rare, but there are humans whose blood contains some form of supernatural pull on vampires. They are called melodies because their blood ‘sings’ to the vampires. It is what gave rise to the belief that vampires are affected by human blood.

“If a vampire encounters a melody, they will have almost no self-control. They will crave their blood. He couldn’t risk

becoming a doctor because it would increase the chances of running into a melody. And then he would likely hurt them.”

“Oh.”

“So he went into security instead. He still helps people but isn’t likely to run into human blood as often this way.”

“That makes sense.”

“He is not as bad as he seems, lune.”

“No. I guess not.”

A comfortable silence settled around us, and Lono replaced his glasses on his face and returned to his book. Now it seemed more important to show Sefa these letters and see what he had to say about them.

Several hours passed, and I helped Lono with various tasks he seemed determined to accomplish. Later in the afternoon, Sefa finally returned, holding a manila folder in his hand. He stormed through the house and straight to his father and slammed the folder down on the table in front of him.

“Did you know about this?”

Lono proceeded to clean his glasses before he responded. “Oh. So you found the deed then?”

“Lono, this had better be a joke. What was she thinking?”

“She was thinking it would keep the land safe.”

Sefa rose to his full height and crossed his arms over his chest.

“So she expected me to find a way to keep her safe?”

I rose to leave, not wanting to intrude on family matters, but Sefa wrapped his hand around my arm. “Don’t go anywhere, Parker. This involves you.”

“What?”

“Tell her, Lono. Tell her whose name is on the deed to this property.”

Lono took his glasses off and looked up at me. “Kalina left the house and the property to you, Parker.”

My brows furrowed, and my mouth tightened. I looked from Lono to Sefa and back. “I don’t know anything about this. What do you mean?”

“She couldn’t leave it to me, or the family would be able to claim it since I’m a vampire. And apparently, she didn’t leave it to Lono. Or even Aroha for that matter. No, she chose a human. One that is vulnerable and has the entire supernatural community’s attention on this island.”

“What?”

“Why did she do it, Lono?”

The old man returned his glasses to his face. “I knew my Kalina very well, but she did not tell me her every thought. I do not know. But, if I had to guess, it was because you would make sure that she was protected.”

He snarled at the words. “She was always manipulating things. Now even in death, she wants to make my decisions for me.”

Sefa snatched the folder off the table and stormed out of the room. I picked up the letters from the Mist Guild and followed him.

“Sefa?”

He spun on me, his eyes dark with anger. “What? What, Parker?”

His anger stirred up my own. None of this was my fault. I didn’t ask her to leave me the house or the land. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I don’t have to like any of this.”

“I didn’t say you did. Sefa, I...I need you to help me with something.”

His eyes studied me for a moment. He turned and retreated into his office. “Tomorrow,” he called over his shoulder. “I’ll deal with you tomorrow.” And then the door slammed.

I flinched even though I saw the door swinging shut. His anger bristled against me and I threw my walls up again to keep him

out. What was I thinking? He didn't want to help me. He didn't even want me here. Fine. I didn't want to be here either. I didn't ask for any of this.

Aroha's face softened as I turned, but I didn't give her the chance to speak. I held in the tears that wanted to spill and jogged to my room, slamming the door behind me.

I hoped he heard it.

CHAPTER 28:

SAVORED

The early morning sun shone through the window. I wished it had woken me, but sadly, sleep had eluded me.

I needed to clear my head.

How much more paranormal nonsense could I take before I went absolutely crazy?

I threw the covers back and dressed for a run. I pulled my sneakers on and laced them tight. It would help me think. I didn't want to be trapped here anymore.

I was unsure why I was being quiet going out the front door, but it made me feel better to try. I bounced down the steps and pulled my hair back as I began to jog. Normally I stretched, but the energy thrummed in my veins this morning.

My heart rate climbed and the burn started in my chest. Somehow, this made it easier to think. Gave my body something to distract it while my mind worked on the problems around me.

I sorted through the facts I knew now. Vampires were real. Joseph was a vampire hunter. He brought me here, knowing there were vampires here. Possibly as bait, if I were to believe the vampire that killed Asher and Kalina. He carried an odd stake that the local police were obsessed with. I couldn't leave. I needed to be cleared by the police before I could return home.

I shook my head as I ran. None of this was about me. It was all about Joseph.

None of this would follow me as long as I got as far away from Joseph and my past. Maybe I could forget that this world existed. Maybe I could start over. Find a normal human. Live a normal life.

A flash in the corner of my eye and a broad chest in front of me—I crashed into the person. Strong arms wrapped around my waist and held me upright. The scent was unmistakably Sefa, making my already-racing heart skip a beat.

I pushed my hands into his chest and gave myself space. “What the hell? Give a girl a warning if you are going to jump in my way like that.” I sidestepped him and began to jog again.

He matched his steps to mine. “You shouldn’t be out here alone, Parker.”

“You weren’t exactly in a listening mood, and I wanted to run.”

“You really have no idea how vulnerable you are, do you? Especially because of the deed.”

“I’m not a child, Sefa.”

“You don’t have any clue what this world is like.”

“Then teach me!” I came to a stop and threw my hands up in the air. “I’m a very intelligent woman. Work with me. Teach me what I need to know to survive this. Don’t dismiss me and hide me away.” He had stopped a few paces ahead before turning his stony glare on me. I marched up to him and jabbed my finger into his chest. “Don’t treat me like a woman when you kiss me and then a child when it suits you.”

He looked at the finger in his chest and then back to my face. “I haven’t kissed you yet.”

My anger grew as my face flushed hotter. How did he do that to me? I pulled my hand back and crossed my arms over my chest. “Tell me why?”

“Why I haven’t kissed you?” His lips tilted into a slight smirk as he raised a brow.

“Yes—no...why you won’t include me in decisions. Why you are one way with me and then another. All of it.”

Sefa disappeared, leaving a breath of wind in his wake. I looked up and down the path, but he was gone. I clenched my fists and raised them above me, shrieking in frustration. I stood under the banyan tree, fuming.

A voice at my back sounded in my ear. Hardly more than a whisper. “Do you realize how weak you are? How truly vulnerable? How delicate?”

I spun to face Sefa, but he wasn't there. “Coward! How weak are you that you can't even face me when you speak?”

His voice whispered again behind me. “Nothing is stopping me from devouring you. Nothing you could do to protect yourself.”

I turned again, and he was gone. “Come out, Sefa. If you can't face me and tell me the truth plain to my face, you're no better than Joseph!”

Without warning, my breath was knocked out of me as he slammed me into the banyan tree, his hands on my arms. His eyes were black as night. A deep scowl carved into his face as he bared his fangs and growled. “I am nothing like that bastard.”

Regaining my breath, I leaned closer to the monster before me. “Then prove it. Tell me why.”

Sefa released me and took a step back. He turned and crossed his arms over his chest, leaving me to stare at the back of his head as I waited for him to speak.

“Because you are caring, I don't think you should be burdened by looking over your shoulder. Because you are good, you should not have to be part of this world. Because you are precious, I don't want you to be corrupted by this.

“You deserve so much better than what he had to offer. You deserve someone that wants to figure out all your secrets. Someone who bends over backward to give you the world, and who learns how to make your breath hitch, how to make your cheeks flush.”

Sefa turned his head toward me, and his dark eyes tore through my defenses. “That’s why.”

Butterflies erupted in my stomach. I had not expected that.

“Kiss me.”

His shoulders tensed and he looked back at the ground. I fought down the embarrassment that threatened to rise from my words.

He said I needed to tell him what I was ready for. I wanted this. I wanted his body pressed against mine again. I wanted his lips on me. His hands. Everything he had to offer.

In a blink, he was before me. He stepped closer as he took my face in his hands. My back pressed against the tree and soaked in every moment.

Sefa leaned closer, his lips a mere breath away from mine.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I whispered, staring into his eyes.

He moved his mouth to my ear. “Close your eyes, Parker.”

I closed them and waited.

“A first kiss should be savored. You don’t get a second chance.” He laid his lips against my pulse. Slowly, he planted kisses up my neck and then along my jaw. I tilted my head to give him the access he wanted. His beard scratched against my neck and sent tingles through me. I shivered, and a soft rumble echoed in his chest.

Sefa gently held my chin and turned me to face him. When he laid his lips against mine, my stomach clenched. The light touch turned deeper. He nipped at my bottom lip and I gasped at the sharp sensation. He took full advantage and swept his tongue into my mouth.

Sefa took his time exploring, but I wasn’t as patient. His taste intoxicated me more than the alcohol had. I slid my hands down his arms, attempting to pull him closer. He took my hands in his, interlacing our fingers. A rush of tingles pulsed

through me as he guided my hands above my head, trapping them in place.

I moved against him, and the pressure of his body on mine was exquisite. He was everywhere, consuming all my senses. I rubbed my thighs together and gripped his hands tighter as he continued to kiss me.

Sefa pulled away, and I wasn't ready. His lips tickled my ear as he spoke. He leaned his head against mine, temple to temple.

“That’s how a first kiss should happen.”

CHAPTER 29: RUNNING (OR NOT)

My mind spun from the earth-shifting kiss Sefa gave me.

I had been kissed before. How was it possible that it could be so different from what I knew?

He released one of my hands and stepped away, pulling me with him.

“Do you want to keep running?”

He started walking down the path, my hand still interlaced with his. I reached up with my free hand and touched my lips. They still tingled from that kiss.

Sefa stopped when I didn't answer. “Well? Do you want to finish your run?”

I dropped my hand from my lips, and he smiled—the one that made my heart flutter.

He tugged my hand and pulled me flush against him. His hand cradled my jaw and he brought his lips to mine again. I reached up and looped my arm around his neck, holding him to me. In the middle of the path, I let a vampire kiss me silly.

He slid his hand along my waist to my lower back. I pushed up on my tiptoes to meet him, growing bolder. Sefa ran his hand up my spine and shivers racked my body.

Sefa kissed his way along my neck. “So, no running then?”

“No,” I answered, my voice breathless to my own ears.

He chuckled. “Come on. Let's go back to the house, and I'll make you breakfast.” He took my hand, and we began walking back.

Disappointment settled in my chest and I tried to push it away. What was I doing? There was no future with Sefa.

Right?

“What did you want to tell me last night?”

A sinking, gross feeling filled me at the thought of Joseph. I still had so many unresolved emotions with him. Not to mention reconciling the man I thought I knew with what I now knew about him.

“Eliza sent me a care package. And she put some of the letters that have come since I’ve been here so I can keep up with everything. Some of them include Joseph’s name—there are a few from a Mist Guild.”

Sefa’s head snapped to the side as he looked at me. “I need to see those.”

“That’s kind of what I thought. Is that the vampire hunter thing?”

He nodded. “Did you read them?”

“Yeah, but they didn’t make sense to me. That’s why I wanted to show them to you.”

Sefa dropped my hand as we approached the house and wrapped his hand around my waist. He tugged me closer to his side as he leaned his head toward my ear.

“Tiato is here. Don’t say anything. Stay close to me.”

My body immediately tensed, and Sefa rubbed his thumb back and forth over my back.

I could see the warlock as we reached the steps of the porch.

“Sefa! Just the man I was looking for.” Tiato stood with a wide grin. “Hello, Parker. Out for a run?”

“I don’t have the deed, Tiato.” Sefa moved me behind him as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Why not? We deserve—”

“The bank has not been able to release it yet. Something about paperwork. You understand.”

Tiato narrowed his eyes briefly. “Hmm. I’ll have to pay them a visit and see how we can speed things along.”

Tiato moved down the steps and Sefa pivoted to keep between us. He leaned forward and smiled as he made eye contact with me. “It was good to see you at the club, Parker.” He turned and faced Sefa. “Both of you. Sorry you had to run.”

“Something came up.” Sefa’s voice remained even, never betraying a thing.

“I’m sure.” Tiato stepped off the steps and into the driveway. He stopped and turned. “One more thing. When the land is ours, the family will need you to leave. Immediately.”

Sefa dropped his hands and stepped toward Tiato. I stopped him, placing my hand on his arm. “Sefa, I think I hear Lono.”

“Yes, Sefa. Tend to the old man.”

Tiato returned to his car, and Sefa and I watched as he left.

“I don’t like this. He’s up to something.”

“He seems to always be up to something. Come on. We can’t sit out here and stew. We have things to do.” I tugged gently on his arm.

His expression softened, and he placed his hand over mine, squeezing it once before placing it in his. He opened the door and led us through. “Go, get a shower. I’ll make breakfast, and then we can look over those letters.”

I gave him a smile, and he returned it. With a quick tug, he brought me to him. He kissed my lips gently, and my cheeks heated. It was one thing to kiss on the running trail. It was another thing to kiss in his home, where other people lived and worked. I didn’t mind, but I was unsure what this meant to him.

He squeezed my hand once and then left for the kitchen.

I retreated to my room, my heart racing and my cheeks burning.

CHAPTER 30: MIST GUILD

I snatched the letters off my dresser and left to find Sefa.

No one was in the dining room or kitchen, so I grabbed some fruit and headed for Sefa's office.

Aroha sat at her desk, pop music echoing softly around the room. She smiled as I approached.

"Go on in. He's waiting for you."

I opened the door and took in Sefa's office again. The last time I was in here, I slammed my hands on the desk and yelled.

This time, I noticed how a wall of screens showed all angles of the property. Sefa studied his computer but raised his hand, waving me in as I shut the door quietly.

"I'm almost done with this, and then I can look at those letters."

I stood awkwardly in the room, my eyes bouncing from the screens to Sefa. There wasn't another chair in here. If I had to guess, that was on purpose. No one would stay long if there was nowhere to sit.

After a few more clicks on the computer, he raised his eyes to me. "Come here. Let me show you something." He gestured at his screen.

Slowly, I circled the desk and leaned against it as he began to show me what he was working on. I felt like I was intruding on his personal space, but he invited me to come closer.

The screen showed the runes on the stake the officers kept asking me about.

"What does it mean?"

"Apparently, it translates as *aim true and swing fast*."

My breath hitched, and a pit formed in my stomach. I raised the hand that held the letters. “That’s the same phrase they use in these letters.”

Sefa took them, and I leaned against his desk and crossed my arms while I waited. He scanned each one before returning it to its envelope.

“So, does it mean anything to you?”

“I can’t say for sure, but yes. I have some of the pieces. What do you know about the talamaur? And do you know what a melody is?”

“So the talamaur are a type of vampire, and they were the ones that...changed you. I don’t know any more than that. And Lono told me what a melody was.”

“Yes, the talamaur changed me, but I am not one. The talamaur drink blood like other vampires but also practice dark magic. They eat the hearts of their victims to gain control over their spirits. For a time, the talamaur can use the spirit and it will have no choice but to obey.”

“That’s horrifying! What do they do with the spirits?”

“They can use the spirits to manipulate others’ emotions, have the spirits whisper things to people and make them insane, or do things out of character. It is honestly a despicable practice.”

“And there is a group of them here?”

“Yes. They have been here for centuries. And it looks like the Mist Guild was looking to take them down. That’s not all that surprising. What is surprising is the information about melodies. They seem to think that there are melodies here. Or close. That is the kind of information vampires would not hesitate to kill over.”

“Why? Lono said that it makes vampires crazed, almost feral.”

“Vitality. A melody’s blood sings because it is so very alive. A vampire can live off a single meal from a melody for a century. It boosts a vampire’s senses and natural abilities.”

“Oh. So if they uncovered that information, those individuals would be at risk.”

Sefa nodded. “A huge risk. I’ll contact my sources and see if we can uncover who they are so they can be relocated and hidden.”

“That sounds awful, to be hunted.”

“It is. That’s what this Mist Guild does as well.” He sighed and tossed the letters in a drawer. “Doesn’t look like they are doing a good job, though. Or something went wrong.”

My stomach clenched as a thought crossed my mind. They would hunt him, even though he had done nothing other than protect me. Protect me from the danger that Joseph brought me into.

“Do you think Joseph knew he was compromised? Or do you think he came anyway?”

Sefa rose from his seat and pulled me close, laying my head on his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and I soaked up his comfort. “All I can hope is that he was ignorant. If not, that meant he deliberately put you in harm’s way. He should never have hunted with you at his side.”

I lifted my head and tilted it back to see his face. “Thank you. For looking out for me. I am glad you are keeping me safe.”

“I hate what he did to you, but I’m selfishly glad you are here.” Sefa pulled me up and kissed me slowly. I threaded my fingers through his hair, gripping it at the roots. He grinned against my lips. A rush of wind brushed my skin, and then we were across the room, my back against the door. He wrapped my legs around his waist and held onto the underside of my thighs.

The heat in my body turned into an inferno. His erection pressed firmly against my center, and I moaned as he kissed my neck. I didn’t have a chance to think. I could only respond. Sefa’s lips found mine again, and as he claimed my mouth, I gripped his hair tighter. He pressed his body harder against mine.

I couldn't hold still. Sefa was sending ice and fire through my body, the intensity of which was indescribable. I moved my body, tightening my legs around him and grinding against him.

Sefa groaned and placed his forehead against mine. "Unless you are ready for this to go further, we need to stop."

"What if I am?"

"The fact that you phrased that as a question means you are not."

There was a flicker of disappointment again, but there was no need to rush into anything. "How about a little space? I'll go and help Lono with something, and you stay here and work."

Sefa kissed my lips gently as he placed my feet on the floor. "Go. I'll be here."

I smiled and squeezed his hand before retreating from the office.

When I stepped through the door, Aroha's face told me she heard everything. I ducked my head and jogged past her as she laughed and turned her music back up.

CHAPTER 31: MY PAST AND MY FUTURE

Lono kept blowing me off.

He wouldn't let me help him with the chores. He wouldn't let me bring him his medicine.

Finally, he agreed to let me make dinner since Sefa still had not emerged from his office.

I found some chicken and a few other ingredients. Baked chicken and rice may not be the most exotic meal, but it would do and was something easy to make. I started prepping everything when Aroha and Lono passed by, dressed to leave.

“Where are you guys going?”

“I have an appointment. Aroha will take me.”

“An appointment? I can help.” I set down the spices that I was working on.

“No, no. You are already working on dinner. Aroha can help me.”

I raised a brow at the older man. “Lono, it's late. What kind of appointment would you have this late in the day?”

“I'm going to dinner, if you must know.”

“Lono, then why did you ask me to start dinner?”

He shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea.”

“But you are going out. Why ask me then?”

“Well, you need to make food for yourself, right? Oh, and Sefa.”

I chuckled. “You could have just told me you were going out.”

“That would have ruined my fun. And now you have a task to occupy you.”

“Very funny, Lono. I guess have fun?”

Aroha gave me a teasing smile. “We will. We will stay out so late, won’t we, Lono?”

“Oh yes. Don’t wait up!”

The two laughed as they left the house arm in arm. I turned back to my meal and resumed prepping. The stupid smile seemed to be permanently stuck on my face. Alone time with Sefa sounded amazing.

I busied myself getting the meal ready, wondering what would go well with chicken and rice.

I diced up a pineapple, thinking it could be added to something. My mind drifted between the Mist Guild and Sefa. What did they know? Did they realize Joseph was bringing his new wife along for the hunt? Where were the melodies?

And Sefa. I couldn’t seem to reconcile my excitement at this new thing between us with the fact that he was a vampire, and the only reason I was here was because my late husband was a vampire hunter.

The knife slipped in my hand, and I fumbled to recover, thankful I didn’t cut myself.

“That was close. Wouldn’t want to cut yourself with a vampire around.”

I looked up, and Sefa stood leaning in the doorway.

“Very funny.” I rolled my eyes and returned to my dicing.

A breath of wind lifted my hair, and Sefa stood behind me. He wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed my cheek. I leaned back into him. “You’re awfully comfortable doing that.”

“I like the way you smell. The way you feel,” he murmured in my ear. “Do you want me to stop?”

That stupid smile crossed my face again, and I was thankful he couldn't see it. "No. I like it too."

I set the knife down and turned in his arms, reaching up on my tiptoes and pressing my lips to his. "You finish this, and I'll get the table set."

Sefa moved his arm so I could slide past. His eyes tracked me until I hurried to the other side of the kitchen to retrieve the dishes. I heard the knife resume dicing, and I took a steadying breath before reaching up to get the glasses first.

The glass slipped from my hand, and I tried to grab it, but it smashed into the countertop. I yelped as the shards sliced my palm. I grabbed a dish towel off the counter and put pressure on my hand.

"Are you okay?"

"Uh, I'm so sorry. The glass slipped, and I tried to catch it." I pulled the towel away to see the damage. The laceration was about an inch away from the heel of my hand. It was straight and not too deep, so best case scenario. I might not even need stitches. "I cut myself but it's not..."

I turned as I spoke, and my words trailed off as I saw Sefa. His eyes were as black as night. No whites showed through. His fangs bared, and a pained expression on his face.

"Parker, get away."

"What's wrong? I thought you said blood didn't affect you. It's hardly bleeding now that I have pressure on it."

"Parker. Leave. Now."

"I don't understand." Sefa seemed larger, aggression brewing under the surface. He sat the knife down and gripped the edges of the counter.

"Parker. Please. Run."

I pulled my injured hand close to my chest, backing slowly out of the room. Sefa moved in tandem with me. With each step away, he stepped toward me.

“Sefa. What is happening?”

He clenched his fists at his side and closed his eyes. He worked his jaw and opened his eyes, which remained as dark as night. Then he uttered the word that would change my life forever. “Melody.”

A pit opened up in my gut. Me. I was the melody.

“Sefa. You don’t want to hurt me.”

“No. I don’t.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Go to your room. Lock the door. I’ll leave.”

“Leave?”

“I’ll call you. I won’t be far. But I can’t...”

“Okay. I understand.” I backed away until I was out of sight, then ran to my room and locked the door. I turned and slid down to the floor, clutching my hand, terrified of what this meant for my past...and my future.

CHAPTER 32:

MELODY

My hand throbbed and tears slid down my face.

I was the melody.

The vampire that kept me safe turned into a monster at the smell of my blood.

I flinched as the front door slammed. More tears spilled over as I imagined Sefa running. Running from me.

I bit my lip and pushed myself up to my feet. I went to the bathroom and removed the dish towel from the wound. It wasn't bleeding so much now. I ran the water and cleaned the dried blood away. I found a fresh washcloth and continued holding pressure so it wouldn't keep bleeding.

The oven started beeping, and I remembered the food we were cooking. I rushed to get to the oven and pull the chicken before it burned, glad for the distraction. I snatched the oven mitt and threw open the oven, pulled the meal from the oven, and set it on the counter.

The glass was still scattered the floor, but I needed a first aid kit to get my wound covered. I searched the cabinets but there was nothing in the kitchen. I hurried back to the bathroom and found a bandage. I took my time getting it situated so there was no chance of it coming off accidentally.

My phone started ringing, and I ran back to the kitchen to answer it. "Hello?"

"Parker. I'm sorry. Are you alright?"

Relief filled me at Sefa's voice. "Me? I'm fine. Are you okay? What does this mean? Do I need to leave? I had no idea—"

"Parker. Take a breath. You're not going anywhere. I was around you before, and it wasn't a problem."

“But I’m a melody. I’m...”

“Parker. Just stay where you are. I called Aroha. She and Lono are coming home. I will go feed, and then we can talk and deal with this.”

My heart rate climbed. I was alone in his home—a vampire’s home, trying to process what I was. How was I a melody?

“Sefa...” I heard the door click open. “Oh, Aroha must be here.”

“Parker, don’t move. There’s no way Aroha is there yet.”

With the phone frozen to my ear, I stared at the vampire in the doorway. The one that killed Asher and Kalina. His lips pulled back in a wicked grin. My heart stuttered in my chest.

“Sefa...help me.”

The vampire rushed forward, snatched the phone out of my hand, and crushed it. I scampered back to the other side of the kitchen island.

“You won’t be needing that, will you, melody.”

Ice froze my veins, and I stared at the intruder. I backed myself up to the other countertop. Keeping my eyes on the monster, I felt on the counter behind me for anything I could use as a weapon. I grabbed a ceramic container and hurled it at the vampire’s head. He batted it away without blinking.

My stomach dropped. I was going to die.

I grabbed a skillet in each hand and hurled them at him one after the other. He stepped toward me and knocked them off course. There was nothing left to do but run.

My feet raced as fast as I could toward the door and out of the house. Maybe if I got outside, someone could help.

Pain lashed my neck and scalp as my head jerked backward. I skidded on my back across the kitchen and back into the wall. I winced and reached up to my head, my hand coming back with drops of my blood dripping from the ends of my fingers.

The vampire stalked toward me, and I stumbled to push myself upright.

He paused in front of me and closed his eyes. I shuddered when I realized that he was smelling the air. It must be full of the scent of my blood.

Using his temporary distraction, I rose to my feet and inched toward the door. How long did I have? Moments?

I wasn't going to make it out alive.

The thought spiked adrenaline in my veins. I pushed off and raced through the house. Almost at the front door, I reached for the handle when the vampire appeared in front of me. He snatched my outstretched hand. I tugged it as hard as I could, but he held it still. A nefarious grin slowly spread over his face.

Faster than should have been possible, he forced my wrist to his lips. The vampire bared his teeth. His fangs flashed in the light before they tore my skin.

I screamed. I punched his face. I kicked him. I pulled on my arm.

Nothing I did stopped him...feeding.

Nausea washed over me, and I wished I could tear my arm from my body.

A twitch of needles and pins flashed through my hand. The sensitive nerves of my wrist begged to be released.

The door flew off its hinges, and the vampire stopped his feeding. He held my arm firm as he raised his head.

Sefa stood so still I was afraid I was imagining him. His eyes were black as night, and his hair was loose around his shoulders. Every muscle in his body tensed, ready to move.

"Sefa," I whispered.

It was enough to break the moment. The vampire released me and tossed me to the floor. He pointed his finger at me as my blood dripped from his mouth. "I'll be back with you in a

minute.” As he positioned himself between Sefa and me, he crouched low to the ground, ready to pounce.

“Twice now, you have come into my home and attacked those I protect. You must be incredibly stupid.”

The vampire laughed. “The melody’s blood is running through my veins. You don’t stand a chance against me.”

“It doesn’t matter. You are still going to die.” Sefa’s voice was so cold I hardly recognized it. I held pressure against my bleeding wrist and backed away from the two deadly creatures.

The vampire wiped the drops of my blood away from his mouth. “It would be so easy to kill you now. I could call my tarunua and keep feeding on the melody, but I’m feeling generous. How about a deal instead?”

“You can keep your dark magic, talamaur. I’ve told you and your tribe many times I want nothing to do with it.”

“I was willing to share her in exchange for you joining us. But you choose death instead.”

Sefa’s lips twisted in a snarl. The vampire lifted his hand, and a ghastly apparition appeared. The edges of the form glowed in an ice blue, but I could still see through it. It approached me, and I screeched as it wrapped its cold hand around my arm. A second ghost appeared and locked onto my other arm. I jerked and pulled but could not break their grips. Fear flowed through me with my cursed blood.

Sefa moved first. He lunged for the vampire, but he dodged with ease. A third ghostly figure appeared and latched onto Sefa. He tossed it aside, but the vampire was there and latched his fingers around Sefa’s throat. He slammed him to the floor, easily overpowering him. Blood pooled from the back of Sefa’s head.

Sefa twisted and kicked the vampire across the room. In a second, the vampire retaliated. A kick to Sefa’s gut sent him crashing through the wall.

I screamed and continued to wrestle helplessly against the spirits that held me.

The vampire broke a piece of wood from the wall and followed Sefa's path.

No. *No.*

He slammed the beam of wood into Sefa's thigh, trapping him to the ground. Sefa groaned and reached for it, but the vampire, high on my blood, locked his hand around Sefa's neck and pinned him to the floor.

I watched the vampire's other hand hover over Sefa's chest. He grinned and flashed his fangs as he spoke. "Any last words?"

Silence filled the air, and time froze. Sefa locked his eyes with me for a moment, and that was all it took for me to break completely, my heart no longer my own.

I couldn't let him die. Not for me.

"Stop! Wait!" I screamed.

The vampire paused to glance at me and then back to Sefa.

"Wait!" I struggled against the ghosts. "He'll take your deal! Let him go, and he'll take the deal."

"Parker." Sefa's voice cracked as he spoke.

"Let him go."

The vampire looked back and forth between us, considering. Then he turned to Sefa. "You will take the deal? We're always looking for new recruits."

His eyes never left mine as he grit out the words. "I'll take the deal."

The vampire lifted his grasp on Sefa and pulled him to his feet. Sefa jerked the wood from his thigh and tossed it across the room. The spirits held me still, but I shook and jerked against them. When they began to pull me toward the door, I thrashed and dug in my heels.

“Wait! Stop!”

Sefa turned to the vampire. “You agreed to share her with me. Where are you taking her?”

“Back to the tribe. We will all share in the glory of the melody.”

The blood drained from my face. I never considered that he would take me to more vampires. I didn’t want to be a human juice-box for a tribe of crazy vampires.

“I’m giving up a lot to join you. Tell me, what is your name?”

“Tane.”

“Tane, let me feed from her here before we go. You weakened me. I need to replenish my strength before we leave.”

Tane glanced between us and gestured for Sefa to continue. The spirits released me, and Sefa closed the distance in an instant.

He put his hands on my face and wiped away the tears I didn’t realize were falling. I gripped his forearm, blood running down my skin and dripping to the floor. The way he looked in my eyes and the way he held me told me he would do everything to get us out of this. A new feeling washed over me. One I didn’t expect.

Certainty.

CHAPTER 33: FEED

He held my face and captured my gaze.

“Parker.”

Tears cascaded down my cheeks.

“Just do it, Sefa. I know it will hurt. Just...get it over with.”

He brushed his thumb over my lower lip.

“Hurry up. Feed and let us keep moving.”

Sefa turned to Tane and glared. “Why don’t you leave your ghosts? It’s clear she’s in shock. Do you want her dying of a heart attack from the stress?”

Tane waved his hand and strolled out the door, happily drunk on my blood. The spirits hovered nearby, thankfully silent.

Sefa pulled me close to him and pressed my head to his chest. I clung to him and sobbed. The events of the evening collided inside my mind.

“Parker,” he whispered as he ran his hand down my hair. “I want you to run to the garden as fast as you can. Kalina spelled it against enemies. You will be safe there until I figure out what to do next.”

I pushed back so I could see his face. “Sefa, he’ll kill you.”

Sefa’s lips formed a grim line. “He might.”

I shook my head. “No. Feed from me. You’ll be stronger.”

“Parker, I will not force you into that. No one should have decisions like this taken from them.”

I gripped his arm and held his gaze. “I have a choice. This isn’t like when you were turned. Please, Sefa. I’m not dying here. Don’t leave me alone.”

His fingers trailed along my neck to my pulse.

I put my hand on his chest. “I trust you. Save us, Sefa.”

He nodded once and pulled me closer. “Open your mind to me, Parker. Let me compel you. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I took a deep breath in to steady myself. The threat of death and pain hovered around the edges of my mind, but Sefa was here, his scent overwhelming everything else.

He kissed my cheek and then found my lips as he turned my face to his. His hand drifted to the back of my neck. I slid my hands up to his shoulders and held tight. He pressed against my lower back with his other hand, and I pulled him closer. His tongue swept into my mouth, and I inhaled all of him. I kissed him back, matching his moves with my own. I couldn’t explain this desperate need that swelled inside me.

I didn’t want him to stop, but I knew he would. His lips drifted across my tear-stained cheek, and he nipped my earlobe.

“You won’t feel pain. The only thing I have to give you is pleasure. Are you ready?”

Warmth flooded my core, and his words sent shivers down my spine. “Yes.”

Sefa’s tongue trailed down my neck. His hot breath hovered over my pulse, and I felt his hesitation. I turned my head to give him better access and pulled him closer to me. I wanted this. He needed this.

Sefa kissed my neck and his tongue danced across my skin. There was pressure, and then a tingling started. It turned into a blaze that coursed through my veins and pulsed with an unfamiliar energy. I knew Sefa was drinking from me, but the ecstasy that flooded my system drowned out all other sensations.

My fingers tangled in his hair, and I pulled him closer. His hands were gentle as they held me still. Heat pulsed in my core. I pressed my thighs together, but it did nothing to relieve the need building inside me.

“Sefa...I need...”

He lifted me and pressed my back further against the wall. His lips never left my neck as he guided my legs around his waist. I moaned when he tilted his hips, and his thick erection rubbed against my clit. My hips bucked in response, and the tension inside me became taut. I wasn't sure what I needed, but I knew it was more. More of Sefa. More of this. More of him against me.

Without warning, a wave of pleasure exploded inside me. I closed my eyes and moaned, arching my back. Sefa growled low, and his lips left my neck to find mine. I tasted the iron of my blood, but it only heightened the waves that crashed through me. Sefa gripped my thighs so hard I knew there would be bruises, but it didn't matter. I tightened my legs and arms around him, keeping him as close as possible.

I devoured him, running my tongue over his teeth. His fangs tasted different from the rest of him. I moved as I kissed him, chasing down the last of those waves inside me. I never knew passion like this before. I didn't know it was possible to desire someone so much I might explode if I didn't touch him, taste him.

I wanted more. So much more.

Sefa lifted his head and smiled as his eyes scoured my face. My heart skipped when I realized I was right. His smile was something I would always desire to earn. It was breathtaking. His eyes had a light behind them when he smiled, making me forget anything else existed.

“Parker...” Slowly he lowered his head and kissed my cheek as he whispered. “You are exquisite, and I am nowhere near done with you.” He ran his tongue along my jaw, and I hummed my pleasure. “But we have company.”

Like being dunked in cold water, my lust changed to fear. Oh god. How did I forget where we were? My eyes reacted by darting to the spirits that still lingered close.

Sefa set me down on the ground and cupped my face. He drew my eyes to his. Black as night, they darted all over my face.

His lips were still red with my blood, and I wanted to kiss him again. The thought equally excited and disturbed me. “Run to the garden.”

Then his hands were gone from my face, and he disappeared. The spirits left just as quickly.

Run.

Sefa said to run.

I put one foot in front of the other and stumbled. Stars started on the edges of my vision. I took a deep breath. I didn't have time for this.

I caught myself on the door frame. My vision began to tunnel, and I did a quick assessment.

My wrist was still bleeding.

Blood loss. I was hypotensive. My blood pressure was too low.

There was no way I could run.

I gripped it tightly, attempting to slow the flow again.

My body begged me to stop and sleep, but I couldn't.

The crashing sounds from just beyond the door pushed me further.

Maybe I could hide.

I...I...

My body collided with the floor, and my vision went black.

CHAPTER 34: A SURPRISE

Aroha's voice filtered into my mind.

"She's still resting. See if you can stall them."

"It's been two days. How much longer?"

"She lost a lot of blood. Her body has to replenish it."

"The officers are getting suspicious."

"Then stall them, Sefa. She can't talk to them like this."

There was a knock and silence, followed by more knocking.

"I'll go. But I want to know the moment she is awake."

He was talking about me.

I opened my eyes and glanced around, squinting. I was in my room in Sefa's home. The bright light in my window told me it was morning. My mouth was dry. I tried to swallow, but a knot was thick in my throat. I couldn't speak.

Aroha had her back to me, and when she turned around and noticed I was awake, she smiled brightly. "Welcome back to the land of the living, lunc."

She brought me a glass of water and sat on the edge of the bed while I drank. The coolness helped to wake my mind and soothe my throat. "Aroha? What happened?"

"You lost a lot of blood. You've been sleeping a lot."

"Sefa? Where is he?"

She smiled and patted my hand as she pulled the glass from my fingers. "He's here."

I glanced at my hand as I drew it back. There was a bandage on my palm and one on my wrist. I gingerly stretched my fingers and circled my wrist. It all ached as I moved it, but it seemed to have full range of motion.

Tane. The spirits.

I almost asked Aroha, but I wasn't sure how much Sefa had told her. "Can I see him?"

A raised voice outside my room caught my attention. A moment later, the door burst open, and I had to blink twice to make sure my eyes weren't deceiving me.

Eliza's dark hair and green eyes burst in the door along with her incomparable energy. My sister stopped at the edge of the bed, and Sefa stood in the doorway. My eyes bounced back and forth between the two of them. A small smile formed on his lips as he watched Eliza's antics.

Eliza crossed her arms over her chest and popped her hip out as she assessed me. She raised a brow and looked me over.

I reluctantly pulled my eyes away from Sefa and addressed my little sister. "What are you doing here?"

"I traveled halfway across the world to get you, and that's all you have to say? I'm here to bring you home." She lunged and tackled me in the bed. Her arms wrapped around my shoulders. "I have been so worried about you! I couldn't get in touch with you, so I went straight to the police station. They didn't want to talk to me, but I convinced them I wasn't leaving without you." She sat back so she could see me but held onto my hands. "And then this giant told me I couldn't see you. I told him I would sue him and everyone he loves if he didn't let me see you right away. Why didn't you answer the phone? Oh my god, what happened to your hand? Why do you have bandages?" She turned without pausing for breath and pointed a finger at Sefa. "Did you do something to her? I will make sure you never—"

I grabbed her hand and turned her attention back to me. "Eliza. I'm here. I'm fine."

She narrowed her eyes and silently asked me if I was lying, as only sisters can do.

"Eliza. Really. I'm fine." I looked over her shoulder at Sefa and Aroha. "Can you give us a few minutes?"

They left and closed the door behind them without a word. I sat further up in the bed and rubbed my temple. At least my vision didn't darken, and my head didn't swim with the transition. I must be healing.

"Why are you still here? The police told me that they cleared you yesterday but couldn't get in touch with you."

I chewed on my cheek and ran my hand through my hair. I didn't want to lie to Eliza, but I was certainly not telling her the truth. "I was in the hospital last night."

"What? What happened? I thought you were fine?"

"I dropped a glass, and it shattered as I tried to catch it on the counter. I had to get stitches. I would have called, but it was late."

Eliza looked me over. Her eyes said she knew that wasn't the whole story, but I was thankful she didn't press.

"Okay. I'm going to go call the airline and get our tickets home." She rose and pulled her phone out of her pocket.

"Wait—"

"Is there more to that story you want to share? Maybe something to do with the hunky security guy out there?"

Heat rushed through my cheeks, giving away my thoughts.

"No. No, just make it later today. I am sure there are papers to sign at the police station. I need to get Joseph's body back to Arizona."

Eliza came back and kissed my cheek. "I'm so sorry, Parker, for all of this. I wish I could have gotten here sooner. You deserve so much better."

She bounced out of the room with her phone already pressed to her ear. As soon as I was sure she was gone, I gingerly got out of bed and cleaned myself up. Eliza still hadn't returned when I finished. I wanted to talk to Sefa. I had to talk to him alone before we left.

I grinned at the thought as it passed through my mind. He could hear me.

Standing alone in the middle of my room, I spoke aloud.

“Sefa. Can we talk?”

CHAPTER 35: MOON AND DARKNESS

Sefa

I heard her request.

She was right. We did need to talk.

She had no idea the danger she was in. I was equally relieved and angry that the officers chose now to clear her name.

Parker had to go back to Arizona and forget any of this ever happened. If she looked more into the supernatural world or her husband's life and his damned Mist Guild, she would only be in more danger.

I wasn't a fool. I knew it would be nearly impossible—but it was the best shot at keeping her safe. The less she knew, and the further away from me, the better.

I pushed open the door to her room, and she turned to look at me. Her smile spread wide, and the blood rushed to her face. She was everything I wanted and everything I couldn't have.

“Sefa.” My name on her lips was music. I wanted her to say it again and again.

“You wanted to talk?”

She ran her hands through her hair. She was nervous, and I wanted to ease that, but she had to go back to Phoenix. I kept my hands at my sides.

“Uh...yeah. What happened? The last thing I remember was hitting the floor.”

“You lost a lot of blood.”

Parker's brow creased. She crossed her arms across her chest.

“That's not what I meant. What happened with Tane?”

I wrestled in my mind with what to tell her. Did I tell her that he escaped? That if she wasn't recovering, I would have tracked him down and ripped him limb from limb. Did I tell her that her blood sang to him now like it did to me? Did I tell her that a raging, jealous monster tried to take control of me when I considered that he shared the same blood bond that we did?

Did I tell her that we were bonded now? That my world had shifted? That she was the moon, pulling me in and drowning out my darkness?

Was she bonded to me as I was to her?

I decided on none of these.

"He won't be a problem." And in my mind, he wouldn't be. As soon as Parker was on the plane, I would hunt him down, and he would die.

"Oh." She tucked her hair behind her ear. "I...Are you okay?"

No. I wasn't okay. The center of my world was not safe here. She had to leave. She deserved to live a full life. "When are you leaving?"

Her eyes searched mine. She was confused and hurt, but it was better this way. She walked up to me and tilted her head to look at me.

"Sefa. What are we doing? What are we to each other? I'm leaving but...I don't have to. Or I can come back?"

I put my hands on her shoulders because it was impossible for me not to touch her. "I care for you, but you deserve more than this life. Go home. Bury your husband."

"And us?"

I dropped my hands. "It's better for you to move on."

Tears filled her eyes, and they cut me deeper than before. "I don't believe you."

"Move on. Go back to your life." Then I used the one part of her that she couldn't ignore. "Your family needs you. Your

sisters need you. Don't drag them into this world like Joseph did to you.”

She bit her lip, and I followed the motions with my eyes, unable to control myself.

After a few moments, tears spilled down her cheeks, and she nodded. “Will you...will you kiss me goodbye?”

My heart clenched at the vulnerability in her voice. I hated that this hurt her. I didn't want to hurt her anymore. Her husband did enough of that in his lifetime.

I caught her by her waist and pulled her against me. Her hands landed on my chest, and she gripped my shirt. I smiled as I studied her face. I memorized every curve—the pout of her lips, the freckles across her nose, and the depth of her green eyes.

She was everything.

Before I lost my nerve, I kissed her. I told her goodbye in that kiss and poured everything I wanted to say instead into it. Her sweet taste was addictive. I only stopped when I heard her sister walking down the hall.

I pulled away, and Parker grabbed my hand as I began to leave. Her eyes begged mine to stay, but when Eliza walked in, she dropped my hand, and I escaped.

It was unbearably painful to be away from her. I stayed far enough away that she didn't see me, but I could still hear her as she packed her things. Eliza talked about their home and their family, but Parker remained quiet.

I waited as she told Aroha and Lono goodbye. The soft whimper in her voice told me she was crying, and I wanted to stop it.

Instead, I reminded myself of the life I never got. Of the life that Parker had in Arizona.

I reminded myself of the dangers of my world.

All to keep me from running to her and begging her to stay with me.

I followed her and her sister to the airport and waited while they boarded the plane.

When she was safely in the sky and headed away from here, I made my plan and prepared to hunt.

CHAPTER 36:

PHOENIX

One month later...

I wiped a towel down the front of my scrubs as I left the room. Whoever decided to put me on pediatrics tonight was going to hear about it. I was getting her temperature when she vomited all down my scrub top. I tossed the towel in the linen rack and ripped my gloves off to throw them in the trash.

Good thing this was my last patient. I didn't have clothes to change into, but the drive home was only ten minutes.

As I walked down the hall to the nurse's station, the call bell went off beside me. "Parker, can you get that?"

Dylan waved me toward the patient's room from behind his computer. His blue eyes raised indignantly from his charting.

I kept walking past him and the call light. "Get it yourself. I'm off."

"Parker, you can't do that."

I spun around and gestured to my ruined scrub top. George walked up behind Dylan and smacked the back of his blond head. "The funeral is today, asshat." George waved me off. "I've got it, Parker. Go home. I'll see you on Thursday." At least George had a sense of camaraderie tonight.

As much as I hated the pity everyone had in their eyes when they looked at me, I was leaving, and that was all that mattered. This shift never stopped moving. The waiting room stayed full all night, and we worked short again. None of that was new, but I wasn't focused tonight.

Joseph's funeral was today, and conflicting emotions thrummed inside me.

I arrived at the nurse's station and saw Nora's name on the report board. I groaned. Nora was the worst. Someone hated me tonight.

The perky blond nurse with makeup that probably took her an hour bounced up to me before she paused and looked me up and down.

"You're getting beds 15-23?" I asked, hoping she would make this painless.

"Yes, I'm always on pediatrics. I'm not sure why they trusted *you* with that last night. Looks like the kids got the best of you."

I resisted the urge to run my hands through my hair and walked to my computer. I pulled up each chart and gave report. Nora asked for more details than I could remember with how hectic the department had been that night. It took everything in me not to strangle her.

"Bed 23 is the Bryant's kid again. He pulled out his NG tube, and I haven't had a chance to replace it. I did give him Zofran, so he will stop throwing up."

"Did you need some help with placing it?"

I turned my head and glared at Malibu Nurse Barbie and her condescension. She graduated last May. Placing an NG tube was a basic nursing skill. Of course, I knew how to do it. I reminded myself that this was the last patient and then I could leave so I didn't wrap my hands around her throat. It also helped to discourage me from harming her that I knew what the inside of a police interrogation room felt like.

"No, but if you need help, be sure to find a real nurse."

I pushed back my chair and left her gaping at the nurses' station. No one would say anything to me. Not today.

Today was the day I buried my husband.

My lying bastard of a husband who used me as bait to catch a vampire. But no one knew that part.

I gathered my purse and keys from my locker and left the bustling ER. The whole family was in town, but I trusted Eliza to keep them away from me for a few more hours. I loved my family. They did not know the complicated emotions I was still working through. I loved Joseph. I hated him. He turned my life upside down, and I wouldn't ever know why. He couldn't explain himself or even apologize because he died.

And a part of me moved on from Joseph on that island.

But I promised myself when I landed in Arizona I wouldn't think about *him* anymore. I wouldn't say his name. I wouldn't dream of him showing up and changing his mind.

He was right. It was better this way.

I had cried myself to sleep on the plane, clearing away the broken parts of my heart. Eliza thankfully didn't ask any questions.

I was done with the dark days. Well...almost.

Just one more day, and then I can begin my new normal again.

When I arrived at my apartment, I wasn't surprised to see Eliza waiting there with coffee. I tossed my bag and keys on the table. She tried to pass me the coffee, but I kept moving and walked past her to my room.

"Hold onto it for me, Liza. I'm going for a run."

"No, you're not."

I stopped and turned. "Yes, I am."

"I hid your running shoes."

I scoffed and ran my hand through my hair. "Really, Eliza? Today of all days, I need to go for a run. We're not kids anymore. You can't just hide my things."

"I still hid them. And I'm giving you a choice." She wiggled the coffee at me. "You can get a shower and enjoy your coffee, or you can take a nap."

I narrowed my eyes before crossing the distance to snatch the coffee from her.

“You smell terrible.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “What? You don’t like it? It’s my new perfume. It’s called ‘twelve-hour shift and a side of vomit’. I think it’s wonderful.”

Eliza scrunched her face up for a moment, and then her expression turned serious. “When was the last time you slept?”

I turned and walked into my bedroom. She followed me as her volume increased. “I don’t have to be a nurse to know that you can only go so long without sleeping.”

“I’m sleeping, Liza. I have a lot going on.”

“Did something happ—”

“Nothing happened, Liza.” I slammed the bathroom door between us and set my coffee on the sink. Gripping the edges of the vanity, I leaned over and bit my lip. Tears choked the back of my throat. I turned over my wrist and examined it again. Faint raised scars from the bite served as a reminder that it was real. All of it. Joseph, the talamaur, vampires, and...*him*.

“Parker...I didn’t mean to upset you,” Eliza called softly through the door.

I ran my hands through my hair and let the tears slip down my cheeks. My sister would think I’m emotional about Joseph. That was partly true, so I could get away with it today.

“I...I’m going to get a shower. Thank you for the coffee.”

I started the shower, stripped down, and got under the water. I stifled the sobs that crashed through me, but the tears poured from my eyes. I went to the place in my mind where I numbed the pain, where it was easier to deal with this.

Because no matter what *he* said, there was no going back to my old life. I couldn’t unlearn what I now knew.

CHAPTER 37: A DISTANT MEMORY

When I exited the shower, familiar voices filtered through my apartment. My sisters were here, which was as joyful as it was draining.

I dressed quickly and downed the rest of my coffee.

As my hand reached the door handle, I glanced at the bed. Sleep would be easier...maybe. A brief flash of the nightmares that haunted me played in my mind and I shuddered. I gripped the handle and braced myself for the onslaught of my family.

Brooklyn raised her head first. She noticed everything and always had. A small smile crossed her face, and she brushed her dark hair behind her ear. Her eyes tracked me as I approached the table. Eliza and Hannah chattered in animated tones with Montu, but all three hushed when I stopped in front of them.

Hannah moved to my side and wrapped me in a delicate hug. "I had your black dress steam cleaned last week. It's on the couch when you're ready. Do you want me to do your hair and makeup?"

I nodded, numbing myself to the events that were before me.

Play the part, Parker. Be the grieving widow.

Montu pulled me into a tight hug next. "I'm so sorry, Parker."

It was easy to give him a smile. Brooklyn's best friend had been part of the family for years. He was so laid back and naturally easy to talk to. We all assumed they were dating when he first showed up at a family dinner with Brooklyn. As the years passed, he became a staple at our gatherings.

When he released me, I sat at the table next to Brooklyn. She reached her hand out and held onto mine. The silence became uncomfortable, and I realized they were all waiting for me to

speak first. I ran my hand through my hair and shifted in my chair before I found the words. “When will Mom and Dad be here?”

“I told them they couldn’t come until at least ten, so you have another hour or so,” Eliza spoke up.

Hannah put a cup of coffee in front of me. Her makeup was already perfect, and her blonde hair styled elegantly. I wasn’t sure how she managed it, but she always had the ‘princess effect,’ as Eliza called it. Eyes were naturally drawn to her, and her tone never raised above a conversational volume. “I spoke to Kara. She said she would meet us at the funeral home.”

I picked up the coffee and thought maybe I should drink water instead, but getting to the kitchen from here was too much effort. “She has been very helpful.”

“I should think so!” Eliza collapsed without grace into the chair across from me. “Did you know Joseph had that much money when you married him?”

My mind flashed back to Mele, the officers’ intrusive questions, and...*him*. I shook my head to release the memories and in response. “No. I didn’t know.”

“Are there any leads on his case?” As he asked, Montu draped his arm across the back of Brooklyn’s chair.

I made a noncommittal noise and shook my head.

“It’s so strange. He didn’t have any connections to Mele. He’d never even been there.”

Brooklyn laid her hand against Montu’s thigh and shook her head. “Montu,” she scolded gently.

“I’m sorry, Parker. I know it’s not what you want to talk about today. You must have been so scared, so far from home.”

I pinched my lips together before biting down on my bottom lip. I had been scared. But I was also safe. Safer than I was with my late husband.

Safer than I was here? Possibly.

I rose to my feet, and the chair scraped loudly against the floor. “I think I’m going to rest until Mom and Dad get here.”

Before any of them could stop me, I retreated to my room. I closed and locked the door against my well-meaning sisters and their lack of personal boundaries. When I arrived back in Arizona, there were endless questions and check-ins until I yelled at our mother. It was awful because she was only trying to help, but my heart hurt in so many ways that I couldn’t talk about.

Eliza assigned herself as my personal caretaker. I told her she wasn’t needed, and she laughed as she moved several of her boxes into my spare bedroom. In the end, she told me it was her or our mother, so I let it be.

My eyes drifted to the nightstand, even though I tried to ignore it. I didn’t want to, but my feet carried me to it anyway. I opened the drawer and stared at the flip phone. I didn’t need to pick it up. I shouldn’t pick it up, but my fingers were traitors and traced the edges of the phone.

It would be so easy to open it and press the speed dial.

Would it still go to him? I didn’t want to think about the fact that maybe he didn’t want to be contacted.

I picked up the phone and held it in my hands as I sat on the edge of the bed. Closing my eyes, I remembered every vibrant color and smell of the island. I flipped through the memories of Kalina and Lono. A genuine smile eased across my face. I hoped that Aroha was taking good care of him.

I could rest my head and fall asleep to those memories. As my breathing relaxed, Tane’s face appeared as he threw me across the room. Tane’s face as he tore into the flesh of my wrist. Tane’s face as he fed from me.

My eyes flew open, and I sat straighter on the side of the bed. My heart pounded in my chest.

Not safe.

I was not safe.

I stood and paced across the floor with the phone held tightly in my hand like a lifeline. It took every ounce of willpower not to call him.

When my heart finally settled to normal, I placed the phone back in the nightstand and shut the drawer. He wanted me to move on. I just needed to get through the funeral. After that, I could leave my dead husband, his secret society, and vampires all in my past.

If I did this right, they would be nothing more than a distant memory.

CHAPTER 38: EVERY EMOTION

My sisters dressed me and fixed me up. I hardly recognized myself in the mirror. I was the perfect picture of a grieving widow. The black dress draped across my skin and encased me in sadness. They tucked my hair in an unfamiliar updo and fastened a black cap with a veil cascading over my face.

Only a few more hours. It will all be over soon.

Everything passed like I was standing in the background, half visible. I was shuffled from my apartment to a car. From the car to the funeral home where I was ushered to the front.

I half heard everyone around me.

“He’s not coming home.”

“So sad.”

“He was such a good man.”

“She’s so sad.”

“The wedding was so beautiful. Such a shame.”

Brooklyn touched my arm and her voice broke the spell around me. “Could you help me?”

I blinked and followed my sister to a side hallway. She sat me on a bench against the wall.

“What do you need?”

I blinked again and couldn’t comprehend what she was asking.

Brooklyn’s green eyes traced my face and waited. She wasn’t one to ask more than once.

I finally settled on the truth. “I don’t want to be here, Lyn.”

She sat beside me, and when Montu popped his head around the corner, she shooed him away. Silently, she waited for me to

continue.

“I only met most of these people a few months ago at the wedding. I’m...done with these dark days. I want to move on.”

The words tasted bitter on my tongue—an unwelcome reminder of him.

She took my hand in hers. “Can you sit through a few more hours? I can ask Hannah and Eliza to run interference. There is no need for you to have to speak to anyone here.”

“I should...”

She raised a brow in question.

“I can do it.”

Brooklyn smoothed a piece of my hair down. “Are you sleeping, Parker?”

I nodded and avoided her eyes. “It’s just a lot, Brooklyn. Once I get past this, it will be easier,” I lied to both of us.

After another moment of assessing me, she rose and pulled me up.

“Let’s get this behind us then.”

I followed her back into the main area. My skin prickled as I felt all eyes on me. She took me to a quiet corner, and Montu appeared at my other side. Eliza and Hannah took our parents and positioned them around me, making a barrier between me and the other attendees.

All I had to do was exist.

I glanced over the people. Some of them I recognized from Joseph’s work—other officers here to pay their respects.

Others I could not name, and it unsettled me.

Were they part of the Mist Guild?

Were they vampire hunters too?

I shook the thoughts from my mind. Move on.

Kara and her bright purple hair moved through the crowd until she stood at my side. My family parted easily to let her through. My sister-in-law gave me a small smile. Did she know about Joseph's secret life? Was she part of it?

"How are you holding up, Parker?"

"I'm...okay."

Kara put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "It has to be so surreal for you. Happy and married, and then widowed."

What did you say to something like that? "Um...yeah."

"Is there anything you need? I mean, I know that Joseph would want me to take care of you."

I bit back the bitter words that rose in my throat. He didn't want to take care of me. He used me. He put me in danger. I swallowed. "No."

"Well...will you let me know if you do?"

I nodded and prayed that she would drop it. I didn't know if she knew anything or not. It wasn't fair to assume that she knew his secrets because she was related to him.

The funeral director moved us through the service, and I numbed myself to every emotion that threatened to spill from me as I named them silently in my mind.

Sadness. My husband, whom I loved, died.

Betrayal. He lied to me. Used me. Almost caused my own death with his actions.

Anger. I fell for his lies and would never know if he ever really loved me. My life would never be the same as it was before I met Joseph.

Fear. Would his dangerous world come back to haunt me? Would I be a victim of the supernatural world I didn't know existed a few months ago?

Loneliness. Joseph was gone...And *he* was gone.

A tear tracked down my cheek, and I dabbed at it with the tissues someone had placed in my hand. And as the service ended, only one thought came to my mind.

None of this was fair.

CHAPTER 39: THE PHOTO

“Do you think I could move some more stuff in here?” Eliza pushed aside another box in my guest bedroom.

“You don’t have to ask. We can load all this up and get rid of it.”

Eliza spun around and glared at me over her coffee. “Oh no. You do not get to get off that easy. You’ve been putting this off for weeks. I let it go, but the funeral was two weeks ago. You need to go through his things.”

I ignored her and moved to the kitchen to get myself more coffee. I didn’t have to look to know she was trailing behind me. Eliza was like a dog with a bone. She would get her way eventually, one way or another.

“A lot of things were trashed in the break-in, so I already went through and sorted some of it.” She ran in front of me and stopped me in my tracks. “Parker, you might want something here. Something of his.”

“Liza, I’m going to say this very clearly so there is no miscommunication. I do not want Joseph’s things.” I darted around her and pulled the coffee pot from the warmer to relieve this headache.

“Fine. I’ll make you a deal.”

I groaned. My temples were throbbing. I had no room in my head for my sister’s little games.

“You go through the boxes, sort through everything, and I’ll tell you why I’m here.”

I narrowed my eyes and glared at her. “Not worth it.” I poured the coffee and replaced the pot.

“Okay, if you go through the boxes, I’ll stop bugging you about sleeping.”

I moved to the fridge and opened the door. Wasn’t there creamer in here earlier?

“You aren’t sleeping, are you? I hear you up most nights moving around your room.”

“I sleep.”

“No, you don’t.” Eliza moved into my line of vision again.

“You’ll kill yourself if you keep going like this.”

I slammed the coffee cup on the counter, and the liquid spilled down the sides and onto the floor. “It’s none of your business how I sleep! I’m a nurse, for crying out loud! I know how much my body can take. Will you lay off already, Eliza?”

She grinned and tapped my nose. “As soon as you go through those boxes, I’ll stop asking you about it. At least Kara did all the ones at his old place before the lease was up.”

“Fine.” I leaned down and opened the door to the cabinet under the sink. I grabbed a trash bag and ripped it from the box with more force than necessary. “Let’s get this over with.”

Eliza plodded behind me and leaned against the door frame. I pulled the top open of the first box and threw everything in the black trash bag.

“You’re not even looking at it.”

“Why do you care?” The words came out sharp unintentionally, but I wasn’t about to take them back.

“What happened to you on that island, Parker? This isn’t like you.”

Flashes of Kalina and Lono, and the garden, and Aroha, and *him* assaulted my mind. I shoved them to the side. It wasn’t part of my life now. I stared down at the paper in my hand. It wasn’t paper, though. It was a picture of me with Joseph. I dropped the trash bag and smoothed my hand over the photo.

It was our first date. We had gone to get ice cream, but it was September, so the shops had been closed. We ended up at a McDonald's and, somehow, their machine was working. Joseph insisted we take a picture of the worst-planned first date in history. The girl in the picture smiled broadly at him as he snapped the selfie.

I wanted bitterness to consume that memory and force it to turn dark like the rest of the relationship had in my mind, but somehow, I couldn't.

I had loved him. Even though he lied to me. Even though he put me in danger.

Maybe it was okay to know that I loved Joseph. Would that help me move on?

Move on.

I heard *his* voice again in my mind and shuddered. I looked up, and Eliza was unusually silent. How long had I been staring at that photo?

Tears spilled over my eyes, and I sat on the floor, holding the picture to my chest. My sister moved fast and wrapped her arms around me as she kneeled beside me. I fell apart in the safety of my home with my sister holding me tight.

I loved a man who didn't protect me. I was fooled into believing he wanted the best for me. I married a man who kept secrets.

And then I became a widow. I was too young for that title.

Why did this have to hurt so much?

I almost died on my honeymoon. Instead, I became stronger on that island. I learned the truth. I found friendship. I found... *him.*

If I was being honest with myself, my feelings for him ran deep. Despite the fact that we only knew each other for a few weeks. Despite the fact that he was there, and I was here. And all of it hurt.

How did I move on from all of this?

I pulled in a breath and steadied myself. Sleep tugged on the edges of my mind, but I pushed it aside again. Eliza released me and swiped her hand over her own cheeks. “Do you wanna talk about it, Park?”

I shook my head and placed the photo on the ground next to me. “Can we just get through this?”

She nodded and, for hours, we silently sorted through the boxes of the life I could have had. Tears fell as I grieved what could have been, what would never be.

I reached the bottom of the last box, and my hands drifted over an envelope. Joseph’s handwriting said “For Kara.” I traced the letters and felt the key sealed inside. I hoped it wasn’t too important since it sat in a box for months. I set it aside to pass to her the next time we spoke.

A knock sounded on the door, and I jumped at the noise.

Eliza looked at me with questions in her eyes. “Are you expecting someone?”

Our family would never knock. They would open the door and announce themselves.

“No. I’m not expecting anyone.”

No one from work dropped by since the funeral.

I rose to my feet and brushed my hand over my cheeks again.

A brief flicker of hope started in my mind that maybe it was *him*, but I squashed it. He wasn’t coming for me. Stomping on that idea before it grows into a full hope or desire was better.

With my hand on the door handle, I hesitated.

What if it was a vampire?

CHAPTER 40: CALL BUFFY

I dropped the handle and twisted my hands together, unsure what to do.

The knock sounded again, followed by a deep voice. “Mrs. Webster, can I speak with you?”

Webster? This had to be about Joseph if they were using my married name.

Eliza appeared at my side and whispered. “Are you going to answer it?”

I blinked and ran my hand through my hair. It was odd for me to ignore it. Eliza didn’t know what I did about the world.

Slowly, I pulled the door open. I had to look up to see the man’s face. His onyx skin contrasted with his stark white dress shirt. He held a briefcase in one hand and extended the other one to me. I glanced between the hand and his face.

“Mrs. Webster, I’m so sorry about your husband’s passing. My name is Charles Elster. I worked with Joseph.”

My stomach clenched. This was the man from the letters.

“I’m...sorry. I’m not feeling well.” I attempted to close the door, but he put his hand out to stop the door.

“Mrs. Webster, I know you are grieving. This will only take a few moments of your time. I’ve traveled a long way to speak with you.”

Eliza moved between us and pushed me back into our living room. She crossed her arms and put her foot behind the door. “She said she didn’t want to talk to you. And if you worked with Joseph, why did you have to travel a long way?”

Charles called over my sister’s head, “Mrs. Webster, it’s important. It’s about the melodies.”

Eliza began to shut the door further.

“Mrs. Webster, please. The vampires are still looking for them.”

I ran my hands over my face, and Eliza paused her attempt to shut the door. Could he have picked a worse time to say that word?

Eliza laughed loudly. “That’s funny, Charles. Now, joke time is over. Go away.”

I walked over to the door and tugged Eliza away. I hated to expose her to this world, but he was clearly not going to go away or be quiet. She might as well find out. It might be nice to talk to someone else about all this. “Charles, why don’t you come in, and I’ll make some more coffee.”

“Parker, are you crazy? This man literally just said he is here about vampires, and you...you...invite him in? Oh my god, what if *he* is a vampire? You invited him in!”

It was hard to tell if she was being sarcastic or having an actual realization. Either way, I ushered Charles inside and left them staring at each other in the living room. I ran my hand through my hair before filling the coffee maker again.

Geez, I could really use a nap.

When the coffee maker hissed to life, I reached into the cabinet for a clean mug, and flashes of standing in *his* kitchen flew through my mind. What if I hadn’t been so clumsy? Would I have returned home none the wiser to my cursed blood?

“What is this guy doing here? You let a crazy man in here. Do you know him?”

Eliza’s rambling grated against my mind. I handed Charles the coffee and settled with mine in a chair opposite of him.

“My sister didn’t know anything about this. So, while I offered you coffee, make this quick so I can deal with the bombshell you dumped in my living room.”

Charles took a sip of the coffee and set it on the end table before pulling a notebook from his briefcase and clicking a pen. Was this an interrogation? My shoulders stiffened at the thought. He cleared his throat before he began.

“Mrs. Webster—”

“Parker.”

He glanced up from his notebook and scoured my face before looking back at his paper. “Parker, I know that the officers on Mele did an investigation of their own, but you must understand that the Mist Guild will have to ask you more specific questions about Joseph’s murder. I’ll start with the most obvious question. Did you see the vampire that killed your husband?”

“What?” Eliza laughed. “A vampire killed Joseph? Should we call Buffy?”

I set my coffee down and rubbed my temples. “Liza, can you wait in my room? I’ll finish up with Charles, and then you can ask as many questions as you want.”

Charles’s eyes darted back and forth between the two of us.

“No. There is no way I’m missing this.” She darted to the kitchen and returned with a notebook of her own. “I’ll be quiet, I swear.”

I ran my hand through my hair, wondering how I hadn’t pulled it all out yet. After breathing deeply to center myself, I realized there was a key piece about Joseph that Charles had told me. The Mist Guild believed I was fully informed about Joseph’s extracurricular activities. But did they know that I was a melody, or did my late husband keep that information to himself?

I volleyed back and forth about whether to tell him I knew nothing or to go along for the ride and see what other information I could find.

I decided to play along.

“No, I didn’t see the vampire. I was out walking on the beach when he was attacked.”

Charles scratched his pen along the paper, and Eliza wrote so furiously that she could light the paper on fire.

“Did you see any other weapons?”

“No. I only saw the crime scene briefly.”

“You saw the—”

I glared at Eliza, and she held up her hands in apology.

“Do you have any idea who could have done this?”

“It was probably the talamaur, right? That’s why he was there.”

Charles nodded and continued writing. “And did you encounter any other trouble with vampires while there? I understand you were injured right before returning to Phoenix?”

I swallowed. I wasn’t a very good liar, but I would try. “No. I didn’t.”

“And what about this man that you stayed with? Does he suspect anything supernatural?” He shuffled his papers, looking for something. “A...Sefa Akana? Does he know anything?”

I bit down on the inside of my cheek. “No. He doesn’t know anything.”

“Okay. Is there anything else you can remember that might be helpful?”

I shook my head and rose to show him the door. Tears stung the back of my throat. I didn’t want to think about Mele anymore. Charles seemed reluctant, but slowly packed up his belongings and rose. He was almost to the door when he stopped and turned to look at me.

“Parker, there’s a document that Joseph had in his possession. It contains a list of names. Have you come across anything

like that in his belongings?”

“No. Joseph didn’t have many things that were sent here. And while I was...away, there was a break-in.”

Charles reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. “If you do remember anything, can you please call me?”

I nodded and took the card before ushering him out of the door. I locked it behind him and turned to see Eliza staring with her notebook in hand.

“Oh, Parker, you’ve been hiding something juicy.” A wide grin spread on her face. “I’ll get the wine. Time to spill those secrets to your little sister.”

CHAPTER 41: SISTER TIME

“Can we just forget about it?”

Eliza rummaged through my cabinets for a bottle of wine.

“Absolutely not. Ah-ha!” She lifted the bottle of red in triumph. “Success. Now, get a blanket and get on the couch.”

“Maybe I could try to sleep instead?”

“No way. You haven’t been sleeping, so why try now? But you know what might help your sleep?”

“Hmm?”

“Spilling your guts about the dirty little secrets you were keeping.”

I rolled my eyes and went to the couch. I tossed the blanket across my legs and wished the next part of my evening would go by quickly. I was only kidding myself. Eliza and her inquisitive mind wouldn’t let this go.

She emerged from the kitchen with two wine glasses and handed me one before collapsing onto the opposite end of the couch. She set her wine down and picked up her pen and notebook.

I groaned. “Liza, enough of the journalist act. I won’t talk to you if you’re going to record everything.”

“It’s not an act. I *am* a journalist. And this is a delicious story.”

“No. I won’t say another word if you don’t put your pen away.”

“But—”

“No. I’m confessing my secrets to my sister, not Eliza Rhodes, journalist extraordinaire.”

“Fine.” She tossed both items on the floor and picked up her wine again. “Well...where do you want to start? The fact that vampires are real or the fact that you had a strong reaction to that security guy’s name?”

Heat crawled up the back of my neck, and I did everything in my power not to blush. “Vampires.”

“How long have you known?”

“Um...so I sorta lied to Charles. I didn’t know about vampires until after Joseph died.”

“What? He didn’t tell you?”

“Nope. I didn’t know about vampires or that he was a vampire hunter who was part of a secret society. None of it.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised. I always knew he was hiding something. I thought it was a mistress or a bucket of debt.”

“Real helpful, Liza.”

“Sorry! Continue. So how did you find out?”

I swallowed more of my wine to buy myself a little time. Eliza was like a human lie detector. She would find my feelings for Sefa without hardly trying. Hell, she probably already suspected it. “I...I was attacked.”

She reached across the couch and held my hand. “Keep going.”

“So, I was staying with...and working...and the older couple that I was caring for and the bodyguard were attacked.” I ran my hand through my hair. “I know that didn’t come out right. I was hired to take care of Lono and Kalina while I stayed with...him. I went to the cottage to tell them that dinner was ready, and the guard...Asher...he was already dead. And that’s when I saw him—a vampire drinking from Kalina. I thought she was dead, but she wasn’t. Then he...he attacked me.”

“Parker. How did you get away?”

“S...Sefa. He saved me.” There. I said it. I’d been avoiding the pain that his name would inevitably cause me. I was wrong

though. It hurt worse than I thought it would.

She narrowed her eyes, and they darted all over my face. “He’s a vampire, too?”

Tears threatened to spill over. I missed him even though I shouldn’t. I nodded.

“So, you had a fling with a sexy vampire?”

“What—no. We didn’t...but I...”

“Parker. Why haven’t you talked about him?”

“He...we...it’s not easy to explain. But whatever we were, it’s over.”

“Why? Because of Joseph? Because you’re here, and he’s there?”

“Yes—no. It’s so I can move on. Live my life without vampires in it.”

“But you want him, right?”

I shook my head. “Liza. There’s more. Apparently, my blood is cursed or something. They call me a melody. Like my blood sings to the vampires. They go feral over it. It...it nearly got me killed more than once on Mele. He...Sefa...wanted me to have a chance at a full life.”

“Wait...did Joseph know about you?”

I bit my lip and nodded.

“Ball-sucking bastard! And he took you on a vampire hunt with him? On your *honeymoon*? If he wasn’t already dead, I would kill him.”

I flinched only slightly, but Eliza didn’t miss it. “What? There’s more?”

“He brought me with him as the...bait.”

“Fuck! That’s cold.”

“Mmm.”

“No wonder you didn’t want to deal with his things. Should we light them on fire instead?”

A small grin pulled at my lips. “I’d rather burn the dress.”

Eliza pointed at me with a finger and lifted her glass in her other hand. “Deal! I’ll make it happen.”

I set my wine down on the end table and shifted to rest my head on Eliza’s lap. “Do you think I’m naive? For marrying him?”

Eliza ran her fingers through my hair. “You loved him, Parker. Love is blind sometimes.”

As she stroked my head, I let the heaviness of my life lift away. Having confided in my sister all the parts of my story, even if it was only the surface, brought me more comfort than I thought.

“Don’t tell Brooklyn or Hannah, please.”

She laughed. “Don’t worry. They wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“Liza?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s the real reason you’re here?”

She stopped running her fingers through my hair for a moment and then started up again. “I lost my job. I can’t afford my apartment anymore.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. You can live here. I would love the company.”

She didn’t answer, but she didn’t have to. My eyelids grew heavy, and I let myself drift to sleep for the first time in weeks instead of fighting it.

CHAPTER 42: A MISTAKE

Sefa

This was a mistake.

I should have never let Parker leave.

I should have never underestimated Tane.

I tracked him without success for weeks, and now he was gone. He was faster than I had expected.

I hadn't experienced the melody blood before. It sharpened all of my senses. My eyesight, my strength, and my speed were all enhanced.

But that meant that his were enhanced as well.

Parker's face entered my mind, as it often had in the months since I sent her away. What was she doing now? Was she back to her normal life?

My gut clenched because I knew that it wasn't possible. I hoped that she would be able to move on, but if she felt even a fraction of our bond, she wouldn't be able to forget me.

I was fooling myself. It was time to go to her.

I should have gone to her sooner.

A knock on my office door pulled me from my thoughts.

"Sefa? You have a visitor."

Aroha's tone was formal, with a warning in the undertone. I pulled my hair into a bun and pushed my chair back from my desk. My brows furrowed when I heard Tiato's voice on the other side of the door. There was only one reason he was here.

The deed to the land.

I pushed the door open, and Aroha and Tiato turned to face me.

“Sefa! I was wondering if I would ever find you. Every time I’ve tried to see you in the last few weeks, you’ve been... unavailable.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m a busy man. What do you need?”

Tiato pulled something from his pocket and held it in the air. “It took me a long time to find this, Sefa. You’ve been keeping secrets.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“I think we can both decide to be honest with each other. It would save us time in the long run. Should I read it to you?” Tiato opened the paper and cleared his throat. “This deed, made the fourth day of June, in the year 2023, between Kalina Akana and Parker Rhodes as witnessed by Lono Akana, that in consideration of the Royal state of Mele, the said Kalina Akana does grant unto the said Parker Rhodes, all the property from—”

“Enough. What do you want?” Rage pulsed in my veins, and I worked to control it. Tiato was devious. Emotions would not serve me here.

Tiato’s grin spread over his face. “I want to talk to Parker Rhodes. You see, apparently, she is the owner of this land. It was clever of Kalina, to choose a human. Especially one that would be whisked away to another country across the ocean.”

“What makes you think that I know where she is?”

“She lived with you. You work in security.” He paused and raised a brow. “You care about her.”

“And if I were to find her? What would you say to her?”

“Well, I would offer her a lot of money to sell me the land.” He chuckled. “What did you think I would do?”

Kill her. That would be the easier option for him.

“It will take me some time,” I lied.

“Some time like the bank? I know you paid off the employees there to send me chasing my tail. Too bad for you that my price was higher.”

His words settled like a stone in my gut, weighing me down. Tiato put the deed back into his pocket and patted the side of his pants. “I’ll be waiting for your call. But a word of advice, Sefa? Don’t wait too long, or I’ll have to find her myself.”

A low growl rumbled from me before I could stop it.

Tiato laughed as he showed himself out of the house. Aroha typed on the computer behind me while I held perfectly still. I needed to think through all the angles. It wasn’t only about my own need to get to Parker. Tane was still on the loose. Tiato wanted Parker. Likely wanted her dead. If I ran to her, would I be leading them both right to her doorstep? If I left her where she was, would they find her anyway?

A shuffling sound tugged my attention away from my internal debate. Lono sat at the table. “Sefa, will you join me?”

“Lono...”

“It will only take a moment.”

I closed my eyes for a moment and pushed the problems aside in favor of the present. I kept my parents close for their safety and knew that while my life would stretch out indefinitely, their years were limited. There would always be a problem. Always be danger. But my mother was already gone, and my father would not linger in this world long without her.

My eyes scoured his face. He was tired and weak. Weaker every day, it seemed. He slid a mug of tea in front of me.

“Drink with me, son.”

I took the mug but hesitated because he rarely called me son. If history repeated itself, he had something important to say.

“Lono—”

He held up his hand. “I have many things to say. Let an old man give his son some wisdom.”

I nodded and took the mug in my hand.

“You have tangled yourself in a mess. There is a simple way out of it.”

“None of this is—”

“I’m not finished.”

Lono gave me a look he hadn’t used since I was a child. It demanded respect and silence.

“You need to go to her. Parker will always be in danger because she is a melody. Trying to keep her hidden will not save her. Bring her here or live your life there with her, but do not leave her alone.”

“She may not want me in her life.”

Lono laughed loudly until tears slid out the corners of his eyes. “For someone with as many years as you have, I’m surprised you do not recognize it.”

I set the mug down and furrowed my brow, silently waiting for him to continue.

Lono leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table.

“She loves you, foolish man. And I suspect that you love her as well.”

I studied his face as hope swelled inside me, and my body became perfectly still. Was it true?

I knew it wasn’t only the melody bond that called me to her.

Pushing the chair back, I stood and clapped my hand down firmly on my father’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

I walked back to the office with renewed purpose, and Aroha stopped me. “Sefa. Here.”

I took the papers from her hand. Plane tickets—the first flight left in one hour.

“Will you watch after him? I don’t know when...”

“I’ll look after Lono. And I know how to reach you if there is any trouble here.”

Urgency filled me. I needed to get to Phoenix. Seventy-three days was too long without seeing her face. With my enhanced speed, I packed a bag and left my home to find the center of my world, praying she did want me in hers. Praying Lono was right. Praying that she did love me.

CHAPTER 43: JOHN DOE

“Code Blue. CPR in progress. ETA four minutes.”

“Got it.” I set the phone down and turned to the charge nurse.

“CPR in progress. Where do you want it?”

“Can you take it, Parker? A GSW just checked in at the front desk, so we will be running traumas at the same time. George can work with you on this one.”

“Okay. Got it.”

I set up the room and paged George. He arrived right before the paramedics. “What do we know?”

The gurney rolled toward the room, and we pulled on our gloves. “All I know is CPR in progress.”

As the patient came into view, I looked up at George. There was so much blood. He leaned out and yelled to one of the techs to get emergency release blood from the lab. “I’ll get fluids.”

Our doctor arrived and rattled off orders before returning to the other department trauma. I drew up IV medications as the paramedics gave report. She must be new because she shook as she spoke.

“We have a John Doe. Call came in that a man was lying in the street bleeding. He seems to be covered in bites or lacerations. When we arrived, he was still breathing, but when we moved him, we lost a pulse. He has a seven ET tube with good breath sounds. He’s had three liters of fluid and has two IVs. We had a third, but it blew.”

I moved the medic out of my way. “Any wallet? Did you talk to the witness?”

“No. We don’t have any other information.”

“Last pulse check?”

“Three minutes—I think.”

Poor thing. This must be her first. “Hold CPR.” One of the techs paused the Lukas machine providing compressions. I held my fingers to his neck. A faint, thready pulse was there. “We have a pulse. Let’s get him switched over to our equipment. Call respiratory to set up the ventilator.”

George returned with the IV fluids, and I pulled my trauma shears from my pocket. I cut the man’s shirt down the center to expose his chest. Shock filled me when my mind put the pieces together. This man was bleeding from multiple sites. Some looked like shallow knife wounds, but there was no mistaking the bites covering his body—his neck, his inner elbows, his wrist.

“What the hell? Someone turned this guy into a chew toy,” George commented over my shoulder.

“Seriously.”

I cut down his pants and exposed every inch of his skin. Bites continued on his groin, thighs, and ankles. This wasn’t a random pattern. The bites were over major blood vessels. They were targeted.

“We have asystole again. Pulse check?”

My hands began to shake as I felt for a pulse. Nothing.

“No pulse. Begin compression.”

George reached across me and started the Lukas again.

“Parker?”

I stared at the bites, frozen in a way I shouldn’t be. Before I knew about the supernatural world, I would have believed that this was the result of someone being high on drugs. Now?

Now, I knew it was a vampire.

My stomach clenched and I wanted to vomit.

“Parker, you’re looking green. Step out. I’ll take over.”

I blinked and breathed deeply. “No, I’m good.”

We continued life-saving measures with the doctor popping in every so often to give more orders. After another ten minutes, we got another pulse back. I began another assessment. Lungs and heart within normal limits. Blood and fluids hanging. I leaned over the patient with my pen light and lifted one of his lids to check pupil response.

Our victim thrashed violently, throwing his hands in the air and attempting to pull out his breathing tube. I dropped the penlight and reached for his arm to prevent him from harming himself further. He closed his fist and punched my temple, sending me to the floor.

“Parker!”

More staff arrived to restrain the patient. My heart pounded so loudly I couldn’t hear anything around me.

Oh god! What if I was bleeding and there was a vampire around?

Stripping my gloves, I touched my head. The tiniest bit of blood glistened on my fingertips.

Hands wrapped around my arm and pulled me from the trauma room. George guided me to the nurses’ station and sat me in one of the chairs. “Parker, can you hear me?”

“I can hear you, George.” I winced as he felt in my hairline.

“Ow! Ever heard of bedside manner?”

“Sorry. You’re bleeding. I think it needs glue. Maybe even a few stitches.”

“Just...just get it closed.”

“Here, or a room?”

“She’ll take a room.”

My head snapped up at the deep voice from my past. Maybe that patient hit my head harder than I thought. He growled as he assessed with dark eyes at George.

“Sefa?”

“Parker, you know this guy?”

“Get her a room. And treatment for that injury.”

“I know him, George. It’s fine.” I rose and took a step but faltered. Sefa was at my side with his arm around my waist before I could blink.

George eyed Sefa up and down before shrugging and putting me in a room down the hall. Was this really happening? My brain couldn’t have imagined the feel of his arm around me and his scent overwhelming filling the air, right?

I kept my eyes down as we walked.

George put us in a room, and I was never so thankful to be far away from the nurses’ station and prying eyes. If Sefa was really here, I was sure that would be the topic of gossip for weeks to come.

Once George left, Sefa closed the door and faced me. His eyes scanned me from head to toe and back again to my face. I shivered under his gaze. I wanted to run my hand through my hair, but I didn’t want to catch on my injury. Was he affected by my blood again?

“You don’t have to be here. If...if it’s too much.”

“Parker,” he whispered.

When he didn’t say anything else or move, I crossed my arms over my chest. “What are you doing here, Sefa?”

CHAPTER 44: SAFE

What was he doing here? He told me to live my life. He told me to move on. He sent me away when I would have gladly stayed.

The longer he took to respond, the more my anger grew.

“Did you come all the way across the ocean just to stare at me? If you aren’t going to say anything, leave.”

He crossed the space between us in a second and cradled my face in his hands. As his eyes darted between mine, he stroked my cheeks with his thumbs.

“I’ve seen your face in my mind every day since you left, and still, it didn’t do you justice. I walked into this ER and smelled your blood, Parker. It’s taking everything in me not to kill the person responsible for harming you. Give me a moment to look at you.”

I dropped my hands to my side and stared back at him. My anger began to fade at his words, replaced with hope. Was he here for me? Was he here to give us a chance at...at something real?

A knock sounded at the door and I stepped out of his reach.

“Parker, I’m so sorry. Let me take a look at your head.” Our nurse practitioner, Ashlie, entered the room, and I sat on the exam table. She poked and prodded, talking as she did her assessment.

When her hands moved away, she stopped for a second.

“Parker, who is this? I’m sorry I didn’t ask. Can I continue with him in the room?”

“This is...Sefa. Yes, he can be in here.” I glanced over at him as he crossed his arms over his chest and moved to my side at the exam table.

Ashlie eyed him with suspicion and then continued. The cut wasn't deep, so she was able to glue it shut. "Now, I'm sure you are aware of the signs to look out for. I'm concerned about a concussion."

"The guy didn't get me that hard, Ashlie."

"Either way, I want you to take a few days off and rest. No working out. No running. Nothing but rest and sleep. Let me know if you have nausea, vomiting, confusion, or vision disturbances." She turned and looked at Sefa. "Are you driving her?"

He nodded.

"Good. Your shift is over. I'll tell the charge nurse so you can just go." Ashlie glanced between the two of us before she left. I would definitely be the talk of the department.

Sefa reached for my hand, but I stared at his and hesitated.

"Parker—"

"Wait. The guy that I was treating. He was bleeding. A lot."

Sefa gestured to my scrubs. When I looked down, there were blood stains all down the front. Gracious. How much blood did he lose?"

"That's not the point." I waved him off. "He had bites. I think..." I lowered my voice and whispered, knowing he would hear me. "I think it was a vampire."

His expression changed in an instant. Sefa came to my side and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me to the door of the patient room. He spoke in my ear as he guided us down the hall. "Where are your keys? We need to get away from here. Now."

"The employee lounge. This way." I led him there, and he stayed close at my side while we retrieved my things. Sefa's eyes scanned every inch of our surroundings as we left the hospital. It was the early hours of the morning, and the light from the sun was barely peeking over the horizon.

When we reached the car, Sefa stood guard while I buckled into the passenger side. He was in the driver's seat a moment later, moving the car out of the lot.

“Sefa?”

“Wait. Let me get you back to your apartment.”

“But—”

“Wait, Parker,” he growled.

I studied his profile as he drove. His hair was tied up in a bun on his head. His jaw clenched as he drove. His shoulders and biceps muscles were tense as if ready to strike at any moment. I scanned the tattoos of his arms and refamiliarized myself with their pattern. Everything about him screamed masculine power, and heat crept up my neck.

Before I could let hope rush in, I turned my eyes to the road ahead of us. When we pulled into the parking lot for my apartment complex, I realized he hadn't asked for directions.

“How did you know where I live?”

“Wait until we are inside, please, Parker.”

“Have you known the whole time where I lived? Did you come here first? Why are you here, Sefa?”

“Parker—”

“Why? Why now?”

“I want to make sure you are safe.”

I stared at his profile while he stared out the window. My anger flowed freely. I scoffed. “Safe? I haven't heard from you in weeks. I could have been dead already. You're unbelievable, Sefa.”

I opened the car door, and stormed toward my apartment. A brush of wind passed my side, and Sefa held the apartment building door open. I didn't look at him as I walked inside. He followed me to my front door and waited while I unlocked it.

When the door was open, I walked through but spun on him and held my hand to his face to stop him from entering. “I don’t need you here. I’m perfectly fine. I’ve been perfectly fine without you. I moved on. See?” I gestured at my body. “I’m safe.”

I slammed the door in his face.

Turning my back to the door, I choked back a sob. I wanted him to be here for me. I wanted him to be here because he wanted to be with me. Not to keep me safe. Not for my blood. For me. I ran my hand through my hair and winced as my fingers caught on my injury.

A knock echoed softly on the door.

“Parker. Open up, please.”

“No, Sefa.”

I walked away from the door so I wouldn’t be tempted to open it back up. I tossed my keys on the table, stripped my scrubs, and stuffed them in the trash can. It was hard enough to get blood out of clothes, but the light blue would make it nearly impossible to get out entirely.

“Why are we slamming doors at 4:45 in the morning? What are you doing home this early?”

Eliza stood wrapped in a blanket, leaning against the door frame of her room. “No reason. I’m going to get a shower, and then I’ll go to bed. See you this afternoon.”

I’m sure she would not have let me go that easily if she were more awake. I got in the shower quickly because I needed all the blood gone. Any trace of the blood from the vampire’s victim, I wanted it gone. Any trace of my own cursed blood, too.

I ignored the thought of the vampire at my door. I hoped he had left, but I asked myself what exactly I wanted from him?

Everything. I wanted all of him. I wanted him to be my life partner. I wanted a future with Sefa.

But I wanted him to want me for me. If he couldn't do that,
there was no future.

CHAPTER 45: RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

As I drifted awake, I heard Eliza talking to someone.

Who was she talking to?

“Agh,” I groaned as my head throbbed harder.

All of the previous night’s events rushed into my mind at once. The vampire’s victim, the blood, the injury, Sefa, and slamming the door in his face.

I winced and gingerly touched my temple. Oh yeah, he got me harder than I thought. Probably all the adrenaline in my system had made it seem minor before. My door opened, and Eliza brought me a glass of water and a Tylenol bottle.

“Here. It sounds like you had an eventful night.”

I reached for the glass, thankful I didn’t have to get it myself. After downing the medication, I handed the glass back to her.

“Wait. How did you know it was an eventful night?”

Her silence was damning, but her face was what gave her away.

“What did you do, Liza?”

“Well, he knocked again, and I couldn’t leave him alone. He said he needed to talk to you, so I told him he could wait inside.”

I groaned and ran my hand through the ends of my hair.

“Really? Eliza, I would have let him in myself if I wanted him here.”

“After you talk to him, you can kick him out. I’m going to the store in a minute. Do you want anything?”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No,” she drew out the syllable dramatically. “You stay here and talk to the sexy sexy vampire who flew halfway across the world to talk to you.”

“You do realize he can hear you.”

She winked. “Yup! I’m off.” She bent and kissed my cheek. “Just talk to him. I think it will be good for you.”

She shut the door behind her. I couldn’t move. Eliza let him in our apartment? She didn’t like anyone my sisters and I dated.

Alarm bells rang in my head—I was *not* dating Sefa.

I pushed the thoughts aside and got myself ready for the day. I’d only been asleep for several hours, but that was nothing unusual. The pain in my head began to settle down, and my stomach rumbled.

Taking a deep breath, I turned the doorknob and went to the kitchen.

He sat at the table facing me, his dark eyes taking in every part of me as I moved. He looked like he wanted to speak, but I decided to deflect. I raised my hand to stop him. “I need to eat.”

He rose from his seat. “Sit. I’ll make you something.”

“You don’t—”

“Sit, Parker. You might have a concussion, remember?”

I crossed my arms as I sat. “I remember everything from last night.”

He fried some ham and scrambled eggs for me while the coffee brewed, working silently. It reminded me of Mele and all the meals he had prepared for me there. I bit my lip because I wanted more of that. Seeing him here with me in my apartment could easily become addictive.

He set the food and coffee in front of me before taking his own seat, where he looked at me from across the table.

“Parker, I want to explain.”

I eyed him over my fork, halfway from my plate to my mouth.
“Explain what?”

“I made a mistake.”

I hurriedly shoved the food in my mouth because I didn’t know what to say. That was not what I was expecting.

“I shouldn’t have sent you away, and I shouldn’t have waited this long to find you. The truth is that I was tracking Tane. I wanted you to have a chance at a normal life, and you couldn’t do that if he were bonded to you.”

I swallowed my food. “What?”

Sefa’s jaw clenched, and he remained silent. I pushed the plate away from me.

“Okay, here’s the deal. I’m making new rules of engagement for us. Got it? Number one, you don’t shut down. I can wait for you to find the words, but no lying or leaving information out.

“Number two, you treat me like a partner in this world. I have no intention of being a damsel in distress while you try to save me from everything.

“Number three, no touching. Don’t give me false hope. Unless you are willing to work for something more with me, no taking my hand, no touching my waist.”

Sefa raised a brow, and his lips quirked ever so slightly into a grin. “Anything else?”

“Nope.” I pulled my plate closer and brought another bite to my mouth. “I think three rules should be easy enough for you to remember.”

“What if I don’t like one of the rules?”

“Which rule don’t you like? The no lying or leaving stuff out rule? The treating me like a partner? Or the no touching—”

“That one. It’s impossible for me not to touch you, Parker.”

Heat climbed up the back of my neck. I licked my lips, and he watched as I did. “Then don’t forget rules number one and two.”

With his impossible speed, he had me across the room and against the wall before I could blink. He lifted me and wrapped my legs around his waist. I draped my arms across his shoulders and waited to see what he would do next. His eyes studied every angle of my face before they dropped to my lips. “Let me kiss you first. We can talk about the other rules later.”

I nodded, and his lips crashed into mine. He parted my lips with his tongue, and his taste shocked me. I gripped the hair at the nape of his neck and pulled him closer, deepening our kiss. Every part of me remembered him and responded to him.

He ran his hand up my side and palmed my breast. I squeezed my thighs around his waist, hoping to relieve the building tension at my core. His cock thickened between us. My fingers traced down his chest, and his stomach tightened as I moved my hand under his shirt. I skimmed the taut muscles and teased around the waistband of his pants. He groaned and pinched my nipple through the fabric of my clothes. Lightning struck a path straight from his hand to my center.

“Hey guys, I’m home,” Eliza’s singsong voice as she opened the door was ice on the inferno that built inside me. I touched my lips as Sefa broke apart from me and set me on the floor.

My sister was going to have to find a new place to live.

CHAPTER 46:

HEALING

“Oh my god! If you were going to do that, just...hang a sock on the door or something. Let a girl know before I walk in and find you naked and groping each other in the living room.”

“No one was naked, Eliza.”

“Yet,” Sefa whispered next to me.

My cheeks heated, and I was sure I was fuchsia with a neon sign over my head, playing my thoughts for all to see.

“I’m going to my room. I’m shutting the door and putting earphones in. Don’t forget that we are supposed to go to the bar tonight and meet Kara before she leaves town.”

“No.” Sefa scowled as he spoke.

“What do you mean ‘no’?”

“There’s a vampire around who is being reckless and you got hurt last night. No.”

“A vampire? What’s this?” Eliza stopped and raised her brow.

“The patient that hit me had bite marks all over him. It looked like he had been fed on.”

“Eww. Gross. I can call Kara and ask her to come here for a girls’ night in instead. What do you think?”

I glanced at Sefa and back to Eliza. It would probably be weird for my sister-in-law to meet someone I was kissing. I pursed my lips and then nodded.

“Cool. I’ll call her and then...I’m putting in headphones.” She winked as she shut her bedroom door.

I ran my hand through my hair. Sefa reached for me, and I ducked out of his arms. “Why don’t we go back and work on rules number one and two?”

“Because number three is so much more fun.” Sefa wrapped his arms around me from behind and kissed my neck. I leaned against him before I remembered that he owed me an explanation.

“I—”

Sefa captured my lips, cutting off my words. I leaned into his embrace and let him take control. He ran his hand over my throat, tracing further down over my collarbone. I placed my hand over his and pulled back.

“Sefa. I need answers.”

He softly brushed his lips over mine before whisking us to the couch. He leaned against the corner of the couch and wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling my back to his front between his legs. “I’ll give you answers as long as I can touch you.”

“That’s a bit manipulative.”

He kissed my cheek. “It’s necessary. Trust me.”

I settled myself closer to him, enjoying his touch far more than I wanted to admit to myself. “Okay. Explain it to me.”

He interlaced his fingers with mine. “Do you remember the deed to my land?”

Until that moment, I hadn’t. Too many other things took precedence in my mind. Now that he said it, a pit formed in my stomach. Whatever he had to say wouldn’t be good. “I remember.”

“I paid off several of the bankers and public records employees to bury it as far as they could. I didn’t want anyone to be able to find it.”

“But...”

“But a few days ago, Tiato arrived at my home and asked me to find you. To tell you he is willing to pay you for the land.”

“If I sell it, won’t he throw you out? No. I’m not doing that.”

“Parker, that won’t stop him.”

“What do you mean?” Sefa’s arms tightened around me, and he remained silent. “Tell me.”

Several minutes passed, and I thought he wouldn’t answer me until the words slowly began coming out.

“Tiato...he will not hesitate to kill you. You’re human. If you die, he will have nothing standing in his way.”

I sucked in a breath. Sefa squeezed my hand, and I released the air in my lungs. “Do you think he will come here?”

“I’m sure he will. Eventually. He didn’t know where you were, so we have that going for us.”

“That’s disturbing.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“No. You won’t because you are going to be open with me. Now, what is this about a...a bond with Tane?”

Sefa’s arms tightened again. “I’ve been tracking him, but he is faster and smarter than I gave him credit for. The melody blood is boosting all his abilities. But there is something that we didn’t know before. Something I know now that I’ve tasted you.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks, remembering when he fed from me. “What’s that?”

“I’m bonded to you. My world shifted, and you are at the center. You pull me in like the moon. It was only a matter of time before I came back to you.” He ran his fingers along my arms. “And I want all of you. Yes, I want your blood in a way that no human has ever controlled me before. But I want your body, your mind, your words, your promises, your laugh. All of you.”

Tears pricked my eyes, and I was glad he could not see me. That was everything I wanted to hear from him. I tilted my head back against his shoulder, and he pressed his lips to mine.

I reached my hand up to his neck and pulled him closer. He pulled my hand away and leaned up. "Let me finish.

"When I drank from you, something primal changed inside of me. It wasn't our past or our attraction to each other. It was the melody blood. There is no doubt that Tane is bonded to you as well. I don't know what that will look like, but for me, I crave more of you. It's addicting."

I bit my lip and faced forward again. "He's coming for me too."

"I won't let him hurt you."

"Thank you for saying that...but we both know it is impossible for you to be at my side all the time."

"I'll make sure."

I squeezed his arm, still wrapped around my waist. "Is that all? Is there anything else that I need to know?" My head throbbed with the new information.

"No. I think that's enough for now."

I leaned my head against his chest and tensed when my temple hit him.

"Do you want me to heal you?"

"Hmmm?"

"I can heal you, Parker, if you want."

I swiveled my feet, so I was sitting and could face him. "Heal me?"

He grinned. "It would be easy. Just a drop of my blood."

"I won't turn into a vampire?"

Sefa chuckled. "No. You would have to die with my blood in your system. And then you would have to feed."

"Oh. Okay. How quickly does it work?"

Sefa brought his hand to his mouth and bit down on his palm. He offered his hand to me as the blood pooled. "See for

yourself.”

I placed my hand under his and eyed him as I brought it to my lips. My tongue darted out, and I licked the tiny stream of blood, amazed that his wound was already healing. The metallic taste filled my mouth, and I swallowed before I could think about it too hard.

The ache in my head eased, and I breathed a little easier. I touched my temple, and no swelling or tenderness was there any longer.

“Better?”

I laid my head back on his chest and settled against him.

“Much.”

Sefa laughed softly. He ran his hand through my hair. “Rest. I’ve got you.”

And so I did.

CHAPTER 47: SISTER- IN-LAW

Sefa shifted his weight, and my eyes shot open. He pulled me closer and pressed a kiss to my temple.

“Your guest is coming down the hall.”

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. “How long did I sleep?”

“A few hours.”

I gave him a sheepish smile. “Sorry.”

Sefa ran his hand up my arm and pulled me close, kissing me hard and releasing me. “I’m not.”

He rose and stretched, showing off endless muscles. My eyes traced the lines of his body. Every line was worth the rising blush on my face. He grinned as he caught me. “Who’s Kara?”

I stood and ran my hands through my hair. “She’s my sister-in-law.”

“Ah. I’ll wait in your room.” He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close. He dipped his head and ran his nose along my shoulder before kissing my neck. “When you’re done with your girls’ night, you’re all mine. Hear me?”

A shiver went down my spine, and I nodded. He took my lips and kissed me hard once more. The next second, he was gone, and the door to my bedroom shut softly. I stumbled at the suddenness of his departure.

A moment later, a knock sounded at the door. I reached for my phone and texted Eliza before opening the front door.

Kara stood with her hand on her hip. Her bright purple hair was pulled back into a braid that sat like a fauxhawk on her head. Her eyeliner was a different shade of purple to match her Converse shoes. Her skirt and top should not have matched, but they worked together on her for some reason.

“Why are we not going out? I have the perfect outfit. See?”

“You look gorgeous as always, Kara.”

She leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek. Her petite frame always made her seem somewhat childlike. Well, that and her complete lack of a filter between her brain and her mouth. She sauntered by me into the kitchen as Eliza exited her room.

“Kara! I’m really glad to see you!”

The two hugged each other, and I closed the door.

“Can we order out?” Kara sat her purse down. “I’m starving.”

“Okay, but before we do, I have this for you from Joseph.” I pulled the envelope from the drawer where I had stored it. “I found it in the boxes he sent before we left.”

She took it and looked at it for a long time before the tears slid down her face. “I still miss him.” Kara tucked the envelope in her purse. She brushed the tears from under her eyes and smiled. “I’m such a downer. Just pass me the wine.” Eliza passed her a glass, and she downed the entire thing.

“Geez. Let’s get some food in you, Kara.”

I picked up my phone and ordered delivery. Part of me felt bad that Kara missed him so much when I had moved on. The other part of me felt bad that she didn’t know her brother. Then again, that was probably better. Safer for her, at least. She didn’t hurt me, so I let our relationship be what it would be.

“When do you go back in the field?” I asked as we settled on the couch.

“I want to know how you keep that purple hair and still try to stay camouflaged out in the wild.” Eliza collapsed beside me and spilled a few drops of wine on the couch.

“I usually cover it up. Sometimes it doesn’t matter. Animals are all about behavior. And often I have a hat. Do you like the purple? I was thinking of doing blue...or maybe green?”

I sat back and let Eliza and Kara go on and on, easily conversing. The food arrived, and we ate, but my mind drifted back to Sefa. He was in my room, and my sister-in-law was here. It felt somewhat taboo, like I should feel guilty or ashamed for it. I pushed those feelings aside.

Instead, I thought about what we might do later. Would we sleep wrapped in each other's arms? Or would we take things further? Would we have sex? Did I want that? Would he want to feed again?

Fingers snapped in my face. "Earth to Parker. Did you hear me?"

"Um...no. What?"

Eliza raised her brow. "Kara asked you a question."

I looked at Kara, and her eyes were as wide as saucers. "Are you dating again?"

"Oh." Heat rushed to my cheeks. "No—yes. Maybe. There is someone."

Eliza's grin widened. "Oh really? Do tell."

I shot her an annoyed look.

"Yes! I don't have sisters. I don't want to lose you, Parker. It's fine. Really, it's totally cool if you are seeing someone."

"It's...new."

"Is he handsome? Is he sweet? Is he good to you?" Kara's questions came out one behind the other, and I wasn't sure how to answer any of them. She glanced over my face and waved her hand in the air. "Never mind. Don't tell me. Let it be a surprise when you know more."

"Thank you." I reached over and squeezed her hand.

She beamed at me and then downed the rest of her wine. Her phone dinged and she picked it up. "Oh hey. My Uber is here." She jumped up off the couch and retrieved her purse as I followed. "I'll call you when I'm back in town, Parker. Thank you so much for inviting me over!" She threw herself into my

arms and squeezed me tight. She released me and waved as she left.

Eliza cackled on the couch behind me. I spun and glared at her.

“What?”

“Your sister-in-law is asking you about your new boy toy. I find it humorous.”

“It’s not that funny. How much wine have you had?”

She got up and walked to her bedroom door. “Enough to know that I’m about to pass out and not hear a thing.” She winked and closed the door behind her.

My heart pounded, and I looked around my apartment. My stomach flopped, and I straightened my shirt. Tucking my hair behind my ear, I crossed the room and opened my bedroom door, taking in the vision of Sefa on my bed.

CHAPTER 48: SOMETHING LIKE FOREVER

“Did you have fun?”

I grinned. “Mhmm, but I was a little distracted.”

His shirt was off, and all his olive skin and tattoos were on display. I traced my eyes over each and every one. His hair fell over his shoulder, and I wanted to run my fingers through it. My face must have betrayed my thoughts. When I looked back at his face, he smirked, and my heart raced in my chest.

In a second, he was standing before me. I jumped, and he smirked.

“Do I make you nervous, Parker?”

I shook my head. “I *am* nervous. But not because of you.”

He traced my jaw with his fingers. “I told you before. You control how things go between us.”

I shivered at his touch. With hesitant fingers, I traced the planes of his chest. His skin beneath my hands sent fire through my veins. I tilted my head up and looked at him. His arms pulled me closer, and I reached up to kiss him, pressing my lips to his before settling back on my heels.

“What do you want, Parker?”

A smile broke on my face, and I told him the truth. “I want it all. I want all of you.”

His eyes scoured my face as he ran his fingers over my cheek. “I’m yours.”

Sefa’s hand slid to the back of my neck and tugged me forward. He laid his lips on mine, and the heat of his skin under my palms sent a thrill through me. He parted my lips,

and I tasted him as his tongue danced with mine. I spread my fingers over his chest and shoulders, digging my nails into his skin.

He groaned as his hand found my breast. I arched my chest into his palm, and he circled my nipple through my shirt with his thumb. Sparks flew inside me. How would it feel to have nothing between us?

As if reading my thoughts, his hands moved under my shirt. He only broke our kiss for a moment to strip my top from me. I reached back and unhooked my bra, letting it fall to the floor.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

His hand settled on my waist and traced the curves of my back before then up the sides of my ribs. He recaptured my mouth with his, each of us trying to get more of the other. His hands enveloped each of my breasts, and he pinched my nipples between his thumb and forefinger. I moaned into his kiss and tilted my hips against his.

Sefa picked me up by my waist, and I wrapped my legs around him. He dipped his head and took my breast in his mouth. I saw stars and closed my eyes, trying to soak up every moment. It was impossible to describe every sensation. I gripped his hair on the back of his head and held him there as his tongue circled my peak.

“Sefa.” My voice was breathy and full of need.

He backed us to the bed and laid me down. His eyes were so dark as he tugged on the hem of my pants, dragging them slowly down my legs. I watched him as he studied each inch of exposed skin. The air was cool against my hot, wet core. I pressed my legs together, but Sefa placed a hand on my inner thigh, holding me open to him.

I squirmed under his gaze, self-conscious since no one had ever seen me naked. Sefa’s eyes found mine and he kissed me sweetly. He broke away and hovered over me. “Don’t hide from me. You are exquisite.”

I studied his eyes, looking for the truth. It was there. He meant every word.

My fingers traced his chest and then lower over his abdomen. I hesitated, unsure what to do next. Sefa guided my hand over his pants to his bulging erection. I gasped as he squeezed, and I felt the girth of him.

“Seems unfair that I’m naked and you aren’t.”

He chuckled and stood at the edge of the bed. I bit my lip and pushed up on my elbows, needing a better view of him. He dropped the shorts first and stepped out of them. A wet spot on the boxers at the end of the bulge caught my eye. I grinned. He wanted this as much as I did.

I’m not sure what I expected, but I would never forget the sight of Sefa as he dropped his boxers and his erection jutted proudly out from his body—thick and glistening. His tattoos went all the way up his thighs to the V—tribal markings that only served to increase his masculine appeal I wanted to trace every one of them with my fingers. With my tongue.

Slowly, he settled himself next to me on the bed. He rested on his side and I turned to face him. I ran my hand over his stomach and hip, wanting to explore but taking my time. My heart raced with anticipation. He sucked in a breath when I ran my fingers through his dark curls and wrapped my hand around his cock.

He became so still I was sure he wasn’t breathing. I ran my circled fingers up to the head and traced my thumb over the tip, slicking my path back down. He groaned and rolled me underneath him. His mouth found my neck, and I pressed my hands into his sculpted back. He kissed down my chest and circled one nipple before giving attention to the other. I tangled my hands in his hair and dragged him closer to me.

Sefa kissed a path down my stomach, and my core clenched when I realized his destination.

“Sefa, I—”

He licked between my folds, and I jerked in response. He pressed one of his hands on my stomach, holding me in place, as the other moved my leg to open me to him further. I moaned as his tongue found my clit. He circled it, and there was pressure at my entrance. His fingers slid inside me at the same time he sucked my clit between his teeth. He pumped his fingers in and out as pressure built inside me. Before I was ready, the ecstasy washed over me.

A wave of pleasure dragged me under. My vision darkened, and I arched off the bed as I came. I tightened my grip on his hair. He lapped at my folds as I fell back to bed.

“Sefa...”

He chuckled and kissed my inner thigh. He pulled his fingers from me, and I immediately missed the pressure. Sefa moved himself over me, and I ran my hands down his back. He kissed me sweetly, and the taste of my arousal coating his lips only served to fuel my fire. I widened my legs, and his cock teased my entrance.

“Are you ready?”

I nodded.

“Words, Parker.” His tone told me it was an order. My eyes snapped open. I hadn’t realized they were closed again.

“Yes.”

Sefa kissed me and, in one thrust, sheathed himself inside me. I winced. The pain was fleeting and almost instantly replaced with pleasure. His tongue danced with mine as I adjusted to his size. When I couldn’t be still any longer, I wrapped my legs around his hips.

He moved back and forth inside me. I gripped his back and held on as he took control. His mouth moved to my neck, and he traced the line from my shoulder to my ear and back. The memory of his mouth on my skin as he fed the first time drove me to put my hand on his head. I arched my neck for him and pressed his mouth closer to my neck. I wanted him to enjoy this as much as I did.

“Feed, Sefa.”

As he thrust into me, his teeth pierced my skin. Pleasure built inside me. I tugged on Sefa’s hair as my back arched, and my body seemed to be lit on fire, every nerve firing violently. The wave was hovering just on the edge, and I wanted to kiss him as I came this time.

I pulled on his hair, and he lifted his head. His eyes were as black as night, and his parted lips showed the fangs of a killer. My scarlet blood dripped from his tongue and lips to his chin. I gripped his hair to pull him closer and kissed him, tasting my blood. I moaned against him and arched again while the waves of pleasure pushed me over the edge.

He broke the kiss and stared into my eyes as his hips stilled. We stared at each other as something shifted between us.

I needed him.

He needed me.

Even though this was my first sexual experience, I knew that something more had snapped into place.

Something like forever.

CHAPTER 49: A HANDPRINT

I leaned my head against his naked chest in the shower and closed my eyes. The hot water rippled down his skin, making me want to trace my tongue over every inch.

“You’re going to be late.”

“It will be worth it.”

“I’d be fine if you didn’t go at all.”

We spent the last twenty-four hours in each other’s arms. Either entangled or sleeping. It was clear to me that we shared something. Something...important.

I tilted my head up to look at him. “Sefa, what is this between us?”

He wrapped his arm around my back. “It feels like the bond is stronger for me. What does it feel like for you?”

“Like I’m surrounded by you. Like you are the only thing I can see.”

“I didn’t know that the melody blood would bond us or bind you to me.”

“Doesn’t seem like anyone knows much about them.”

“I asked Aroha to look into it more. Maybe she will turn up something.”

Comfortable silence settled between us until the alarm on my phone dinged. I sighed and reached around the curtain to silence it. I kissed Sefa and stepped out of our safe bubble and into the bathroom.

I busied myself getting ready for my shift, ignoring the pit forming in my stomach at the thought of being away from him. I mean, he was coming with me. He said he would be in

the waiting room until I finished, and I didn't need to argue with him.

The shower turned off, and I glanced over as he pulled the curtain back. I let my eyes trail over his entire form as I smiled.

He was mine.

He reached for the towel, and I checked myself in the mirror. Sefa's teeth marks covered my neck. I traced my fingers over them, surprised that they didn't hurt.

Sefa came up behind me, his towel wrapped around his hips, and noticed my hand tracing the marks. He took my hand away and kissed the marks, splaying his hand over my stomach. I watched in the mirror as his fangs extended and he bit his thumb. He held it toward me. I met his eyes in the mirror and sucked on his thumb, my tongue circling the pad. The metallic taste was no longer strange to me. I released his thumb with a soft pop and watched the marks fade in seconds.

Sefa ran his hands over my unmarred skin, his fingers applying light pressure to my throat as he tilted my chin up and kissed me. He took my lower lip between his teeth and sucked, eliciting a gasp from me. Releasing my lips, he smiled. His eyes lit up every time he smiled, and I couldn't help but become more and more addicted to it.

"You're going to be late."

"Shit. Sefa, we have to go. Hurry up!"

He chuckled. With his vampire speed, he was dressed and walking beside me as I exited the bedroom. Eliza stood in the kitchen with headphones on. She caught sight of us and pulled them off her head. "Oh, there you are! I thought maybe you were calling in sick." She winked, but I moved past her.

"I'm late. We have to go."

"Okay! See you in the morning!"

Sefa and I rushed to the hospital, and I clocked in only six minutes late. I tossed my bag in the locker and pulled my hair

back into a ponytail as I walked to the nurses' station. I glanced at the assignments and realized two things.

Nora was in charge, and she was the worst, so that meant a long shift.

And my name wasn't on the assignments.

"You're late. And you're not even *supposed* to be here. I heard you passed out, hit your head, and took off with some *man candy* to ease your widowed heart."

Steam would have been pouring from my ears if this were a cartoon. I crossed my arms and turned to face her.

"Nope. I'm here. Good as new. Which ones should I take?" Each word came out encased in ice.

She waved a pen in the air as she cocked her hip. "Like I said, you aren't needed. And speaking of man candy, looks like yours has come back to play."

I turned and saw Sefa marching toward me. At the same time, medics rolled another stretcher past me. The woman was covered in blood, and the impression of teeth was clear on the side of her neck. In slow motion, I watched as she passed. Her dark blonde hair could have been mine. My stomach clenched, and time sped back up.

"You know what, Nora...I'm not feeling well."

Sefa appeared at my side a second later. I didn't know how he knew. I didn't care.

We retrieved my bag and rushed to the car. My hands shook as we pulled back into the parking lot of my apartment building. Sefa reached over and held both of mine still in his. My eyes met his. "I'm here," he told me firmly.

I nodded.

"We're going to go inside and make a plan."

I nodded again.

He appeared at my door and opened it, pulling me from my seat. My legs felt like lead, but Sefa tucked me into his side and guided me up the steps to my apartment.

We stopped suddenly and I stumbled. Sefa kept me upright with ease. His head swiveled back and forth, checking both ends of the hall.

Did he hear something? Was there another vampire here?

Then I saw it.

Crimson blood in the shape of a handprint swiped along my apartment door.

CHAPTER 50: A DISTRACTION

The blood was like a neon sign on my door.

A melody lives here.

My heart sank.

I couldn't stay here.

Sefa turned us and headed back toward the parking lot.

"Wait," I struggled against him. "Eliza."

My sister was there. I couldn't leave without knowing where she was and if she was okay. Sefa tugged me against him.

"With me, Parker."

He opened the door, and I stayed against him even though my instinct was to run into the room. I inhaled to call for my sister, but Sefa wrapped his hand around my mouth and shook his head. He dropped his hand, and I waited for him. He scanned the apartment, never leaving my side.

"She's in there," he nodded to the bedroom.

"Eliza?" I called.

"Parker? I didn't even hear you come in." She appeared from her room completely unfazed.

Sefa released me as I sprinted the distance to Eliza, crashing into her, and she nearly fell back.

"What? What's happening?"

"You're okay."

"You're being weird."

I pulled back and held onto her shoulders. "You didn't hear anything?"

"What do you mean? What are you doing home, Parker?"

My face wrinkled in confusion. “Liza, you didn’t hear anything?”

“No.”

I took her hand and dragged her to the door. Sefa stood at our side as I pulled it open and showed my sister the blood.

Her face turned ashen and her lips parted.

Sefa shut and locked the door as I pulled Eliza to the couch. I saw the moment that she began to process what she saw. Her eyes lit up and she started to rapid-fire questions at us.

“Was that blood? That was blood, right? And a hand? That couldn’t have been easy? That person would have been hurt to have that much blood? That was blood...right?”

I nodded.

“Why would someone do that?”

I sat silently and waited for her to connect the dots.

“Is someone after you? Are they going to hurt you?”

“Eliza.” Both our heads turned to Sefa as he spoke. “You’re going to have to leave. I’ll take care of Parker, but you shouldn’t be anywhere near here.”

She swallowed and looked back at me. “You’re not allowed to die.”

“Liza—”

“No. No dying, Parker.”

I nodded, and she hugged me tight. When she released me, she jumped off the couch. “I’ll go to Seattle. I’m sure Brooklyn or Hannah will let me crash with them. I’ll leave—”

“In the morning,” Sefa interrupted. “Less likely for anyone to be attacked.”

We alternated between talking, packing, and resting throughout the night. None of us were able to sleep. I worried about Eliza, but Seattle was far away, and our sisters would be there to help her too. When the early morning rays peeked

through the window, Eliza brought her bags out and stacked them next to the door. She sat beside me on the couch and leaned against my shoulder.

“Where will you be?”

“I’m not sure yet. But I’ll call you. And this isn’t forever.” It felt like a lie. Sefa and I hadn’t talked about what our plan would be. Did I have a life of being on the run ahead of me?

She sat up and pointed her finger at me. “You better call. A lot. Especially if I have to go live with the ice princess and she-who-does-not-speak.”

I grinned. “I’m sure Hannah and Brooklyn miss you too.”

Eliza rolled her eyes and then kissed my cheek. “Be safe, Parker.”

Sefa appeared at the door, and Eliza went to meet him. She shoved a finger in his chest. “She doesn’t die. If anything happens to her, I don’t care if you are a vampire. I’ll find a way to kill you.”

A twitch of a smile crossed Sefa’s face. “Noted.”

The two of them disappeared into the hallway. In a matter of seconds, Sefa reappeared in my apartment. He crossed the distance between us and wrapped me in his arms. I held onto his waist as he ran his hand up and down my back.

“Sefa, what are we going to do?”

“I own a few safe houses around the world. We can get to one of them for now.”

“You own safe houses?”

“I can own property under human laws, just not under supernatural ones.”

“Okay, and then what? Live our life in hiding?”

“No. You deserve more than that.”

I snuggled closer to his chest. “As long as you are with me...”

Sefa's hand came under my chin, and he tilted my head back to look in my eyes. "Always, Parker."

He dropped his lips to mine, and I opened for him. His tongue delicately danced with mine. I dug my nails into his back, and his fingers tangled in my hair. I wanted to stay like this, but we had things to do and danger to avoid.

A knock sounded at the door. Sefa spun and put me behind him in a second. My heart beat loudly against my ribs, and I fought down the panic that threatened to consume me.

The knock sounded again.

In quick strides, Sefa crossed the room and whipped the door open. Charles stood in the hallway in his white dress shirt and eyed my door with suspicion. He focused on Sefa and raised a brow before leaning to the side and addressing me.

"Mrs. Webster, can I come in? I have a few questions."

"No," Sefa growled.

"Unless you would like for me to expose you for what you are, Mr. Akana, I suggest you step aside."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I know what Sefa is, Charles. I also know that it's hardly even seven in the morning. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to ask you about Joseph's things again. Are you sure you couldn't locate anything that the guild might need? Specifically, the list?"

"Mr. Elster, I've been through everything he sent here. Have you checked with Kara? She handled the rest of his things."

"I've already spoken with Miss Webster. We assisted her with going through Joseph's belongings. He was clear that she was never involved with his work at the guild."

"I'm sorry, I don't have anything else to say. I don't have it."

Sefa moved to shut the door, but Charles slapped his hand on it and stepped into the door frame. Sefa's lips curled back into

a snarl, revealing his fangs. Charles glared at him briefly before addressing me again.

“Mrs. Webster, Joseph would have kept this item close. Somewhere secure but also where he could access it quickly.”

Biting off each word as I spoke, I leveled my gaze at him. “I. Do. Not. Have. Any. List. And in case you missed the blood on the door, there’s a vampire here in Phoenix. Maybe you should focus on that problem instead.”

“This list is more important because there is a vampire here. Find it, Parker. Joseph’s work at the guild saved many lives. I’d hate to see that all come crashing down.” He stepped back and straightened his shirt. “I’d hate to see what would happen to those we’ve been working to help.”

Sefa slammed the door in his face and locked it. He wrapped his hand around my arm and pulled me back into the apartment to the bedroom.

“That was...”

“A distraction. The Mist Guild is not a threat. They are nothing more than an annoying complication. But there is an unhinged vampire making kills in the same city as you. I don’t think that is a coincidence.”

Something niggled at the back of my mind. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but we seemed to be missing something. I just hoped it wouldn’t end up getting me killed.

CHAPTER 51: COMPULSION

Sefa placed his phone on the bed and set it to speaker as he pressed the number for Aroha. She picked up on the second ring.

“Hello?”

“We have a problem. We need to get to a safe house.”

Aroha didn't miss a beat. “The one in Colorado is the closest without having to leave the country.”

“Can you send the codes to my phone?”

“Already sent. Sefa?”

“What is it?”

“I haven't seen Tiato in two days.”

Silence filled the room. That couldn't be good.

Sefa reached over and took my hand. I hadn't realized how much I needed that simple touch.

“You and Lono stay where you are. Stay safe. Let me know if he shows up again.”

“Stay safe.”

Sefa ended the call and pulled me against his chest. I clung to him like a lifeline as he pressed a kiss to my temple. The small gesture sent a shock straight to my heart. Tears choked the back of my throat.

“Sefa, what if the Mist Guild comes after you? You're a vampire, and they know about you. And now they want something that they think I have.”

Sefa cradled my face in his hands. His thumbs brushed away the tears that escaped.

“They aren’t going to come after me. I’m going to keep you safe, Parker. We need to get going, though.”

I nodded and sat on the bed as he sped around the room.

If there was another vampire in Phoenix, how could we be sure they were looking for me?

Maybe it was all a coincidence?

I tried to lie to myself, but deep down, I knew something bad was about to happen.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the door to my apartment crashed open, and I jumped to my feet. Sefa was at my side in a second, one hand wrapped around my arm.

Through my opened bedroom door, I watched as Tiato approached. His corded hair was pulled back. A smile stretched across his face and he rolled his shoulders as he stalked toward us.

“Parker, what a lovely place you have here. I’m so glad I got to see you while I am in town.”

“What are you doing here?” Sefa growled.

“Oh, I’m here about the deed. See, I brought cash. I wanted to make Parker an offer. One that will be...mutually beneficial.”

“What do you want, Tiato? Breaking into my apartment isn’t doing you any favors.”

Sefa and I moved out of the bedroom as Tiato sat on my couch. He crossed his ankle over his knee and leaned back comfortably.

“I have a new and emerging need. Something that you can help me with. And I would like to offer you payment for that and the land.”

“I’m not following. And I don’t want your money.”

“Oh...let me explain.” Tiato leaned forward and grinned, his lips parting over his teeth. They weren’t teeth, though—he had fangs.

I leaned into Sefa. “You’re a vampire.”

“You catch on quickly. That’s good. It would have been better though if you had kept the ring. All of this would have made you easier to control.” Tiato resumed his comfortable positioning.

Nausea swept through me. “Control?”

Sefa wrapped his arm around me. “He spelled the ring to make it easier to sway your mind and emotions. But he couldn’t do that if he’s a vampire.”

Tiato examined his nails. “It’s new to me, this vampirism, but it serves a purpose. It gives me access to longevity and strength and speed—”

“But not your magic.” Sefa glared at him as he spoke. “Why would you care about the land if you can no longer access the magic? You’re not a warlock any longer. You’re a vampire. You can’t even own property.”

Tiato crossed the room in a blink and stood face-to-face with Sefa. “You think you know everything...but you are wrong.”

Sefa moved me behind him and snarled. “This conversation is done.”

“Again, you think you know everything.” Tiato sighed dramatically. “Must I connect all the dots for you? If that is the case, we will do it my way and my time.”

Tiato snapped his fingers, and three spirits in their ghastly forms appeared in the room. I shrieked and clutched Sefa’s back.

“Talamaur,” Sefa growled.

“You guessed it. Seemed the best way to use my powers. And now, these little spirits will come in handy.”

The spirits began to approach me, and my vision tunneled. I gripped onto Sefa.

No. No. *No.*

With his supernatural speed, Sefa turned, picked me up, and sprinted to the door. We were both stopped as he slammed into another body.

I collapsed to the floor and Sefa crouched between me and the intruder. Tiato laughed boldly behind us, and that's when I saw Tane enter the apartment—his lips covered in blood. I stumbled to my feet, and the spirits wrapped their hands around my arms. Sefa lunged at Tane, but more spirits appeared in the room and held him down.

Tears fell in streams on my face.

We were trapped.

There was no way out of this.

I fought and pulled and tugged to get out of the spirits' grasp, but it was no use.

Tane appeared before me and gripped my jaw in his hand. Blood dripped down his chin and he licked his lips. He looked into my eyes and gave me a command that I couldn't ignore. "Don't move."

The spirits released me but stayed close. I wanted to move. I wanted with everything inside of me to run, but it was as if my mind and my body were disconnected.

Tane grinned. "Give me your hand."

My hand lifted of its own accord and more tears fell from my eyes.

Compulsion.

How was he able to compel me when Sefa couldn't?

Tane gripped my hand and kissed my wrist where he drank from me before. He inhaled deeply, and his eyes darkened. His lips pulled back over his fangs, and a pit settled in my stomach.

"Don't touch her!" Sefa struggled against the spirits. He wrenched his arms and strained closer to me.

Tiato appeared beside Tane. “Now, Parker. I need to talk to you about your choices. I have need of you back in Mele. You see, the melody blood has many mystical powers, and I will need it to unlock the magic buried in your land. I was prepared to ask for only a few drops, but since you are less than enthusiastic about our arrangement, I’ll be needing...more.”

“Tiato! I’ll kill you!” Sefa roared.

“Oh, that’s not part of the deal Sefa, but killing you? That’s what makes this deal more interesting.”

I could hear my heart beat loudly in my ears. If I could have spoken, I would have. Tiato turned back to me.

“Remember that payment you and I were discussing earlier? I’m willing to pay you in the form of Sefa’s life in exchange for you coming back to Mele with me. You’ll surrender the land and your blood.”

Silence filled the room for several seconds before Tiato clapped Tane on the back. “Let her speak, Tane. I’m sure she has a lot to say.”

Tane dropped my hand. “You may speak.”

The iron cage around my voice unlocked instantly. “No. I’m not going with you.” There was no way that they planned to let Sefa live. Our best shot was for me to make things difficult for them, and maybe Sefa could get us out of this.

“Not even for your bonded vampire? How interesting. I assumed the melody bond would be strong with you two. Perhaps I am wrong.”

Tiato moved to my table and chairs. He broke the leg off a chair and headed toward Sefa.

“Wait.”

He didn’t stop. He raised the stake over Sefa’s chest.

“Wait!”

Tiato paused and looked over his shoulder. “Willingly?”

“Yes. Keep your side of the deal. Sefa lives. And I’ll be... willing.”

Tiato tossed the handmade stake to the side.

“Excellent. We have a plane to catch.”

I locked eyes with Sefa, wondering if this would be the last time I saw him. Before I could think of something to say, before I could come up with the words I needed to say to him, Tane stepped in my vision and gave me a single command.

“Sleep.”

CHAPTER 52: THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

My eyes snapped open, and nausea filled me. The humidity in the air settled on my skin, and I knew where I was.

Mele.

The night sky stretched out into infinity with stars glittering like diamonds. The moon shed its light on my surroundings—tropical foliage at the base of a mountain. The wild floral scents flooded my senses along with the salt air.

The events before my compulsion slammed into me and I sat up straighter. Metal bit into my wrists and I looked to see what held me. Handcuffs looped around an iron chain and locked against the banyan tree. Something ominous echoed in my mind. Why were we here? I had to escape. Only my left hand was cuffed, and I tentatively pulled to see if it would loosen.

“I see you’re awake. Good. It’s almost time to begin.”

Tiato’s voice settled like ice on my skin and I whipped my head around to meet his eyes. “Where are we?”

“You don’t recognize it? That’s ironic. This is part of the land you own, Parker.”

I situated my back against the giant tree that held me in place. “What do you even want with it?”

“I can have the best of both worlds. And I want the very best, Parker. I deserve it.”

Tiki torches suddenly lit up around us in a circle. A squeak emitted from my throat.

“The magic of this land is deep and strong. It runs straight to the heart of the volcano.”

I eyed the mountain and realized with horror that a red glow was coming from near the top. Nope. No. I had no desire to see a volcano up close. Death by lava seemed a gruesome way to go. However, at this point, I was honestly choosing between one awful death and another.

“What does it matter if the magic is strong? You can’t access it now that you are a vampire—a talamaur.”

Tiatio appeared in front of my face. I retreated further against the tree, straining my hand against the cuff. His breath was hot on my skin as he spoke. “I can still feel the magic. With the right catalyst, I could use magic again. It would have to be a strong catalyst. Historically, that would be a sacrificial virgin...Do you still meet those requirements?”

I clenched my jaw and refused to answer.

“I knew you were a good candidate when we overheard your conversation with the witch at the bar. But somehow, with the melody bond in place, I can’t imagine that your virtue is still intact. Plus, using you would tie up loose ends, what with your husband’s...unfortunate end.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What do you know of Joseph’s death?”

Tiatio straightened himself and looked at the night sky. “I know that we were expecting a different member of the guild. Someone that sold information to us about a melody. Your husband showed up instead and tried to kill the contact. It got...messy.”

“*You* killed Joseph?”

“Hardly. I’m more of the brains than the brawn. But you have met him. How ironic that he tried to kill Tane, only for him to discover that the fool had brought a melody along with him for the hunt.”

I wanted to wrap my brain around Joseph showing up instead of the person who was selling melody information, but my circumstances were looking more and more dire.

“No matter, we got what we needed in the end. A melody is a rare gift. We shouldn’t waste it.”

Nausea swept through me.

“What are you going to do?”

He tapped my cheek with his fingers. “All in good time.”

A sudden idea sprouted into my mind. If I kept him talking, it would delay things. Tiato wanted the dramatics. He wanted to explain and set the stage. “I think I would rather know now. It’s not going to change anything.”

He grinned and stepped into the center of the tiki torches. He spread his arms wide and turned slowly as he spoke.

“I’m going to unlock the restraints on my magic and this land. Under the light of the moon, I will make three sacrifices. I’ll start with the other two first—I’ll use them to strengthen my spirit workers.” Tiato raced into my space and inhaled deeply next to my neck. “Then it will be your turn, Parker. We will drain your melody blood and sacrifice you to the land. Your blood will unlock my powers in death. Your death will bring about a new era for the talamaur. Not only will we control the spirits, but we will also have access to this island’s magic once more.”

He was certifiably crazy. Did he really think my cursed blood would be enough to reverse the laws of magic?

I bit my lip. Where was Sefa? Was he still alive?

“Where are the other sacrifices? And who will be here with you? You said *we* will drink.”

“So impatient. I have a special surprise for you.”

“Someone will know. Someone will come for me.”

“Who? Who is going to come for you? Your human family? The ineffective Mist Guild with their internal leak? Sefa? Ha! He has no idea where you are.”

A small bit of relief settled inside me. He was still alive.

“Even if you get your magic back, someone will stop you, Tiato. This isn’t worth it. You are already a talamaur. You still have mystical abilities.”

His face changed to rage. “It’s not the same! The earth spoke to me before. Now...now there is nothing but silence.”

Kalina’s story filled my mind. She didn’t want to be changed. Did she know that it would cause her pain? Did she know that it would make her insane?

She had to have known. Why did she put the land in my name? Why did she draw me back into this when I could have been free forever? None of it made sense. I knew she cared for me. Why, then, did she put me in such danger?

“Oh, finally. The rest of our party has arrived.”

My head snapped in the direction he gestured. Tane entered the tiki circle and deposited two men. It took me a few moments to recognize them under the blood and grime. I sucked in a breath.

Officers Smith and Mageo.

CHAPTER 53: I BELONGED TO HIM

“Miss Rhodes?” The officer’s words came out slow and slurred. “What is this about?”

“Apparently, there was more to my late husband’s murder than either of us realized.”

Officer Smith tried to rise and Tane kicked his knees to keep him on the ground. He groaned as he fell.

“Was that really necessary?” I glared at Tane, and he approached me, a look of determination on his face.

“I don’t need to listen to anything you say, melody. I can keep you silent.”

Realization dawned on me as he approached. “Wait. You don’t have to compel me. Please.”

He stopped a few feet in front of me. “No more snark. I’m dreadfully hungry.” He licked his teeth and winked.

I curled my lip in disgust.

“How are you able to compel me? Sefa said it was nearly impossible for him.”

Tane shrugged. Tiato clapped him on the back as he joined him. “It’s the melody bond. Now that Tane shares your blood, you are more susceptible to him. And he is stronger.”

“How do you know so much about melody blood?”

Tiato grinned widely. “I’ve done my research. It’s how I know that your blood will unlock this land.” He clapped his hands and raised his hands in the air. “Shall we get started?”

“No. Wait. Why do you need to make more sacrifices? Can’t you do this with...with only blood?” I struggled to come up with more excuses to stall them.

“Time’s up, melody.” Tiato winked as he entered the tiki circle. Moments later, vampires appeared around the tiki circle. There were...so many.

I pulled on my cuffs again, determined to find a way out of this.

“Friends, welcome. Tonight, we will unlock the powers of the island once more. Vampirism is not a reason we should be denied our birthright as witches and warlocks.”

All the vampires here were once witches and warlocks? Is that what talamaur were?

“It has taken a long time to locate the melody, but there she is.” He gestured to me, and the vampires began to look at me with bloodlust and greed. “Now that we have her, she will be the catalyst to unlocking our powers. The earth will not be able to deny our request.”

Cheers rose from the group following his speech. My vision tunneled, and I wanted to run. Run so far away from this. Run toward Sefa, wherever he was now. Run and never stop.

Tiato spread his arms out toward the crowd. “Shall we begin?”

Another rise of affirmative cries filled the air.

Tane and Tiato were the only ones inside of the circle, other than the officers. The lights flared stronger on the tiki torches, filling the area with an ethereal glow.

Tane grabbed Officer Mageo first and lifted him to his feet. His face was blue and purple from a beating. Blood dripped down from his nose and mouth. He stumbled, but Tane stood behind him and held him upright by his shoulders.

Tiato walked up to the officer and, in a swift motion, plunged his hand into the officer’s chest and pulled out his heart. A painful groan emitted from his throat, and his eyes rolled back in his head as his life left him. I shrieked and I pulled harder on the cuff until the skin on my wrist began to break and bleed.

Tane tossed Mageo's body carelessly to the side, and Tiato held the heart above his head, blood dripping down his arm.

I gagged when he bared his fangs and ripped out a chunk of the muscle with his teeth. A feral and vicious expression covered his face. Something downright monstrous rested behind his eyes. How was this the same man who bought me that ring in the market?

My heart pounded furiously in my chest, and I pulled on the chains again. If I could separate my hand from my arm to escape, I would have.

Vampires clustered around the circle and lifted their voices in a victorious chorus.

Tiato then moved to Officer Smith. The officer lifted himself to his hands and knees in an attempt to rise. Tiato kicked him in the ribs, sending him to his back. He knelt beside the man, blood dripping from his chin and hand. Tiato shot his hand into Officer Smith's chest faster than I could track. He pulled it back violently with the heart still twitching.

I stared as the last of the officer's life breath faded into the night. I could see his chest ripped apart and the broken ribs shoved up through his skin. Even with my background, the image disturbed me.

Tiato rose to his feet and showed the heart to the circle of vampires. He bit into it, and fresh blood dripped down his chin and neck, his eyes black as the night sky. In the glow of the flames, he was more demon than vampire.

Tane left the circle of tiki torches and walked toward me.

No.

No.

No.

This wasn't happening.

He latched onto my arm and broke the iron chain. I struggled uselessly against the vampire as he dragged me inside the

circle of death.

“You can’t do this! Let me go!”

When he forced me to the center, he gave me a command.

“Don’t move.”

My mind screamed inside me, and tears slid down my face.

How had I become so helpless?

A noise echoed off the mountain. I wanted to turn my head and see what was happening, but it wasn’t possible.

Another sound behind me.

Tiato and Tane looked for the source of the noise.

There it was again.

My tears fell harder when I saw him. Sefa paused for a moment behind one of the vampires before he drove a stake into her heart. He moved again, and I almost thought I had imagined him.

No—I knew he would find me.

We were bonded. I belonged to him as much as he was bound to me.

War cries rang out from the remaining vampires. Now on their guard, they turned their attention away from me and to the threat.

Another cry of pain.

Hope crept up like a ripple in the water each time he entered my line of sight.

When the last vampires outside the circle fell, Sefa headed straight for me. He stopped suddenly. An invisible force stood between us, edged by the tiki torches.

“Sefa.”

His dark eyes locked onto mine.

He was a wild monster. His hair fell across his face and blood dripped from his face and hands.

“Give her to me, and I’ll end you quickly.”

“You can’t enter, and I have a ritual to complete,” Tiato snarled.

“You kill her, and I will end you slowly. Painfully. And I will enjoy it.”

“There are two of us and only one of you. You won’t be able to stop us.”

“It doesn’t matter how many of you there are. You are threatening the center of my world...and I will tear down every part of *this* one to bring you to an end if you touch her again.”

“He’s not alone.” Aroha stepped into the light. Her amber eyes glinted with malice as she took in the scene. “And I’ve already dismantled your warlock’s circle. You’ve grown careless in death, Tiato.”

Sefa charged toward me, but Tane intercepted him. Aroha joined the fray but I couldn’t turn my head to follow, still held by Tane’s compulsion. Tiato spun me so that my back was pressed to his chest and said into my ear, “I have a different plan for you now. But I still need your blood. *All of it.*”

His teeth clamped down on my neck and I screamed. As quickly as he bit me, he released me.

“It was good to know you, Parker. I’ll miss you when you’re gone.”

I saw the glint of the firelight on the metal a second before the blade sliced across my throat. I tried to pull in a breath. I tried to raise my hands to stop the bleeding. I tried to think...

My vision darkened, and my heart beat ominously in my ears.

CHAPTER 54: MOON TO THE DARKNESS

Sefa

My chest tightened and a scream echoed in my mind.

Neither of the emotions were mine.

The melody bond increased more and more as time passed.
And so, I felt every emotion Parker did as she died.

While Aroha weakened Tane, I ripped his heart from his chest and tossed it to the ground. The satisfaction I would have normally felt was hidden by the need to get to her—to be *with* her.

The spirits he controlled dispersed into the air with a hiss, finding their peace.

I turned to see Parker on her side on the ground. Her face was away from me, her blond hair scattered chaotically behind her, but I knew.

She was too still. No movement at all.

Tiato laughed and reached out to the flames. They rose and fell at his will as he explored his newly unlocked powers. The volcano rumbled and sputtered as Tiato regained his lost powers, flexing them at his will.

No matter. He would die tonight.

Aroha appeared at my side, tears falling down her face. She lifted her hand and reached out into the air. Intensity covered her face as she focused all her magic on the talamaur responsible for my love's death. Tiato clutched his head, screaming as he fell to the ground.

“Go to her, Sefa. Save her.”

“She's gone, Aroha.”

“Try. You have to.”

A million tiny thoughts and emotions passed through me in a second. Would Parker want me to save her? Would she choose vampirism, if it were her choice? Or would she instead wish she were dead? Did she want to live a life bonded to me? I doubted the melody bond would leave if she turned.

I rushed to her side and turned her on her back. Her throat was slit so deeply that her blood had spilled in seconds. I sliced my hand on my fangs and pressed it to her lips. Hope niggled in my mind, and I ignored it.

She was gone.

This wouldn't work.

I cradled her in my lap, pressing my blood to her mouth.

Tiato continued screaming under Aroha's power until, finally, the world was silent. The only sound in the night was that of the gentle breeze. The glow from the volcano darkened and the ground steadied.

I looked up at the moon, wondering if my life would stretch out into eternity like the darkest night, devoid of light.

No moon of my own to light my way.

Aroha knelt across from me. She began to chant and hovered her hands over Parker's neck, closing her eyes in concentration.

Tears slid down my face, and I buried my head in her hair. The light in my life was gone, replaced by an emptiness that settled into my soul.

I had grown accustomed to the emotions on the other end of our bond. The rise and fall of her was like the tide, and I enjoyed knowing her better. We had so little time. It wasn't fair.

With gentle hands, I laid her body out on the ground. Aroha continued her ministrations in vain.

I rose to my feet and grief slammed into me like a truck.

She was gone.

Gone.

I screamed at the night sky.

Tiato's body lay across the circle, blood dripping from his eyes and ears. I crossed the distance and ripped the head from its body, tossing both out of the circle and yelling at the night sky again.

As I worked to control my breathing, a small, small tug on the bond pulled me.

I didn't dare to hope.

I turned slowly, and Aroha stroked Parker's still form.

The tug turned into a pull. Like the moon on the tide, I was drawn to her side.

With shaky hands, I lifted her body to mine. And then I heard it.

A heartbeat.

CHAPTER 55: JUST THE BEGINNING

I stretched my arm across the bed, surprised to find it cold and empty.

I closed my eyes and listened for him. He wouldn't have left the house. He hadn't left the house at all except to feed for the last two weeks. And when he did, it was only moments.

Lono was snoring in the guest room.

Birds were beginning to wake outside and sing their songs.

The clicking of a keyboard gave him away. He was in his office.

As silently as I could, I rose from the bed. Since I transitioned two weeks ago, I had been exploring my new senses and skills. Everything was brighter...louder. But, at the same time, more focused.

I ran my hand through my hair. Vamp speed was still new. I didn't like how it made me feel out of control. Whenever I tapped into that ability, I thought I would run through a wall. I shivered at the thought.

I walked through the darkened house to Sefa's office at a normal speed. I leaned against his door frame as he hovered over his work.

"Morning." I grinned as he looked up to see me.

"Good morning." He sped to me and pressed me against the door frame. I saw every movement of his muscles as he approached, my eyes now able to process the motions clearly.

He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear and leaned closer to me, hovering centimeters from my mouth. "You're getting better. I didn't hear you until you stepped into the kitchen."

A smile spread over my face, and Sefa's moved from a smile to a scowl as he dropped his hand.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him closer to me.

"Don't do this. It's too early in the morning for this."

"Parker..."

"I'm fine, Sefa. Really."

"You're a vampire now because of me."

"No." I drew out the word as I said it. "I'm alive now because of you."

Gently, he unlocked my hands from around his waist and kissed them both before returning to his desk. I frowned. Sefa had treated me with kid gloves ever since I turned, bringing me food, letting me feed from him instead of humans, sleeping next to me—but never intimately. I was so tired of the calculated safety he surrounded me with.

It was a shock when I woke up in Sefa's arms that night. I knew I had died.

I thought that was the end. That I wouldn't get a goodbye. A last kiss. Any last words to complete my life.

When I awoke, and the tiki torches lit the night sky, my brain hardly processed everything happening. Aroha fed me her blood to complete the transition, and it was done.

It was like experiencing the world for the first time all over again. Every flower's scent swarmed around me. Every bird call was up close. Even the ocean, miles away, sounded like I was standing on the beach. I could see every drop of blood scattered on Sefa's face. And I could feel...something.

Today, it felt like regret, bitter and salty in my thoughts. I ran my hand through my hair. That wasn't how *I* felt. I was happy and relieved to be where I was.

Sefa. The melody bond.

He...*regretted* me?

Part of me wanted to sulk because I didn't want to be a burden.

The other part of me was angry. My fury rose inside me, and Sefa glanced up from his desk. He laid his pen down and gave me his full attention.

“Do you regret saving me?”

“What—no. Why would you think that?”

I pushed off the wall and slammed my hands down on his desk, cracking the wood with my new strength. “Because you cater to all my needs, but you won't talk to me. You kiss my hands and my cheek, but you never kiss me. You sleep next to me every night and never want intimacy. Do I repulse you that much now, Sefa? Do you regret me so much?”

Sefa rose slowly from his seat. He circled the desk and deliberately entered my space. Taking each of my hands, he pinned them above my head and leaned closer to me.

“Never say that. You. Are. Everything.”

I stared into his eyes, looking for the truth. They changed from sadness to lust in a heartbeat.

“Then don't treat me differently than before. Be my partner. Be with *me*.”

His eyes dipped to my mouth, and then his lips were on mine—a collision of tongues and teeth. We spilled everything into our kiss. I felt his emotions roll through him in waves through our bond. Regret was still there, but so were hope and love.

His hand released my wrists as he stripped my clothes from my body. I worked just as quickly to free him from his.

He trailed his hand down my neck and breasts, moving to each side to stroke my peaked nipples. I gripped the back of his arms as I pulled him closer, burying my face in the juncture of his neck, inhaling his scent. As his fingers trailed down over my abdomen, I traced my tongue along his collarbone.

Need pulsed through our bond—his and mine.

His fingers found my center, and he pumped them inside me.

“You’re already wet for me,” he murmured.

I moaned against his skin. His thumb circled my clit, and my tension built. My fangs ached to pierce his skin and taste his blood on my tongue, but I didn’t know if that was normal. I traced my teeth over his skin, attempting to relieve the pressure.

“Sefa...”

“Feed, Parker.” His command washed through me and heightened my need for his blood.

I kissed his neck before plunging my fangs through his skin. He groaned and pumped his fingers harder inside me. His thumb continued to circle my clit, and as I drank, ecstasy washed through me. My orgasm crashed into me without warning. I lifted my head, and the blood trickled down my neck as I threw my head back and arched against the wall.

“Is...is it supposed to be like this?” My words came in short bursts.

“This is just the beginning.”

Sefa’s lips captured mine, and he moved us to the desk. He laid my back out over it and spread my legs wide. With a wicked grin, he lowered his mouth to my thigh and kissed a trail up to my core. His tongue circled my entrance, and I grabbed his hair, urging him closer to where I needed him. Sefa needed no further guidance. His tongue and fingers worked me into a frenzy.

Just as my back arched over the desk, he released me and trailed his tongue over my abdomen and chest to reach my mouth. He kissed me deeply, and I moaned with the pressure as he entered me. His lips kissed my skin before his fangs pierced through.

So much pleasure pulsed through me. Through the bond, through my body, through his fangs on my neck. I pressed

myself into him, and I came as he thrust into me. Waves and waves of ecstasy rushed through my system. Sefa groaned and his cock twitched inside me. He continued to feed until my body finally returned to earth.

He lifted his head, and our eyes locked. I put my hands on either side of his face and bit my lip as tears slid from my eyes.

“I do not regret knowing you. I do not regret changing. I get more than a lifetime with you. There is nothing about this that I regret.”

Sefa’s eyes darted between mine. After a few moments, he smiled—his eyes lighting up even more than they had the first time I saw it. And I knew, finally, he was starting to forgive himself.

CHAPTER 56:

CURSED BLOOD

Sefa stood in the kitchen while I sat at the table with my coffee. Today was the day we needed to plan for the rest of our lives. After I transitioned, Sefa called Eliza and told her what had happened, but that I needed to recover. I spoke to her on the phone often, but we were not sure what life would look like now.

There were still so many things that we needed to figure out. Now that I was a vampire, could I still work as a nurse? What would happen if I came across a melody? Sefa wanted me to stay here with him and look after Lono. That seemed like the best option, but I wanted to take my time to decide with so many things in my life changing.

The Mist Guild was still a concern. They had a leak since, apparently, someone was selling information about known melodies. I wanted to track down whoever was responsible and rip their hearts out—especially because of what happened to me.

Today was also the day that Aroha was coming to sign over the papers so that Kalina's land would be in her name. Sefa and I decided she was the best person to care for and protect its magic. I owed her so much.

Aroha's car rumbled into the driveway. It was still very cool that I could hear things so clearly. I loved that I felt so powerful.

Sefa brought three plates of food to the table, and Aroha joined us.

"You're looking so good, Parker." She smiled, and her eyes glistened.

"It's thanks to you. Honestly, I can't thank you enough."

Her face dropped, and she pulled her seat out to sit.

“What’s wrong? Did I say something wrong?” I glanced at Sefa, looking for confirmation.

“No.” Aroha waved me off as she sat. “I have some bad news, and I really don’t want to give you more bad news.”

I set my fork on the table and ran my hand through my hair. “Can we get through the deed stuff first? I can’t handle bad news this early in the morning.”

She nodded, and I passed her the deed papers. Sefa signed as the witness, and I signed as well. There, one task was completed.

Sefa scooted closer to me at the table.

“What is it, Aroha?”

She took a deep breath and took a book from her bag. “I’ve been doing research. On melodies.”

I held my breath and waited for her to continue.

“We all know that they are very rare, and their blood calls to vampires of all kinds. We know their blood can strengthen the vampire and be used for many other mystic rituals.”

She tapped the book in front of her. “This book is Egyptian. It has the most information I’ve seen about vampires, and a whole section on melodies.”

She paused, and my brain began to catch up to where she was. “What does it say, Aroha?”

“That melodies are always female and...their blood is passed on through bloodlines.”

“Family? Melodies are...oh god.” I turned and faced Sefa.

“My sisters.” I looked back at Aroha. “My sisters? Are they...?” I couldn’t bring myself to say it. Could my cursed blood be theirs as well?

“We don’t know for sure, but...yes. It is extremely likely that your sisters are melodies as well.”

“I have to call them.” I began to move, and Sefa wrapped his hand around my arm.

I pulled away. “Sefa, I have to warn them.”

“Two of your sisters don’t even know about vampires. Do you want to tell them about this on the phone?”

No. I didn’t. It would have to wait.

I looked at Sefa, and I knew we could keep them safe. We would figure something out. Anything.

For Hannah.

For Brooklyn.

For Eliza.

If I shared my cursed blood with my sisters, the world of vampires had better watch out. The Rhodes sisters stuck together.

No matter what.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hi!! Thank you so much for reading Mist Guild Archives! I hope you loved this story! I was so excited to see it come to life.

If you wouldn't mind doing me a favor, can you drop a review for this story? Reviews are one of the ways that indie authors can get their stories into reader's hands.

And if you want to stay in touch, you can find me on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok @authorleighferguson

I'm so glad you went on this journey with me! There are several more books planned in this world and I can't wait to get them to you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leigh Ferguson

An American fantasy romance author, Leigh loves her family , a strong cup of coffee, and happily ever afters.

Mother to three wild boys and an ICU nurse on the side, she can usually be found in yoga pants or scrubs. (Aren't those the same things?)

When she isn't wrestling, refereeing, or loving on the boys, (or at the hospital) she can be found cuddled up with her Brave Knight, a bowl of popcorn, and a good book.

BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

[The Cord Between Us](#)

Shadow Dragon Series Book 1

[The Pieces Around Us](#)

Shadow Dragon Series Book 2

[The Stars Against Us](#)

Shadow Dragon Series Book 3

[A Cursed Covenant](#)