



IVY WAYNE

LORD

IMPALER SERIES

MRS. BLACKWOOD

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LORD IMPALER

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NAME – PLACES - TRANSLATIONS

NAMES

PLACES

TRANSLATIONS

About the Author

LORD IMPALER

Mrs. Blackwood

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Lord Impaler Series

1. Mrs. Blackwood
2. Gravedigger
3. Iron Maiden

To everyone in my family, do not read it. Family gatherings are awkward enough as it is. To everyone who laughed at me, this is my war cry. To those I consider my family, you are part of the story's journey as heroes.

As for the muse that inspired the portrayal of Vladislav Basarab Drăculea Tepes III in appearance, voice, and personality, thank you for the inspiration that you are and the beauty you carry within that transpires over you.

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CHAPTER 1

WELCOME MRS. BLACKWOOD

JUNE 2ND

Raleigh, North Carolina

The sun shone down on her face and slowly awakened her from a deep sleep. She saw pale blue walls and elegant hardwood floors. The bed sheets were white and incredibly soft on her skin, while the comforter was a bright white with elaborate navy blue embroidery.

Looking around her, she saw tall and expansive French windows about twelve feet from where she lay on her belly in the king-size bed. She brought the comforter to her face and looked around, slowly moving side to side, ensuring she was alone.

What happened? What am I doing here? This isn't the room in my rental home, she thought to herself.

Her name was Coralie Bellefleur, and for the past six years, she had rented a summerhouse in North Carolina on a stunning private property. The property itself belonged to a man who lived in the Bourbon House, a historic property with an extraordinary past linked to the occult and perhaps witchcraft going back to the seventeenth century.

Coralie realized, with a sigh of relief, that she was alone. Reassured, she looked around the bedroom again and noticed a picture above the headboard. It depicted a foreign land, with the Poenari Castle of Romania. She remembered the sight very well as she enjoyed the paranormal, and the castle belonged to Vlad the Impaler, who inspired Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

She sat on the bed and noticed the room's old wood furniture. An armoire was placed on the left against the sidewall, and two bedside tables were on

each side of the bed. A bible rested on the one by her side, while the other carried a *Phantom of the Opera* novel.

Coralie gathered all the courage she could spare and looked beneath the sheets. To her relief, she saw that she was dressed as she had been the day before. She wore dark grey jogging shorts, a white tank top, and a pink zipped hooded sweater. So great was her relief at being clothed that she chuckled softly.

Why am I here? How did I even get here?

Coralie put on her running shoes that were resting by the bed, and the moment she was about to stand up, she fell to her knees. An excruciating throbbing in her skull, like a blacksmith's hammer, was banging against her head. She dug her fingers against the skin on each side of her face and grimaced as she firmly closed her eyes, wanting to never open them again.

"Argh!" She screamed in horror, for what awakened in her was an undeniably unsure memory that, if proven true, would change her life forever.

"It was a dream!" She cried as her body fell forward, her hands touching the ground. "It had to be... please, heaven, help me."

The floor became wet as her tears poured down her cheeks. Resting on the hardwood floor, she allowed the tears to fall unchecked, full of terror and sorrow.

CHAPTER 2

IF I COULD TURN BACK TIME IN MY HEAD

MAY 30TH

Raleigh, North Carolina

Coralie locked her door and walked down the patio from the house she rented each summer. She had decided to go for a long walk. She felt so happy her latest novel was out, and she could relax.

She enjoyed a few days off before she started to write again. Coralie would write a novel centred around the house she was renting. It had a dubious reputation of once belonging to a vampire.

When Coralie started writing, she had come up with short stories about historical houses. Those that bore strange and dark pasts stained in blood, treason, or curses. All were related to supernatural beings and legends that always fascinated her. She did not believe in vampires or anything but enjoyed writing about them.

When she got her first contract with a publishing house, Coralie was asked to write more, so she came up with her first novel, which took place in a ghost town. Now, she had decided to push the boundaries a little more. She wanted to write a series about a real vampire rumoured to live in the woods of Raleigh near her rented summerhouse. The building was on the land of an old colonial mansion known as the Bourbon House.

The night was warm and comfortable. Coralie was enjoying the firmament in the quietest part of southwest Raleigh. The trees were tall and mature, giving the street she walked an enchanting feel as their leaves danced

in the wind. Coralie admired the flower bushes, some in early bloom while others were still deprived of flowers.

However, they still looked beautiful. She had her hands in her sweater pockets, headphones on, and she was listening to her favourite country music station, thinking about moving down to North Carolina. After shopping for her groceries and meeting warm, welcoming people, she thought this could be a town she would finally be happy to live in. She was tired of the never-ending winters of the north.

I always said I was born in the wrong place.

The wind suddenly changed, and Coralie stopped walking. Upwards, the tree leaves changed direction. Downwards, shadows moved. Coralie was not an easy woman to scare. Supernatural researchers in many investigations had often invited her to study their cases with them and write a blurb or two about the events for their blogs, podcasts, and other media outlets. She even spent the night in the famous haunted Colorado resort hotel from that horror movie everyone was discussing. Also, Coralie wasn't that easy to take down.

I might be a little rusty, but I'm sure it'll return to me fast.

Coralie had studied tae kwon do and jujutsu and knew how to defend herself very well. For an exceptionally long time, she had fought against her shyness and her lack of self-confidence. Because her first boyfriend was a martial arts teacher, he convinced her to try it. Now, she owned black belts in both arts and had learned to defeat her stage fright when attending book conventions.

Come on, show yourself.

She was not expecting anything like this. Four dark figures appeared. Four men dressed all in black. Their skin was as pale as the moonlight and carried a subtle blue glow. Their eyes were bright, reflecting a bright specular light that seemed lifeless. However, looking closer, she could see their eyes were as red as blood.

Coralie stepped back, removed her headphones, and widened her stance, lowering her body, ready to defend herself for the first time. Confident in her skills, she tried to convince herself that taking four people down should be doable for someone as strong as her.

Fangs? Those people are vampire wannabes. I thought I was in Raleigh, not Transylvania! This should be very easy, she thought.

“You are new here, aren't you, little bloodbag?” One of the men said, eyeing her.

“Bloodbag?” Coralie repeated in a monotone voice, showing her annoyance at the quartet.

“Oh, but what have we here? A pulse that thinks she’s at the top of the food chain!” One said while circling her with a noticeably light footstep as he looked into her eyes.

“A pulse? Seriously, you guys need to get a life outside this roleplay you’re doing,” Coralie replied as she turned her back on them. But not without paying attention to their every sound. They were reticent, which was disconcerting.

As she moved her head up to look confidently in front of her, the leader of the four appeared before her eyes. She wanted to scream, she had to admit, but she couldn’t show them her fears. He wore a black suit and must have been about her age, although a little taller than she was. He had a unique sea scent that emanated from his pale white skin.

“I’ll have her,” the leader said.

“Excuse me, Dracula?” Coralie replied.

“Oh, how I wish,” the leader said with a smile.

He brought his hand next to her chin and used his fingers to lift her head up, moving it from side to side. Coralie quickly hooked his elbow and forced him down on his knees, pushing her own into his back. The man growled. She violently dislocated his shoulder, shouting at the top of her lungs.

“Who’s next!” Coralie shouted.

One threw himself at her. Coralie pulled his arm, used his momentum, and shoved him against the oak tree. As the other moved in, she was about to propel herself to kick the man in the chest with her foot, but she felt the leader restraining her.

Impossible, I dislocated his arm from his shoulder! She thought with a jolt.

There was no time to think. Coralie used the man’s grip as leverage to lift her body up and squeeze the man’s head between her knees. She applied so much pressure that she could feel his throat slowly collapsing, but strangely, the man was still smiling widely. The leader let go of her, and she quickly contracted her abs, giving herself a swing. The man with the broken pipes fell back onto the asphalt.

“You are a fighter. I love it when my prey is skilled!” The leader screamed, with his arm strangely back in place.

“I am nobody’s prey!” Coralie shouted as she witnessed all four still

ready to fight and just as strong as they were when she first saw them.

In the blink of an eye, all four were circling her. Coralie was not about to surrender, but it was clear that something strange was going on. She was about to believe that vampires existed and heard the leader ordering his bodyguards to step back.

“I will make her mine, and then, she’ll be my source of nourishment. I’ll have her fight me repeatedly,” the leader laughed as he eyed her.

His fangs out, he violently pulled Coralie toward him, and with strength more significant than she had ever felt, for the first time, she sensed as if her body weighed a ton. She was unable to move or fight. One tear rolled down her face the moment she was about to be forced to surrender.

“Stop! Don’t you dare touch my fiancée,” a strong voice suddenly thundered out from behind her.

Coralie saw a tall silhouette walking against the last street lanterns toward the dead-end, where she was held against her will in the arms of a supposed vampire who was ready to make her his main course.

“Blackwood? What are you doing here?” The man appeared a little uneasy.

“I am the duke of the southern states. I rule over these lands, and you are holding my fiancée,” the newcomer replied coldly.

“I see no ring, no mark. How do I know you are telling the truth?” the leader said in a nasal voice.

Coralie listened to every word, still held firmly in place. She doubted she could even try to attempt an escape. She was not engaged to anyone, and at that moment, she wasn’t dating anyone either. Coralie didn’t know anything about what was going on that night.

“Her ring is being sized, and I leave no mark. That woman has a career that brings her to meet readers. I won’t compromise our existence,” Mr. Blackwood said.

He walked toward her, and she saw his long black layered hair, deep blue hypnotizing eyes, and a shy smile. A cool breeze took over her mind, and she heard his voice whispering to her.

“*My name is Bruce Blackwood. I will save you. I promise,*” he whispered in her mind.

Coralie closed her eyes, and a few tears rolled down her face. She thought she had lost her mind. She hoped when she opened her eyes, she would see that she was alone, and calling a therapist might take care of the problem. But

she was still held tightly against the leader's chest, and the tall, dark man was only a few feet away.

"Is this true? Are you this vampire's fiancée?" The leader asked.

She took a deep breath and thought carefully about all the possible scenarios. Sadly, none of them seemed to work in her favour. It was either fighting out of this, hoping for the best, or telling a lie and escaping with, wait...a vampire?

"Yes, I am Bruce Blackwood's fiancée," Coralie said.

By mentioning his name, she confirmed to the leader that she knew her rescuer even though the leader believed moments ago, she denied the existence of vampires.

She tried to slowly back away, but when she was about to walk past Bruce speaking to the leader, she felt him grab her hand and hold her tight behind his back as if protecting her from the quartet.

"If this is a lie, I can still make her my bloodbag. She'd be my prime giver and I would feed on her solely for the rest of her life, which I would prolong by giving her my blood," the leader said as he licked his lips, staring at Coralie's neck.

"You know, by threatening me, you are directly threatening my donor, and we both know you don't want to upset my donor," Bruce said, staring the leader down.

The leader's eyes widened. His brows lifted quickly before frowning. He showed his fangs to Bruce, who responded with a sardonic laugh.

"I will be back in three nights. If she is not your wife by then, I'm taking her, and you will have to answer for your lies, Bruce Blackwood," the leader said with a frown.

CHAPTER 3

THE WORLD IS A VAMPIRE

JUNE 2ND

Raleigh, North Carolina

Startled, Coralie opened her eyes widely.

"I have to run away," she whispered, her hand firmly closed on her cross, her fingers cramped when letting go of the metal pendant.

Coralie jumped, paced to the door and swung it open. She looked around, scanning the perimeter to ensure she was alone. There was no noise, and there was no one in sight. She carefully walked out, but once she spotted the central staircase, she charged on it like a bull on its target.

You are Coralie Bellefleur, no matter what anyone else says. You have your mother's name, she thought.

She strolled down the stairs as fast as possible and spotted the entrance. She could almost taste her freedom. A memory from the night before surfaced as she ran down the stairs. She had signed her name beside his. The moment it emerged in her mind Coralie flinched. She shouldn't have flinched.

I was about to leave. I was about to run away, fixing his deep blue eyes right in front of me, but the moment I turned away to face the chapel entrance, he was standing between each door. He vanished and appeared. In the time it took me to blink, he moved sixty feet. Vampires exist, heaven help me.

Abruptly, Coralie stopped in her surge to reach the doors. Two men in grey suits blocked her way, appearing just like he had in the old chapel,

except now, she stood in his home.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Blackwood. We cannot let you leave this house."

His name was Ryan. He was walking down the hall through the right corridor. Coralie remembered him, although each time she tried to peek at her memories, it seemed to give rise to a headache.

When observing his bald head and cold brown eyes, she recalled his kindness when walking into the chapel. He had tried to free her himself but lost to him because—needles felt as if they were piercing her skull, and so she stopped thinking for a moment.

"My name is Coralie Bellefleur, Ryan," she said, looking deep into the tiger eye stone colour of his eyes.

"I know," he said with a gentle smile.

Coralie saw how genuinely Ryan wished to hold his hand out to help her up. But he explained that all around her, no one was allowed to touch her in any circumstances except if she was in pain or need. Afraid for her life and realizing how possessive Mr. Blackwood was of her, she looked around, noticing about twenty people dressed in summer clothes. Some were waving at her, while others smiled. To her immense surprise, they all seemed somewhat happy and welcoming.

"No one here is kept against their will," Ryan said.

"Except me," Coralie replied with a frown.

"To save your life. May I remind you, Mrs. Blackwood, that you willingly signed your name besides his own? Although not given much choice, if you stop feeling sorry for yourself for a moment, look around. This might be one of the best things ever happening to you. Much better than the alternative, if I may say so myself," Ryan explained with a soft smile on his face.

Ryan's voice was warm and reassuring. He pointed out the old engravings on the wood columns resting as beams holding the wood arch before the entrance. He showed her the luxurious paintings on the walls and the vast, clean rooms on each side.

The mansion that belonged to Bruce was most impressive. While it was the most beautiful home she had ever seen, she felt like a lion wrongfully captured. She was thrown in a circus for everyone to stare at in amazement as she heard the murmurs from around.

"Come! You haven't seen her yet. She's Mrs. Blackwood!" One of the residents said.

"She's so gorgeous," said another.

"Look at how afraid she is...should we talk to her?" Another voice asked.

"Would Mr. Blackwood let us befriend her?" Someone else asked.

Suddenly, Coralie heard strong yet very feminine steps coming from behind her entering the hall. Looking over her shoulder, Coralie noticed the woman's five-inch high-heels white sandals, legs going on for days, and she wore a tight yellow dress.

Looking at her beauty pageant face, she stared at her bleach blonde hair cut short, perfectly aligned with her earlobes. Her voice was firm, and she sounded annoyed when referring to her.

"So, everyone is talking about that pathetic bloodbag that Bruce replaced me with without a second thought? Pfft, what a sorry excuse for a woman. She looks like a dork, Ryan!" The woman spoke out as she pointed at Coralie and grimaced in disgust when staring at her. "Ginger hair all curly and untamed going down the low of her back, amber eyes, freckles on her face, hourglass figure maybe, but no ass? That's what he went with?"

Yes, I met you before...you're a...damn, I can't remember.

"Sarah! You are way out of line! Don't make me report you to Mr. Blackwood!" Ryan ordered.

Coralie noticed the guards' eyes glowing like a canine's eyes in the wild.

Coralie stared at both Ryan and Sarah. She could almost swear she saw their complicity, as if they appeared close to one another. It must have meant they were friends or even more than that. Ryan's voice didn't sound as firm as it should've been if, honestly, Sarah made a crucial false step when addressing Coralie. Staring at his eyes, she saw his pupils dilating as if in admiration when looking at Sarah, who seemed to share that attraction.

Something's wrong here, terribly wrong.

Coralie stepped away when Sarah walked up to her and extended her hand to grab Coralie's arm. She closed her hand on Sarah's wrist and quickly hooked her elbow, forcing her down on her knees.

"I'm not as dorky as I look," Coralie firmly whispered through her teeth into Sarah's ear before pushing her free.

She could hear more whispers and murmurs. They mainly consisted of Sarah's misstep of daring to touch her as she bore the name Blackwood.

"I'm Coralie Bellefleur. I might have played the part where I was Mr. Blackwood's fiancée, but I am still a Bellefleur," Coralie shouted.

She saw the guards approaching her. Ryan was trying to calm her down,

letting her know they would ensure she would get to her bedroom safely. Coralie saw their eyes glowing. His eyes never glowed, or did they? What were they? What was Ryan?

"Don't come any closer to me!" Coralie shouted suddenly, in a surge of panic.

Coralie had nowhere else to hide than the place she knew. So, she ran toward the staircase to her bedroom, hoping to feel safe again. Somehow, she thought that crawling into bed and falling asleep would bring her back to reality because this had to be a dream.

Tears ran down her face when she noticed a spark on her ring finger, but she never dared to look at it. She stopped abruptly.

"It will all be all right. I promise," a deep, manly voice whispered in Coralie's head.

Someone spoke in her head. Again. Coralie followed the second floor's main corridor, running down to the end, where she opened the door. She stared at a tall and robust man. His hair was as dark as the midnight sky, cut in a long, layered, messy haircut. His eyes were the deepest royal blue she had ever seen.

"What is this? Who are you?" She asked with much moisture in her eyes.

"I'm your husband," he answered, his head falling forward in a short, curt bow.

"How did you speak to me in my head?" Coralie asked.

"I am a vampire, and you have telepathic abilities. It's almost as if it was written in the stars for us to meet," her husband replied with a smile in the corner of his mouth.

CHAPTER 4

I AM BRUCE BLACKWOOD

"MY NAME IS BRUCE BLACKWOOD, AND I AM YOUR HUSBAND," HE SAID.

Unable to speak or move, she widened her eyes and stared at him with a terrified expression. He stood in the entrance of the bedroom he had given to her. She clenched her fists and kept her mouth tightly closed.

She saw the vampire holding his hand out with an awkward smile, as it seemed trembling. Undoubtedly, it was an attempt to show her his good intentions or to lure her into believing his every word.

"Do not touch me! Do not come close to me!" Coralie shouted.

Her eyes were covered in tears. Her hands were suddenly cold, and her voice cracked so much that it almost vanished. She had a difficult time keeping her mind focused.

"I won't be touching you. I am sorry! I'll stay away, I promise," he answered, his hands up, standing right in the middle of the bedroom between the bed and the wall still close to the entrance.

Bruce wore pale-washed jeans and a grey vee neck t-shirt down to his hips. He had a black leather bracelet tied around his right wrist and a thin gold chain around his neck that went down to the middle of his pectorals, holding a wolf claw pendant.

When Coralie met his gaze, she noticed how dark the contour of Bruce's irises was compared to the inside and wondered if the vampire in him surfaced through the doors to his soul, if he had any.

Coralie hoped Bruce would soon say something. However, he seemed slightly afraid or maybe choked up.

"I...I never wished to hurt you in any way, Coralie. I was trying to save you, that's all," Bruce explained.

His eyes were sad, and he stepped away again as he lowered his arms and put his hands in his front pockets. Coralie never lost sight of him and followed his every move. She asked how he expected her to believe his actions would save her.

The moment she walked deeper into the bedroom, leaving the entrance to the chamber, she almost bumped into the bed. Bruce spoke up.

"It is hard to explain. I fear you won't believe me, and if I prove to you that I am telling the truth, I am even more scared that you will try to escape again and injure yourself as you did last night and the night before that," Bruce said with arched brows and his eyes saddened.

Coralie tried to recall the events of the night before but could not. There was a robust, vivid strike of darkness as black as the pit of the night. It was as if it was stuck in her mind, and she couldn't move past it. She couldn't see what was hiding behind its obscurity.

"In other words, I doubt you are ready to know, but you have a right to. I won't stop trying until you accept that I exist and am real. I asked as I had to because I wanted you to be as free as you could possibly be without endangering yourself," he explained with a soft-spoken voice.

Coralie was speechless and stared at Bruce. She kept quiet and refused to say anything, listening to him and hoping he wouldn't stop talking until everything made sense.

"This might sound unbelievable to you, but although I may look thirty-two years old, I am actually two hundred and twenty-nine. When I was only a child, an incredibly powerful old vampire native from Romania adopted me. Long story short, soon after I turned thirty-two, I came back to him, mortally wounded, and he took it upon himself to turn me into one of his people. That night, I was reborn a vampire," Bruce shared.

Unable to contain her emotions any longer, out of exhaustion and helplessness, Coralie burst into loud laughter. Reaching the bed, Coralie sat in the middle of the mattress, letting herself fall, before blinking quickly. She would not lose sight of Bruce, who seemed to have respected her need to be as far away as possible from him.

Before she closed her eyes, Bruce was at the end of the bed, toward the bay window facing the eastern side of the house. But he wasn't there when she looked back at where he stood. She turned her head, and he was standing on the opposite side of the bed behind her. No human possessed that kind of speed. Coralie moved back against the headboard.

"Coralie, please, listen to me. I would never hurt you, never have and never will," Bruce said with a tone that showed his compassion and that he was speaking the truth.

You are speaking to me in my mind again, Coralie said.

"Yes," he replied.

"So, this is real. You are somewhat alive, and vampires are real?" Coralie asked with a gasp.

"Yes, and I also am part of the few that believe breathers are to be cherished and protected," he added.

Coralie watched Bruce sit in the far corner of the bed, away from her as promised. She wondered if he would show his fangs to her and put to rest any doubts that were left in her mind about the existence of his kind, but the door to her bedroom suddenly opened, interrupting her thought.

Two men walked into the bedroom accompanied by Sarah, and they carried Coralie's white luggage with navy blue stripes. They carefully placed the bags on the ground next to the armoire, and at the very moment when Coralie was about to address Bruce about her belongings, she saw his eyes narrowing and his brows lowering toward the bridge of his nose.

"Mrs. Blackwood's possessions were all transferred here as you have requested, my lord," one of the guards stated.

"Thank you, that will be all," Bruce replied with an embarrassed tone as he scratched his head, looking away from the security guard, the same one Coralie had seen by the door earlier, Ryan.

"Leave," Bruce said.

"Mrs. Blackwood's computer and other electronics have been altered, and there is no Wi-Fi access. Also, I have agreed to accompany Mrs. Blackwood to tour the house in your absence, as she requested last night," the same guard added.

"Leave, now!" Bruce growled, "I would like to be alone with my wife."

Turning his attention to Coralie, she was still adjusting to hearing the word wife. She felt an emotion of embarrassment, but it did not come from her but from him.

"We have bonded. Don't be afraid. I, too, feel the same," Damian said.

His face softened. His hand was about to reach for her own while Coralie moved her fingers forward. When she was about to finally touch his skin, she saw a charming presence envied by all women, while all men must have wished for her most intimately.

Bruce turned his head to listen to her words, and Coralie could tell he desired nothing more than to be alone with her because he whispered deep within her mind.

"It's the third time you have tried, my beloved," Sarah said with a tempting voice, her hands slowly moving down his chest.

"Third time's the charm," Bruce replied, stopping her hands and moving them away brusquely.

"She's not worth it. Don't you see?" Sarah said, caressing Bruce's face with her pianist's fingers.

Bruce grabbed her wrists and stood up straight. Only then did Coralie realize how tall and broad his shoulders were as he looked down at the woman who did nothing but insult her.

"Do not play me for a fool, Sarah. Not only have you lied to me about what you were, but you also have used your abilities to enter my wife's mind! You've abused my hospitality and made a mockery of me. Now, before I decide to share your true nature with my donor, gather your personal belongings and wait for my guards. If you attempt any other intrusion in my wife's mind, there will be hell to pay," Bruce said with a growl.

Coralie understood next to nothing about Bruce's statement, but by the look in Sarah's eyes, the tears, and the terror, she knew something horrible was about to happen to her. She could see Sarah's hands shaking, her skin prickled as though she was chilled, and her brows curved, begging for Bruce to forgive her.

"You should have thought of the consequences of your actions before walking into my life, Sarah. Vampires of my kind are not known to forgive or to forget," Bruce added with an intense growl.

Two guards walked in, and Coralie could tell Bruce trusted them thoroughly just by the way he whispered his orders. They grabbed onto Sarah's arms and dragged her out of her bedroom. She shouted for Bruce to give her one last chance, but he ignored her.

"Not only have I learned that you are a duke, but you have a mistress too?" Coralie cocked an eyebrow at him.

"You already knew I was a duke, Coralie when I said I was the night we met. I never hid that from you. As for Sarah, she was my sole source of nourishment. It's hard to explain, but let's put it this way: vampires with a noble title have that one blood giver that becomes their sole source of nourishment. They don't confuse them with regular givers because they have

perks such as receiving blood from vampires to remain young. But all givers and prime givers choose to be givers out of their own will. The night we met was Sarah's last night as my sole source of nourishment. Needless to say, she did not take it very well," Bruce explained.

"How long have you had her if you are over two hundred years old?" Coralie asked.

"I am two hundred and twenty-nine. She has been with me for twenty years," Bruce said, almost as if he did not care about the food that he had for the past two decades.

"But she looks almost younger than me and I'm thirty-two! Whatever her secret is, I want in," Coralie said with a smile and a laugh.

"Vampire blood," Bruce replied.

Coralie awkwardly laughed, her tone trembling as she moved farther away from Bruce on the bed. Abruptly, Coralie stopped when staring into Bruce's deep, piercing blue eyes. She remembered him saying he might have appeared only thirty-two, but he was present when the French Revolution raged.

CHAPTER 5

WE SAID FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

THE NIGHT OF MAY 31ST
Raleigh, North Carolina

White rows of lampions were lighting the old building by each wall. More giant beeswax candles were placed higher in the front, below large, imposing tableaux of scenes older than the first crusades.

“Coralie, Coralie, please...let me help you,” a man with black hair and royal blue eyes said with a soft, silvery voice as he held out his hand.

“No! Stay back!” Coralie ordered as she moved a fire torch from side to side, trying to keep him away.

She now knew vampires were real. After all, they had attacked her. Although she initially thought they were part of a role-playing game when facing the one who saved her, they seemed afraid, and more so of the duke’s donor.

Nonetheless, to save Coralie’s life, Mr. Blackwood had to tell a lie that happened to have inconvenient consequences.

“I will not be your wife!” Coralie cried.

“Coralie, I have explained it all to you, and there is no other way,” he said as softly as she had ever heard.

“In my world, we marry the one we love,” Coralie replied with tears in her eyes and covering her voice.

“Is love more important than your life at this very moment?” He pegged her with that question in a honeyed voice.

He handed her the pen that would allow her to sign her name besides his own, using his blood to prove the document had not been forged, and it

would be placed in the vampire archives.

He took the torch from her hands. The chapel was old and hidden in a deserted country town, far away from any curious eyes. The wood panels were white, but the paint was cracking, just like the plaster on the columns on each side of the chancel.

She walked up a few steps to her right. A small table rested with an old book, tarnished papers flapping in the wind. It turned by itself as if witchcraft tried to warn her not to sign her name. She held onto the white gold cross around her neck, closed her eyes, moved away from the paper and signed her name in tears.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the priest said.

CHAPTER 6

PLEASE, DO NOT FORGET TO REMEMBER ME

JUNE 2ND

Raleigh, North Carolina

“My memories were suppressed, and now they are coming back. It’s very confusing to me,” Coralie said as she was now forced to face the troubling idea that she was married to a vampire whose donor—a way to say, vampire parent—seemed to implant fear in the eyes of those who dared to confront Bruce.

“I know what it is you recalled,” Bruce said with a grave voice, “I’m the one who suppressed your memories for two nights and, in the early hours of dawn, released your mind for you to remember and try yet another attempt at making you believe in the existence of vampires and our marriage.”

Coralie finished rubbing her head and turned her attention to Bruce, wondering how someone could hypnotize her so deeply in her mind to play with her memories at will. She asked if it was a sick joke, but Bruce’s answer was somewhat terrifying.

“Vampires can control the minds of their prey, humans and those who are younger than themselves and of the same species. We call this ability mindspell, for it is not hypnotizing but rather altering the mind of those under our control. For my part, just as my donor taught me, rely on this ability as a last resort and only in time of need.”

Bruce’s voice was calm and tender when he sat by Coralie’s side. She felt comfortable and trusted his words for the first time, only to remember that he could’ve mindspelled her into trusting.

“This is the reason why I despise this ability vampires possess...it creates

paranoia for everyone, vampires and breathers. Look at me, Coralie, I'll show you what it is to be mindspelled so that you will always remember the difference," Bruce said.

Her eyes were lost in his, and he whispered more words.

"You are now under my control, but I will not own you further. You are free," he said.

Her body was now hers again. Coralie remembered how unresponsive it had been while she was under his power. She now knew he had not used his mindspell to alter her memories, but only to suppress them.

"Why?" Coralie asked, trying to look into his eyes, but he continually escaped her gaze.

"Because you remember most of your stay, I will only speak of what caused me to make your memories dormant," Bruce answered.

Coralie watched Bruce brush his hair back before turning to face her. His gaze escaped her own as he reached for her hand as if to see if she would now let him come a little closer. She did.

"At first, you would be calm and accept the strange reality you were now a part of. As you were thrust into it rather unfairly. Unexpectedly, you would scream each time I would reach for your hand, as I did now. If surrounded by other people, you would crane-kick everyone to escape and, by doing so, leave me with no other alternative than to put you to sleep and suppress those memories. Understand that what I did, although it left me very ashamed, had to be done for your protection and those who are under my charge," Bruce explained with his silvery voice.

Slowly, it all came back to Coralie, as she could see blurred flashes in her mind of an event that occurred recently, a night ago, maybe. She remembered being nestled in his arms as he caressed her head with a kiss and one of his hands, helping her let go of a piece of broken glass she was holding as her blood dripped down to the floor, leaving her afraid.

"I reached for your hand when you agreed to come with me to visit the house. You lost your mind and screamed, then you tried to escape. But, since we've met, the outside world has become too dangerous. I ordered my men to keep you from running out of the house, so you broke a window, but my guards were already circling you. You picked up a piece of glass and fought off everyone approaching you. You were amazingly holding your own, but you dangerously cut your hand. I had to do something."

Coralie remembered.

You slowly approached me, softly repeating my name, so I let you come closer. Never have you mindpelled me. You just came to me with the bit of trust I was allowing you to have.

“I did what I could, Coralie,” Bruce whispered in her mind, his fingers slowly squeezing harder on her own.

“What you did for me that night saved me from the quartet. However, I have no wounds or scars to prove I ever held that piece of broken glass,” Coralie said as she looked at her hand without a scratch.

Bruce finally met Coralie’s eyes, and his hand moved from her own to near her face, about to touch her cheek, but she breathed quickly and moved back. He restrained his hand, but then his fingers touched her face, and that’s when it surfaced in her mind.

“You were in my arms, and I was rocking you back and forth for a while as I explained to you some unique attributes of vampire blood, which includes healing.” Bruce explained, “You looked at me afraid, but I said it wouldn’t hurt, and you trusted me.”

Coralie remembered Bruce slowly moving the piece of glass from her hand, and the sting of the glass being pulled away from her skin left her in much pain, and it burned, leaving her hand numb with all the blood that spilled out.

She then felt him bringing her hand to his mouth. She turned her head toward him and saw the tip of his tongue licking her palm.

“*It’s okay,*” he whispered in her mind, “*I will heal you.*”

A specular light hit his mouth, and the moment after, his lips met her flesh. Once he opened his mouth, she felt a warm liquid spreading through her wounds.

“I felt something after...in my mind and in my guts. I felt something,” Coralie recalled.

“Yes, we bonded. Drops of your blood were in me, and I in you,” Bruce said.

“What does it mean?” She asked.

“It means that you were special,” Bruce said as he touched her forehead, reminding her of her faint telepathic abilities. “And I as well, because I am a vampire, we are forever a part of one another, nothing more and nothing less.”

CHAPTER 7

LET THE RAIN FALL WE'RE COMING CLEAN

IT WAS CHALLENGING FOR HER TO ACCEPT. CORALIE REACHED FOR BRUCE'S hand and saw that he looked surprised by her gesture. She asked him why he had requested Ryan to stay with her while he was away. Bruce looked down and acknowledged that something in the house wasn't right.

"Someone has betrayed me, Coralie," Bruce said.

The duke flipped his hand upside down to hold her own,

"It might have started a while ago, but it amplified when we walked into each other's lives," he explained.

His thumb rubbed the back of her hand. Coralie was hypnotized by his back-and-forth movement.

"I know for a fact that Sarah is a part of it, but I do not know the other one. Since we met, there has been something wrong with your memories, and each time, the only one you seem to remain calm around is Ryan."

Coralie asked how she could have such violent outbursts when she knew herself to be a shy and introverted person. She was uncomfortable around people.

"Mindspell. Someone violated your mind and made you forget about them. Ryan might not be a vampire, but he had an accomplice who could do it. I know how to stop it," Bruce replied with a firm answer that left Coralie speechless.

"How did a mindspell order me to do that?" Coralie asked, knowing that it had to be very precise for her to be able to turn against Bruce in a blink.

"One gesture from me seemed enough to trigger your outburst. Each time, it happened when I would reach for your hand," Bruce said as he recalled what occurred.

“I didn’t do it this time, and let’s face it, we’ve been holding hands for a while now,” Coralie said, intrigued by how she could touch him.

“Yes, but I released your suppressed memories. Nevertheless, I would like your permission to enter your mind and erase that command before the quartet comes tonight,” Bruce asked.

Coralie agreed, afraid of the leader who almost turned her into his blood bank. Bruce asked her to stare into his eyes as he guided her into his mind while he looked for the command previously implanted in her mind.

She heard the soothing sound of humming and recognized the song. It was *All I Ask of You* from her favourite story, *The Phantom of the Opera*. She listened to his enchanting voice and every word, and he ended with perfect words.

“*Love me, that’s all I ask of you,*” Bruce sang with his tenor voice yet softly spoken. “You are free of that command now, Coralie,” Bruce said with a smile as he moved away from her, letting go of her hand.

Earlier, Coralie had asked him never to touch her again. Somehow, she could see it had hurt him significantly.

“That’s it?” Coralie asked, now wishing he would still be by her side, holding her against him as he did when healing her hand.

“Yes, I couldn’t have you aware of me looking for it because you were unaware of it. Does that make sense? Regardless, I erased it, and that’s the important part,” Bruce said with a grin.

Bruce’s hands were in his front pockets, his head down. He seemed to have been staring at his cowboy boots. Coralie moved from the bed and walked toward him. With each step she took, he seemed to back away by two.

“Bruce, I need to know if we are truly married or if this was all a charade. It is just a play to convince those four vampires that we are a couple, so he wouldn’t come after me, right?” Coralie asked, somewhat uncomfortable now that she found him charming and kind.

Bruce’s face saddened, his lips slowly parted, and he slowly closed his eyes, only to open them again as he answered. Coralie understood that what happened three nights ago had changed her life forever, and nothing would ever be the same. She wouldn’t be free to marry whomever she wanted and live a tranquil life in a country suburb in North Carolina.

“We are officially married, Coralie. You do remember us in the chapel. You saw us sign the papers,” Bruce answered with a serious voice that

Coralie had not previously heard from him.

“What about divorce? Will I ever be able to divorce you?” Coralie asked hastily.

“Yes, in time. When we are both sure that you are entirely safe, I will release you because that is the vampire way to do it. Our bond will forever stay, but you will be free from me,” Damian said.

“Good. Let’s do that,” she hurriedly said as she ignored Bruce’s deep voice.

Somewhat relieved, Bruce walked four steps toward Coralie. She could almost feel his warmth emanating from his body, embracing her own. It felt like the night he rocked her in his arms and cared for her until she had let go of her terror.

Her hand was then entirely healed. What she remembered was the second night that she gravely cut her hand. In her mind, she heard Bruce whisper words of warning to her.

“I would’ve done it forever if it meant you would have been safe,” Bruce whispered.

Coralie watched his hand reaching for hers. He lifted it up just enough so his other hand could pull up her sweater sleeve to show her the wedding band, made of white gold and covered in diamonds. Her engagement ring was also made of white gold and carried one diamond, larger than she had ever seen. It looked vintage and feminine, just like she had always dreamed of her entire life.

“If one night you ask for my permission to release you so that you will be forever free from me, know that I’ll also have the freedom to leave you and never come back,” Bruce stated in a severe but hurt-sounding voice.

Her heart sank, and she was filled with confusion and an ever-growing flame inside of her loins. She looked at Bruce, bringing her hand to his lips and turning it over to kiss the inside of her wrist, and just like that, he walked to the corridor leading him to the entrance of her bedroom.

“Bruce!”

CHAPTER 8

YOU ARE THE REASON WHY I BITE

BRUCE LOOKED OVER HIS SHOULDER, HIS EYES LOOKING DOWN INTO HERS. Coralie asked where he was going and if she would need to remain confined in that horrible bedroom.

But the moment Bruce turned around, Coralie stepped back, thinking that maybe she had insulted him by using the word horrible to define the room as it was quite charming. She stared at him. His irises were adorned with a glowing red dot that caught her attention as he examined the room.

"Bruce?" Coralie asked and jumped once he responded with an intense look into her amber eyes.

"Yes?" His voice, longing when staring at Coralie, who had never heard this yearning tone of his before. But she recollects the red dot spreading through his irises in various situations.

"Why are your eyes turning red, Bruce?" Coralie asked when pointing at him with her index finger. She noticed his sudden awkwardness toward her. "It's okay, you can talk to me," Coralie said with a smile, trying to make him feel more comfortable.

Her hand was near his face, hoping it would be just as warm as what she remembered, but suddenly she was brushed away by Bruce.

"Don't touch me!" He almost shouted at her.

Coralie pushed back an involuntary cry, not expecting Bruce to react toward her in that way. He immediately asked for her forgiveness and was about to open the door to leave her alone. She grabbed his arm firmly, reminding herself that he was her husband, and she had a right to know what was wrong with him.

"I'm scared, Bruce. But I won't be if you take the time to explain what's

going on with you."

Coralie's voice softened as she ended her sentence. She saw Bruce's hand close to her cheek, his fingers caressing her face.

"I am hungry, Coralie," Bruce said.

Bruce walked to the bed and sat down, his legs spread apart and his elbows resting on his knees. Coralie wondered what it was like for him to crave blood. Was it like when she felt hungry for a bowl of cereal? She needed to know because humans were no longer at the top of the food chain.

Keep in mind that he can kill you in half a second, she told herself firmly.

"If I wanted to, I would have done it already. I wouldn't have gone through the trouble of marrying you," Bruce answered with an exhausted tone.

As Coralie walked to the dimming light switch to make the room brighter, she thought that she had yet to adapt to having someone capable of reading her mind.

When she turned around, she could see Bruce's dimples on each side of his mouth and his eyes, both in the shape of a feline. She wondered how he remained single for so long.

"Coralie, I need to ask something from you. Believe me, if there were any other way around it, I would," he stopped suddenly with a pained expression.

"Bruce?" Coralie said.

His body leaned forward, his arms entirely soft fell between his legs and then he tumbled onto the floor. Coralie rushed to him and tried to pick him off the floor. She slid her hands under his armpits and gently lifted him up. She might not have been a vampire expert, but she had read enough books to know what was wrong with him.

Coralie had to admit that she feared for her life, unaware of whether what she had read in novels was right. He was risking her life saving him, but then remembered he had done the same for her.

The leader of the four vampires who attacked her had made it clear that if Bruce lied about their relationship status, he would pay a stiff price.

Come on. You can do this, Coralie.

Sitting on the hardwood floor by the bed, Coralie spread her legs apart and held Bruce against her chest. His head was leaning back, and she brought her wrist to his mouth, but nothing happened.

Maybe he needs to smell the blood?

She reached into Bruce's right front pocket, but nothing. She slid her hand

into his left front pocket, but nothing. Slowly, Coralie moved her index on the side of his mouth and lifted his upper lip, like she had done when she was curious about her childhood dog's canines.

So sharp, so bestial, so sexy.

Coralie moved her finger against Bruce's right fang and pushed against the tip. She felt it go through her skin, and in the time it took for her to blink, she felt Bruce move. His body contracted in a very sudden way. She guessed instantly, scared of what happened. He then stared at Coralie's finger.

"It's me, Coralie! Your wife!" Coralie said.

She instantly caught Bruce's attention. His eyes squinted, his left hand was now against her cheek, and he moved closer to her.

"My wife?" Bruce asked.

"Yes, you're my husband, remember?" She slowly said as she saw him nod with a smirk, and she asked why he was smiling.

"You said you were my wife and called me your husband," Bruce said as his smile slowly spread over his face.

She stared into his eyes, as they were gradually turning red while the blue was fading. She could still see the tip of his fangs and discovered that she found the look irresistible as he moved his arms up to reach for a lock of her wild ginger hair that he twisted around his finger.

"So, you remember?" Coralie asked again to ensure he was still the same vampire she had met when he saved her life.

"Of course. I'm a hungry vampire. I don't have amnesia," Bruce replied, not upset but sarcastic, as if he was probably more irritable when starving, just as she would be.

CHAPTER 9

WHY DON'T YOU FEED ON ME

CORALIE HELD HIM AGAINST HER, AFRAID HE WOULD AGAIN LOSE consciousness. She felt his touch on her cheek as he turned to face her. His eyes were now entirely red. She feared for her safety, yet she knew he knew because a cool breeze was in her mind.

“I need you, Coralie,” Bruce said with a low whispering voice against her ear. She could feel him losing his strength as his body felt more substantial and more massive against her own.

“Why? Can’t you find another blood source?” She said softly.

“Do you wish me to?” Bruce asked.

It hit her like a brick wall. Never had she thought about how it would affect her if those words were spoken out loud. Heck, she had never thought about considering vampires were real. She moved her head to look into Bruce’s eyes, his forehead leaning against the mattress, unable to hold himself up.

“No,” Coralie answered, surprised she said it.

“Then, I need you,” Bruce replied.

She asked what she had to do if she needed just to let him sink his fangs into her neck. He quickly turned his head toward her and said that he would never have her first experience be on her neck. He explained further, saying that he wished to one night give her the pleasure she deserved.

“The neck is a very fragile part, and although I wanted my bite to be on your neck for the first time, I wasn’t expecting to be rejected as often as you did. So, the result is now that I’m starving,” Bruce explained.

“Why didn’t you feed on someone else?” Coralie managed to say, finding it strange to put those words one after the other.

“I wanted to give my wife a choice,” Bruce said. “Even if this marriage isn’t meant to be, I always promised myself that my wife would choose for me to feed on her solely or not.”

His eyes were slowly closing. Coralie could tell he was having a hard time keeping them open. His body was limp, and he couldn’t control himself straight. It was as if his strength was all gone. She stared at the darkest red his eyes had ever been and bit her lower lip.

Coralie had never thought Bruce would go as far as starving himself so he could give her a choice to be his food?

Was that even a compliment?

“Thank you for—” Coralie said but was cut short.

“Later, I need your wrist, please, I—” Bruce said.

Coralie gave him her wrist. Bruce sat with his legs straddling hers. She saw him reach for her wrist and quickly turn his eyes to her. She then felt his frosty presence, asking her to focus on him and let him inside her as if he had always belonged. She let him in, and it happened so naturally. It was as if he had always been there.

His fangs were already out, and she only saw the tips. When his lips touched her skin, she felt like a fire was ignited deep inside. Coralie had braced for the pain she was sure would happen. She was surprised instead with a feeling of euphoria. She stared at his mouth, his lips in hard contact with her skin. It felt like passionate kisses as his tongue swirled around, catching every drop of blood he could swallow.

His fingers crossed her own, and she slowly caressed each one. She knew he was asking for more when his eyes met hers, and she nodded. She felt his fangs digging more profoundly into her.

Suddenly, she surprised herself by biting her lower lip, feeling her skin overly sensitive to his every touch. She tried to memorize his every single move by heart. With her right hand, she reached for his shirt, pulling him closer to her own body.

“Thank you,” Bruce whispered before he kissed her wrist, now clear of all wounds.

“How did you—” Coralie asked but was cut short.

“I scratched my tongue and mixed my blood with yours to heal you. I would never hurt you,” Bruce said.

His words were all a whisper as he moved closer and pressed his lips beside hers. His left hand slowly caressed her face, and he kissed her again.

Coralie, still under the effect of Bruce's bite, breathed louder, and as she did so, her chest bulged. As she exhaled, she noticed a quick look from Bruce and then that arrogant smirk that she loved so much.

"I guess you enjoyed it?" Bruce asked with a smirk in the corner of his mouth that made his dimples carved in.

"Did you?" Coralie asked.

"More than I ever have before," Bruce said with a longing voice as Coralie felt compelled to reach for the button on his jeans to undress him but restrained herself.

He read her thoughts anyway.

"I know, Coralie. Imagine what it would be like for you and me?" He whispered just before he leaned in, and his perfectly curved lips softly met hers.

As he pressed harder against her own, she felt the tip of his tongue teasing her, and she slightly opened her mouth to let him in. Her fingers ran through his thick black hair, and she felt his arms sliding behind her back, holding her tighter against him. She freed her right hand and slid it under his shirt, coming in contact with his lower abdomen, hard as steel.

"Sir?"

From the corner of her eye, Coralie counted five people standing by the entrance to the bedroom. Coralie could barely look up, embarrassed by the situation, but Bruce angrily rectified the situation.

"Make your last words count," he growled angrily.

CHAPTER 10

WORDS CAN'T SAY WHAT LOVE CAN DO

CORALIE HAD HER BACK AGAINST THE BED WITH BRUCE STANDING ON HIS knees astride her legs. She stared at his muscular chest and perfectly sculpted arms from a lower point of view that gave him a heroic posture.

The look in his eyes was brutal and furious. His brows were low, and his lips tightly sealed. His hands closed in fists, and he asked his men what was so crucial that they all needed to rush into Coralie's bedroom.

"Sir, Lautaro is here with his men," the guard answered, looking at the ceiling.

Bruce stood up, and as he helped Coralie on her feet, he carefully caressed her shoulders, his hands rubbing against her sweater. He lifted her chin, kissed her passionately, and asked if she was okay. As she nodded, he took her left-hand, led her wrist out of her sweater and looked.

"I healed it right, I believe. Is it sensitive?" Bruce touched her skin with his fingers at the exact place where he had bitten her, but Coralie shook her head, only feeling a slight sting.

"It will go away in no time, *ma belle*," Bruce said.

Ma belle translated to 'my beautiful.' Coralie surmised that those were his words in French as he knew she was French Canadian but also a descendant of French royalty by her name and perhaps by her thoughts.

It seemed as if nobody else was in the room for a moment. Nobody in the world mattered but them. Coralie had never felt such a feeling before in her entire life. No one had ever put her first above anyone or anything else.

She saw Bruce paying attention to her wrist, her lips, and her hair, and she could tell by the look in his eyes as he gently kissed her that he genuinely felt something profound for her. Bruce could not fake the admiration in his

eyes when looking at her, and that's the moment she felt her cheeks warming up, and she heard the duke chuckle.

When Bruce turned his attention to the people in the room, although he tenderly let go of Coralie's hands, he roughly grabbed one of the guards by the collar in the bedroom doorway and forcefully pulled him forward.

"Never interrupt me when I'm with my wife! Is that understood?" Bruce said with a growl.

He violently pushed back the guard and pointed at all five safeguards with his index fingers.

"All of you! Interrupt me once again, and I'll have you impaled in front of the house!" Bruce shouted.

Impaled? Coralie stepped back and hit the bed's footboard, grabbing Bruce's attention again. She saw him go from mad to loving in no time, but his focus went back to his guards or whatever they were.

Although Coralie was thankful to be on his good side, she feared one night she might cross the line, and it would bring out that demon she had just seen who continued his threats while addressing his guards.

"If it would have been my donor, the warlord, instead of me, never would any of you have dared to disturb him. Next time, I dare you to test me, and I shall prove to you that I am just as ice cold as he is, and you precisely know what I speak," Bruce said with a stern voice.

Coralie had her arms wrapped around her, hugging herself. She had a tough time controlling the fear growing deep inside of her. She might not have known who the warlord was, but she had a growing sense that it could be the devil himself.

Her right hand now softly rubbed against the white gold cross around her neck. Her mother had given it to her for her twenty-fifth birthday seven years before that night. She prayed he wasn't the devil but could not be sure.

Bruce was the most attractive male she had ever seen in her life. His voice was enchanting, and his eyes were hypnotizing. Even though he was a vampire who could threaten to impale those who would dare disturb him, his donor was even more feared. Was she there to spawn the devil's child? Nonsense, vampires are undead. She was married to a corpse. On the other hand, she enjoyed greatly the movie *The Corpse Bride*.

"Now, all of you out! I need to speak with my wife alone!" Bruce shouted.

He claimed that Lautaro could wait momentarily as it was his house and

home. The guard whispered in his ear something Coralie couldn't hear.

"All right. We are following you," Bruce growled in response.

Was Bruce as important as he seemed to think he was? Coralie wondered what was going on as Bruce gently reached for her hand to keep her by his side as they walked toward the door, leaving the second floor and heading toward the main entrance.

The walls were silver-blue, as before, and Coralie noticed many paintings of forts, lighthouses, and mighty ships. She figured Bruce enjoyed the sea or the coastal life. Coralie saw a blue carpet descending the stairs as they approached the dark oak banister.

About to look around at the hall, barely remembering its appearance from her overwhelming experience that morning, she felt a soft and cool breeze in her head.

"We are about to meet with Lautaro. You know him as the leader of the vampires who attacked you. Do not worry about him. He will not do anything to you as you are now protected not only by me but by my donor as well. No one dares get in the warlord's way, and what I own or whom I want to defend, he grants me, always," Bruce said in her mind, emphasizing his donor sheltering her.

Why are you telling me this? She responded mentally, with a questioning look on her face.

"Because if I fail to protect you, I want you to know that the warlord will forever protect you. You will be moved to his mansion or have your own, whichever you desire," Bruce explained.

Coralie didn't understand. Three days ago, she was just a writer and blogger renting a summer house. Now, she was the wife of a vampire who seemed most likely to be the devil himself. Yet, he was scared of someone else who seemed to have a lot of influence on him and his decisions.

"Listen, remember that connection we shared upstairs when you kindly agreed to let me nourish myself on you?" Bruce said telepathically in a longing voice, and it awakened the same orgasmic feeling she had before. As she nodded, he added, *"Please, let me ask you one more favour for tonight."*

Coralie wondered if he wanted to display his ownership by sinking his teeth into her before the eyes of Lautaro and his guards to show that she was his wife when Bruce quickly tossed that idiotic idea away.

"No, what's the matter with you? You watch too much television," Bruce said with a chuckle.

Coralie laughed internally and listened to Bruce.

"I want you to act as if you care about me and want this marriage to occur as planned and not forced on you. It will sell the idea better," the duke asked of Coralie.

Coralie didn't think twice and immediately agreed. She squeezed Bruce's hand in hers and felt it being reciprocated. They were about to enter the boudoir, where Coralie saw the silhouette of the four vampires dressed in black suits. Bruce stopped before entering the room, and so did she, surprised by his sudden reaction.

"For what it's worth, I won't be acting. I do care about you. You might not remember every memory of those three nights, but I do. I still can taste the essence of each raw emotion that we both went through, and for that, I deeply want to make sure you are safe," Bruce said.

CHAPTER 11

I WILL FEED YOU YOUR OWN FLESH AND WATCH

THE THOUGHT FLOATED THROUGH HER HEAD, SENDING A WARM FEELING through her. His lips pressed on hers, and she kissed him back, wishing she could remember everything. It would be a long process, and she feared for her sanity the deeper she was falling for Bruce. The devil.

Is this part of the act?

"No," he whispered back to her aloud.

The room was vast, and while the walls everywhere else seemed to be painted cold grey, the boudoir's walls were painted eloquent sand. The ceiling, trim, window frames and sizeable imposing bay French windows were white, giving the room even more of a tall and wide impression.

A long beige vegan leather sofa was embellished with several throw pillows of sage green and greys. On either side of the sofa were French vintage boudoir chairs with the back and seat cushion in grey suede.

In the middle was an antique-looking old oak table with a vase full of brightly coloured flowers. Their scent gave the room a welcoming touch while the fire crackled and roared in the mural fireplace behind the vampires.

Music played softly in the background, and Coralie wondered where the sound came from. Then she noticed white little wireless speakers around the room, with another on the veranda. She recognized the name of her favourite country radio station. It made her smile and also rethink her devil theory.

"What are you smiling about, bloodbag?" Lautaro said with his adenoidal solid voice. He was staring at Coralie, who stood tall by Bruce's side.

Bruce let go of Coralie's hand and moved forward as if to try and keep her behind his back. He pushed Lautaro against his guards. Coralie now suspected they were also vampires, but Bruce used a display of strength she

had not seen.

"Say that again, and I'll tear your fangs out and wear them as a trophy around my neck," Bruce growled, his fangs out and his eyes turning deep red again.

Was he hungry again? Coralie wondered to herself.

Back in the real world, in Bruce's boudoir, Coralie witnessed Lautaro going head-to-head with Bruce, starting a very heated conversation. She noticed the three other vampires by Lautaro's side, dancing from leg to leg with their fists ready to fight and their fangs ready to bite.

Coralie somewhat felt outnumbered, but then she saw Ryan entering the room accompanied by two other guards and Sarah, who grinned when looking at Coralie. She suddenly felt a zap in her mind.

"She's a fucking bloodbag, Bruce! Do you know what my donor would've done to her after she hurt me like that? It fucking took me an entire day to heal!" Lautaro shouted in Bruce's face.

Lautaro was shorter than Bruce, so he had to reach up to shove a finger in his face.

"Do you know what mine would do if he knew you dared to challenge me?" Bruce replied with a low, growling voice.

"Fucking bloodbag," Lautaro said before spitting on the white rug as he turned around.

Before her eyes, Bruce violently took Lautaro by his black jacket and pushed him onto the wall. Coralie saw the guards on both sides ready to jump at each other's throats when Bruce's cold and growly voice was heard loud and clear.

"Insult or speak to my wife in that manner again, and I'll have your head mounted on my wall!" Bruce shouted.

Even when forced into a vulnerable position, Lautaro never feared to ask for Bruce's proof that Coralie was indeed his wife. She could hear his slurred voice trying to shout, but it came out as a whisper because Bruce's forearm pressed against his head.

"I believe I had given you three nights to make her your wife. That surely gave you enough time to ask her to submit to your will," Lautaro said.

His eyes fixed on Coralie, who recognized the bright caramel dot in the middle of his blue eyes, and something clicked in her mind.

"Bruce!" Coralie shouted to grab his attention, "Someone's trying to make me believe Lautaro implanted the command for me to panic in your presence.

I recognized the caramel dot in his eyes, but it's not him," Coralie spoke aloud.

She was confused, but sure, she was right.

"I know it wasn't him, but right this moment, someone is trying to make me believe he did," Coralie said.

Coralie saw Ryan walking forward, standing just one step before her. She noticed his frown and his angry look at the vampire as his lips tightened. He turned the accusing look toward Lautaro, believing he was orchestrating the confusion.

Coralie knew who was behind it, and she was trying to resist the mind control that Sarah was using. However, Sarah was also trying to convince Bruce that Lautaro was behind the mind control of his wife.

"I will have your head, Lautaro," Bruce snarled.

"I haven't done shit to your 'wife,' Bruce. I contacted our priest, and he confirmed your wedding. I only came here tonight to warn you that someone in your circle has betrayed you."

Lautaro's voice sounded mildly concerned and sparked doubts in Coralie's mind.

"Why would you tell me this, Lautaro?" Bruce asked with a roar, apparently not buying into the vampire's play.

"Because I, too, desire to have your head mounted on my wall. I want to take over your lands while your donor would be impaled outside my house. However, I want it to be by my hands and not one of your filthy, guard dogs. I don't want your death to be wasted. I want to personally drag you to hell and kill you as slowly as I can go. I have it all planned out, but this betrayal will ruin it. So, here I am, trying to convince you that what I say is true," Lautaro said with a sneer.

Bruce loosened his grip, and Coralie believed what Lautaro was saying. She saw doubts in Bruce's eyes, so she spoke up, and what followed only fed her fear about vampires of different houses meeting.

"I think what he's saying to be real," Coralie said.

"Yes, Bruce, listen to your bloodbag of a wife. Come on, be a good boy. Who's a good boy?" Lautaro sneered, which pushed her husband over the edge.

Bruce forcefully grabbed Lautaro by the throat and pushed him onto the ground before knocking his smile off his face with his fists. Coralie heard a loud crack on Lautaro's face as blood was splattering on the sofas and chairs.

For the first time, she witnessed Bruce plunge his fangs like a wolf into another's throat, much like a predator would. He was tearing the flesh apart, a slab of meat between his teeth before he spat it out.

Pounding on Lautaro's chest, each rib cracked one by one. For Bruce's final move, he threw him out of the window and shouted as loud as he could, his voice sounding more like a wolf's howl mixed with a growl than a vampire's voice.

"Have your fucking goons fetch you, bitch!" Bruce shouted.

Bruce turned to the other three vampires, blood dripping off his fists, ready to attack.

"Get out," Bruce growled.

CHAPTER 12

DON'T FEAR ME YOU CAN BITE ME, TOO

AN HOUR HAD COME AND GONE. WHILE SITTING ON THE BED, CORALIE WAS trying to erase that horrifying view of Bruce tearing Lautaro's neck apart. The image of spitting pieces out of his mouth, as if he was a wolf in the wild eating a deer. But she couldn't. It kept surfacing in her mind. Never had she thought Bruce was capable of such a shockingly barbaric act.

In complete darkness, with the moon as the only light source, Coralie crawled to the middle of the bed and held her knees to her chin. She looked to her left and waited for Bruce to walk in. She was almost hoping that he would change his mind and just set her free as she feared one night he would repeat this scene, only with her neck in his mouth.

"Never would I do such a thing to you, Coralie. Nothing you could ever do would make me want to hurt you," Bruce softly said to reassure her deep inside her thoughts.

Although Coralie wanted most to believe him, this terror in her mind would grow each time she saw that rock-hard look on his face while staring at someone he most despised. She opened her eyes and jumped in horror when she remembered all the blood dripping off Bruce's chest. When she heard his voice in her mind, she focused on his tone and disregarded the noise on the bedroom doorknob. She never heard him come in.

"I am so sorry. I didn't wish to scare you," Bruce said.

He walked to the other side of the bed, and the moonlight lit him like a spotlight was on him. Coralie saw the glow in his eyes, reminiscent of a wolf in the wild at night. Bloodstains covered the lower part of his face from his nose and ran down his squared jawline along his neck. The upper part of his grey shirt was now drenched in blood, the blood of someone who had dared

threaten his wife.

Coralie followed the bloodline down his shirt and looked at his hands, both stained red. She should have been terrified, and a part of her was, but his words somehow reminded her why he was covered in blood that was not his.

“He hurt you, and he hurt me. I couldn’t take it anymore, Coralie,” Bruce said, leaning forward as if to touch her face. “I...I know what you saw was monstrous, and I am so sorry you had to witness that part of me. But you asked me once to explain what was going on so you wouldn’t be scared anymore. Well, this is one part of the vampire that I am.”

Coralie let Bruce sit close by her side. She touched his face and moved closer to look into his eyes.

“They remind me of a wolf. I guess it is part of your vampire side?” Coralie whispered as she caressed the side of his face.

“Let’s say that I’m a very special vampire. While my donor made me one, when I was younger, I was bitten by a moonwolf, one unknown to the daylight people. They are a very ancient species of wolf. It caused me to have these eyes while other vampires don’t,” Bruce explained.

“That’s why Lautaro insulted you by referring to you like a dog,” Coralie said.

“Yes, and that’s also why my guards are special compared to other regular vampires. They were fed my blood, so it turned them into something quite different. But what’s important is that everyone is safe now,” Bruce said.

“You are a very kind being, Bruce,” Coralie said as she moved a lock of his hair away.

Looking at the blood that dripped on her fingers, she gently took his hand in hers and guided him to the bathroom, where she turned on the hot water in the shower for him.

She slid her hands beneath Bruce’s shirt, and as she slowly lifted the fabric up, she saw him raise his arms above his head. As she followed every curve on his torso, she wished he could erase that horrible image of his fangs brutally digging into the vampire’s throat, and she felt his breeze in her mind.

“Let me in...I will not erase it. I will gently fade it so you do not suffer through it,” Bruce asked.

Coralie refused.

“If I am to be your wife, I must know the real you and accept who you

are. That is why I am standing here with you,” she said.

Coralie’s hands were now on his belt buckle, and she loosened the belt and unbuttoned his jeans. Bruce’s arms rested on the side of his body, and she could feel his eyes on her.

At the moment that his right hand reached her hair, she felt a horrible throbbing pain on both sides of her temples. She stepped away, and Bruce asked if she was okay. She nodded and left him in the bathroom.

The room was bathed in the dark, and she slowly crawled onto the bed and rested her head against one of the pillows. She held her head with both hands. While her knees bent as if it would help her feel better. She grimaced, hoping for the headache to go away.

Flashes of blood splatter, a piece of torn flesh thrown across the room, eye contact with the one who shattered her life, and a marriage she had never agreed to. Finally, adding in the knowledge that vampires were real and roaming about, yes, that was enough for anyone to get a headache that would cause throbbing pain.

Then, to her surprise, everything went black, and she couldn’t see anymore. Coralie tried to rub her eyes, but nothing happened. She felt a presence in her head. She could hear a voice that felt quite familiar.

Coralie couldn’t focus on anything as her mind seemed tampered with, and she could not match the voice of someone she knew.

“Bruce!” Coralie found the strength to whisper out of pure fear as she tried to sit on the bed. Her eyes were entirely blind, and she had a headache so intense that it felt as if someone was playing whack-a-mole with her head.

CHAPTER 13

I'D PULL OUT MY EYES JUST TO SEE YOU

SHE TRIED TO CALM HERSELF AS SHE HEARD THE SHOWER ABRUPTLY STOP AND a heavy breeze coming from the bathroom, stopping by her side carrying a smell of fresh cedar wood. The presence took place on the bed, and she felt herself rise on the mattress and subtly lean forward toward her husband sitting by her side.

She felt Bruce's hands on her shoulders and heard his voice clearer than usual, as if her other senses were already compensating for her loss of sight despite knowing it wasn't true. She knew it was the adrenaline kicking in and having her on edge.

"I feel it. You are blind. I guess Lautaro was right," Bruce said, slightly frustrated.

"Please, do something!" Coralie begged, terrified.

She thought about what could happen if she stayed blind. With vampires being real and meaner than she had ever thought possible, how would she survive in the house?

Coralie's breathing quickened, and she started rocking herself back and forth, lost in her thoughts. They were becoming darker by the second, fearing that she would, in fact, become a vampire slave. Then, she felt a soft and cool breeze again in her mind.

"Hear me, Coralie. Your blindness is not real. You are not blind. Someone is playing with you, making you believe that you cannot see, but you can," Bruce said.

Nothing made sense. She could not see, and her world had been turned upside down. Coralie reached for Bruce's arms and asked for something she had never thought she would ask for. As her hands came in contact with his

body, still drying in the tempered air, she worked her way up to reach his face and found the strength to ask for his help.

"Bruce, would you...I never thought I'd say this, but would you give me your blood? You said it could heal most wounds. Could it heal me?" Coralie asked.

With her hands on his face, she felt Bruce nod. She lowered her head the moment he touched her waist to help her turn around on the bed so her back would rest against his chest, and she leaned back. Bruce's left arm stayed wrapped around her body, and she firmly held it with her hands, refusing to let go. He was the only person she could trust with her deepest fears of becoming blind in a world filled with paranormal creatures.

"How does it work?" Coralie asked, lifting her chin up in a reflex to see him better, but soon realized that it had been unnecessary.

"I will extract my fangs and bite into my wrist, then I will let my blood fall into your mouth. You must swallow it despite the taste or the fact that you might find this repulsive," Bruce explained.

She heard his flesh slowly tearing as his fangs dug into the skin. She then felt his wrist against her mouth. The liquid was warm and tasted like salt and iron as her tongue slowly licked his wound, getting as much of his blood in her as she could.

"Drink, don't be afraid," Bruce said, his voice almost like a whisper. He sounded reassuring and kind.

His grip on her waist tightened, and he lifted her up a little more. At that moment, she thought nothing would work, not feeling her sight coming back.

Suddenly, she could see a blur, and her sight was better as it became more focused. She felt so much stronger and completely rejuvenated. She grabbed his arm with her hands and held it tightly against her mouth.

"You're a hungry girl, aren't you?" Bruce said with a playful tone.

She licked his wrist more but then felt his skin closing. The wound had disappeared, and she could see now with a new, keener vision that the laceration had vanished and grown new flesh. She turned her head to face him and asked with a hastiness in her voice.

"Can I have some more?" Coralie asked.

Bruce's fingers slowly ran through her fiery hair with beautiful, untamed curls. Her messy bun was now falling down the side of her neck, and she leaned her head toward his hand to feel his palm against her cheek. He was smiling at her fondly, and she saw his lips parting slowly.

"I will give you more, but you need to know that vampire blood is very addictive. Because you are experimenting, I do not wish you to consume too much at once. All right, *ma belle*?" Bruce said.

She nodded, staring at him as he brought his wrist to his mouth. She could hear a sudden tear and saw him flinch before handing her his wrist. She held his arm loosely in her hands, and when her lips met his blood, she swirled her tongue around to grab everything she could. Then, the door to her bedroom opened quietly.

Bruce heard it, as well, just as he had heard her whisper his name earlier. His senses were much more developed than her own. Nevertheless, he didn't move or pay any attention to the intruder. She kept on licking his wound, hearing his voice whispering.

"Never mind the noise, *ma belle*," Bruce said.

Someone walked up the bedroom's corridor—a complete suite, in high heels. Coralie heard it clearly. The walk was languorous and gradual, and she knew it would be Sarah because she could recognize the presence in her mind. She was trying to penetrate Coralie's mind, but she didn't account for Bruce's strong presence in her blood.

Coralie kept her attention on the walk, coming closer. Once they entered the bedroom, the steps became louder with every move.

"You let her drink from you?" Sarah shouted out of anger.

Coralie let go of Bruce's arm so he could stare at Sarah with a grave look.

"You seem surprised to find her well, Sarah. Is there any particular reason for you to be standing, uninvited, in my wife's bedroom? Have you come to finish her off?" Bruce asked.

CHAPTER 14

I KISS YOU GOOD MORNING AND SWEET DREAMS

WITH BRUCE'S WORDS, IT ALL BECAME CLEAR. SARAH WAS BEHIND THE command. Sarah wanted Coralie to be terrified of Bruce. Even in the confusing moments when she watched Lautaro being restrained by Bruce, it was all Sarah. Lautaro had been telling the truth. He was not the violator. Coralie felt sick to her stomach and reached for Bruce's hand.

"I came to make sure she was all right after such a traumatizing experience," Sarah answered. Bruce was not buying it, and neither was Coralie.

"Lie to me once more, and I'll have your tongue cut out like the traitor you are," Bruce stated as if this was the proof he had been waiting for to prove Lautaro right. "I refused to believe he could be correct, but your behaviour had changed since Coralie became my wife. I was waiting for one mistake on your part, and here you are."

Bruce stood before Sarah, and his words were enough to raise Coralie's hair on the back of her neck. She watched him hold Sarah's wrists, keeping her hands away from him.

"Please, Bruce. We have shared so much together," Sarah said.

"And yet, you have betrayed me, thinking I wouldn't be able to put the pieces together with your telepathic skills that permit you to play with everyone's mind, including Coralie's, to a point. When I stepped in to erase your command word, I used my mindspelling ability to protect her. That's why you were unable to influence her thoughts anymore. But I didn't expect witchcraft from you to make her believe she was blind."

"Bruce, please," Sarah said, as Coralie suddenly saw terror in her eyes, as they were covered up with tears. She could see her trembling like a leaf.

“I have heard enough,” Bruce said.

Bruce grabbed his phone and pressed one button.

“I’m throwing Sarah out of my wife’s bedroom. Bring her to the basement,” Bruce ordered.

His face was as grave and hard as she had ever seen it when guards had come into her room earlier. It frightened her just a little bit to think where Sarah would be taken. For all she knew, it could be more than a simple basement in that house.

“Please! Don’t do this!” Sarah begged, but it was clear that Bruce had made up his mind when he walked her out the door, pushing her back to make her go faster.

“Please!” Sarah begged again.

“It’s too late. You should have thought twice before betraying me,” Bruce said.

The door closed on her pleas as the guards moved to take her away.

When Bruce returned to sit on the bed, Coralie crawled on all fours to him. She looked into his deep green hypnotizing eyes and saw they glowed like a wolf in the night. She thought about his paranormal side and tried to imagine how much of a beast he kept leashed. Inside, she saw a smile as he read her thoughts.

“The vampire that I am doesn’t stop at my fangs, Coralie,” Bruce said with a longing voice near Coralie’s ear. She felt his warm breath on her skin. “The bite I got when younger awakened a beast in me, too.”

A loud scream reached Coralie, who recognized Sarah’s voice. She was calling for Bruce, but he wouldn’t even look in her eyes. She tried to ignore the sound, but how could she enjoy an intimate moment with her husband when a woman was about to be brought to a basement she feared was a torture room?

“Our ways are different from yours. I have to admit. But it has to be that way because we are very different from you, with the unique abilities that permit us to control other beings. See what she had done to you? If I do not make an example out of her, others will follow, and it’ll only go downhill from there,” Bruce tried to explain with a soft and soothing voice as if to justify his ways.

“But will she be tortured or something?” Coralie asked as she moved away from Bruce, who quickly answered while bringing her head closer to his own.

“How about I promise you she will only be held in the basement for now?” Bruce asked.

“What about later?” Coralie said.

“For now,” Bruce ended firmly.

Suddenly, she had a flashback. Blood splattered everywhere, a piece of torn flesh was thrown across the room, and Bruce’s mouth bathed in the red liquid that he had himself claimed as a spoil of war from Lautaro. His words surfaced once again in her mind: Interrupt me once again, and I’ll have you impaled before my house!

“Coralie?” Bruce said with a low but worried voice.

She backed away. She couldn’t move forward, knowing that Bruce could be able to tear her to pieces in a vampire second. He never moved. Her eyes might have watered up, but she could visibly see that Bruce had no intention of moving even though in the distance, from the corner of her eye, Coralie could see the first light of dawn.

“I understand that you are afraid of what I can do, but I want you to know that what I do to scare my enemies away or keep my house in order, I do to protect those I love and care for the most. Maybe it was the way I was taught to do things or by whom I was raised. But, in the paranormal world, you eat or are eaten. There is no live and let live. You take, or you’ll be taken,” Bruce said soothingly.

Suddenly, it all became clear to Coralie as if, finally, after three nights, she could read Bruce’s story on how he decided to save her and why.

“That’s why you took me,” Coralie said in a gasp.

“Yes,” Bruce answered with a ghostly voice as if he remembered a tragic moment in his past. Coralie wondered about what the early years as a vampire were like for him.

“You wanted to save me,” Coralie added.

“Yes,” Bruce answered.

“Why?” Coralie asked, anxious to know why Bruce jumped at the opportunity to save her despite its danger. When Bruce’s ghostly voice spoke, she knew she had been fortunate to have been saved by someone like him.

“Because I was saved once,” Bruce replied.

Her fear suddenly subsided. It might not have gone entirely, but for the moment, Bruce could help Coralie to bed and kiss her forehead good morning. His warmth enveloped her body and left her in a dreamy state. She was hoping that the sun would soon go away.

“I will be back at dusk, *ma belle*,” Bruce whispered with a smile as he pressed his lips against hers.

She ran her fingers through his hair and closed on his neck to hold him in place, and she heard him chuckle as he moved his lips to speak.

“I have to go...I will be back at dusk. I promise,” Bruce said.

Just like that, Mr. Blackwood, her husband, vanished.

CHAPTER 15

THE COLONIAL HOUSE

CORALIE CUT HERSELF SOME FRESH APPLE SLICES, ADDED A FEW GRAPES INTO a small bowl of vanilla yogurt, and added some granola. She poured herself a glass of milk and sat at the silver granite kitchen island.

The bistro chairs were oak, while the chair backs and seat cushions were sage green with brown tree designs. In front of her was a carved-in sink, and beside that was a wooden stand to hold bananas.

The kitchen was massive, just like all the other rooms in the house. The walls and ceilings were pure white, and even the wood cabinets were painted the same light colour. The countertops formed an L-shape around the back and side walls, with stainless steel appliances on her right.

By the double stove was a glass vase with wildflowers, and the microwave was hidden in a white wooden compartment attached to the cabinets. Even the dishwasher was hidden behind a white cabinet door by the sink, where three tall guillotine windows displayed the magnificent trees leading to the private lake.

Above her head, Coralie noticed an elegant vintage chandelier made of cast iron. She looked around and wondered why a vampire would require such a vast kitchen when she heard noises coming from the stairs. Two people entered the kitchen and greeted her with big smiles and hellos.

“My name’s Leeann. You are?” A blonde girl asked with a bright smile on her face.

Coralie was about to answer with a smile of her own but was cut short.

“She’s Mrs. Blackwood,” a young man answered by the girl’s ear.

He had a judgmental look in his eyes as he stared at Coralie, mostly from her chest to her head.

“Oh, let’s leave her alone, then,” Leeann said and sounded slightly disappointed.

Because Coralie was Bruce’s wife, she was to be treated with respect, which had her question their behaviour. The two friends ignored her from that point on and opened the refrigerator to grab themselves glasses of orange juice, preparing their breakfast around her.

Soon after, toast popped up, and jars of peanut butter, marmalade, and chocolate spread open, as other people arrived, the kitchen quickly became a mess.

People seemed to act differently around her. They didn’t seem as compassionate as they were the other day. She had a nervous breakdown. Coralie was an introverted woman. An author and blogger by choice, she lived a solitary and quiet life.

Although she was thankful the whole cohort went to sit down in the dining area, leaving her alone at the kitchen island, she wondered why their behaviour had changed so radically when she hadn’t seen them since the morning before.

Sarah, whatever you do will not work if you can hear me. I am not going anywhere.

Some would have said Coralie was paranoid, but her job had helped her develop a very observant eye for depicting human behaviour. People don’t change that drastically in such a short amount of time. Those people were very hurt to see her cry the morning before, and now they were deliberately ignoring her. Something wasn’t right. She could feel it.

When Coralie finished eating, she rinsed her bowl and glass and put them in the dishwasher. She could hear people leaving the dining area and walking outside. She decided she couldn’t stand seeing the messy kitchen, so she cleaned up. Coralie put away all the jars and found a rag to clean the countertops. Once she grabbed the cohort’s dishes, she heard footsteps entering the kitchen. It was Sarah.

“Learning your place, I see?” Sarah sneered at her from the doorway.

“You’re welcome,” Coralie answered, knowing it might have been her compassion that had Sarah released from the basement.

Coralie watched Sarah grab herself a bottle of water. She grabbed an apple for herself, never letting Sarah out of sight. She held it in her mouth while putting the dishes away.

“Keep eating. Maybe Bruce will throw you out of the house, and I’ll have

him back,” Sarah said.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but the way I see it, I should keep eating because, to me, it seems as if he got fed up hitting his fangs on your bones,” Coralie said, satisfied to have a sarcastic comeback.

Sarah’s eyes widened as she frowned, and her mouth opened in anger. There was nothing Coralie had not heard before on HBO. She didn’t expect a punch Sarah was about to throw at her. Coralie grabbed her hand and flipped her arm, forcing her down.

“Do that again, and next time, I won’t ask Bruce not to make an example out of you,” Coralie growled.

Sarah was held on the ceramic floor while Coralie heard other footsteps coming in. It should’ve sounded comforting and kind, yet Lautaro’s glance at him from the night before prevented her from opening up to Ryan. She now knew that Ryan was in the process of becoming a paranormal being, being fed on Bruce’s blood.

“Ryan?” Coralie said as she looked over her shoulder.

“Yes, it’s me,” he smiled as he walked toward her, his hands in his pockets.

Coralie could tell Ryan wished to approach her and maybe even take her hand, but his role in the house forbade him from doing so. Coralie wanted to talk about what the title of Mrs. Blackwood represented to Bruce because she couldn’t stand being treated so coldly by other people. Especially those such as Ryan, as she needed comfort and companionship.

CHAPTER 16

A MYSTERY IS AFOOT

AS SARAH STOOD UP, CORALIE SAW RYAN GRAB HER BY THE ARM AND PULL her toward him. He whispered something through his teeth and then pushed her away. Sarah's hair was a mess. She fixed her short summer dress, and as she left the kitchen, Coralie asked Ryan what Sarah's problem was.

Ryan explained that although Bruce wished her to go, she had many things in the house, having lived there for the past few years. Coralie understood what Ryan was trying to explain to her.

"Judging by what I understand, she was Bruce's prime giver, which means she was his sole source of nourishment. Is that correct?" Coralie asked.

"Yes, but now that you have agreed to be his source, Sarah becomes obsolete. Not to mention what she has done to you and how she betrayed Bruce...I mean, Mr. Blackwood," Ryan added as he watched Sarah walking away.

Ryan then showed Coralie around the house. She noticed many vintage frames and even a white grand piano placed against a corner of a second boudoir on the other side of the room. It was right where the incident occurred when she'd seen Bruce in quite a different light. She walked past the room with Ryan by her side, who led her outside to see the yard. He explained that Mr. Blackwood did not want Coralie to feel captive inside her new home.

The sky was clear, and the sun's warm rays shone down on her. She heard Ryan say that vampires most enjoyed smelling the daylight wind on the skin and that they could even sometimes feel the warmth the sun left behind.

Coralie asked why he would know such a thing, and he mentioned having

lived with vampires for many years as a prime giver but had not been as lucky as Sarah. She had lived in luxury and had been very well cared for by Bruce.

Coralie removed her shoes and walked on the grass, enjoying the warm day. She walked as far as she could from the front entrance, but Ryan asked her not to go too far. She mentioned only wanting to see the building from the outside.

Feeling her feet in the thick, healthy, deep green grass, she twirled around and looked at the sky above her head as she walked. It was sapphire blue, with fluffy white clouds passing by slowly. The sun's rays left a warm feeling on her face as its warmth was blown over her by a warm breeze.

Coralie walked farther, constantly feeling Ryan's eyes watching her from behind. She didn't want to pay attention to him, nor did she wish to think about how her life had taken a drastic turn. The only thing she desired the most was to feel free. Nature could provide that sensation, and so she enjoyed the view of the tall mature trees until she turned around and was amazed by the view of the home Mr. Blackwood owned.

It was the type of house Coralie had always wished to acquire but never could, as it was not common where she lived. In the province of Québec, those houses were scarce, if not entirely nonexistent. The architecture differed from country to country, even when you were the northern neighbour.

The colonial house had been renovated in a very tasteful and respectful way over the years and was a full three stories high. The outside was done in white vinyl, and every rectangular French window was embellished with black shutters.

While looking at the house from the front, it seemed as if it had been separated into two sections as the middle front part was more forward with a wide entrance. Four imposing white columns supported a porch with a black roof. In its center was a high redwood door, highlighted by a lantern above and two expansive French windows on both sides. Above the porch, three tall, shuttered French windows were perfectly aligned. Above it was a triangular structure with a decorative French oval window.

The back part of the house was just as romantic, and just like the front, the roofing was triangular in black shingles. Two dormer windows on either side of the advanced center gave the house a charming look. A brick chimney resided on the right side of the home, and below that was an additional block

attached to the home, all in white with French windows. It seemed to be the veranda that linked to the boudoir she had seen the night before.

All around the house were bright green shrubs and flower bushes. There was a path of different grey stones leading to the entrance. Trees surrounded the house, making it seem secluded from any neighbours. Returning, she finally saw the lake and walked to the wooden deck.

She spent the rest of the day admiring the water and listening to the sound of nature. Although there were human laughs in the background, she quickly shut out the sound to listen only to what nature could give her: peace and quiet.

"*Ma belle?*" Bruce said.

The sun was going down behind the trees in the distance. His voice was now next to her ears as his arms slowly held her tight against his chest. She never thought it would be possible to fall for someone so fast.

"It is normal for us," Bruce explained. "We have bonded. I am in you, and you in me. By exchanging a part of ourselves, we finally connected, and because of that, our attraction is intensified."

Coralie asked if that would have happened with any other person he would have decided to save, but Bruce explained that her appearance and unique personality helped to make the bonding easier.

She gave that some thought, although she was now his wife, and he was the most beautiful male she had ever seen. It was as though she had walked out of a dream.

"Your eyes are red again. You are hungry," Coralie asked.

She was about to hold out her wrist, but he gently moved it away with his hand and shook his head.

"No, I'm not," Bruce said.

CHAPTER 17

THERE'S A PAINTING HUNG ON THE WALL

CORALIE WATCHED BRUCE AS HE STOOD UP. HE HELPED HER ON HER FEET, and they began walking toward the patio entrance of the grand house. Her hand in his, she wondered why he was taking her away, but when they crossed the kitchen to the dining area, everyone stood up and looked down except the guards.

Coralie deducted that something might have happened with the human giver crowd. Once she and Bruce were by the stairs, he addressed the givers and spoke sternly to all who were present.

"I do not care if someone is again tampering with all of your minds. It was brought to my attention that my wife cleaned up after you. It is unacceptable and will not go unpunished. From this point on, Sarah is to be held in the basement. You are all responsible for your actions. Is this understood?" Bruce said.

Everyone nodded, terrified, as Coralie and Bruce left the kitchen and walked toward the staircase.

"It's okay, Bruce. I mean, I have two hands and legs. Before meeting you, I could function and run a whole house myself. It's cleaning, not cold fusion," Coralie smiled at him, attempting to diffuse his anger.

"Don't use that sarcasm with me. I know perfectly well that you are more than capable of taking care of yourself. You managed to have Lautaro agonizing for an entire day and having him whine about it to his donor. You did that all by yourself," Bruce said with a slight grin, but then he changed his tone and calmly explained. "But now you are my wife. I know it'll be hard for you to understand, but in the moonworld world, we have ranks. You are one of the highest-ranking women now. You are Mrs. Blackwood and a duchess.

They are givers to my vampires and lovers of my guards."

He was right. Coralie had a tough time understanding what was going on. She was no royal woman. Coralie came from a typical family. She grew up on a hobby farm in a small country town way north across the borders. She would only come to North Carolina in the summer before returning to her native land.

"The paranormal is ruled by aristocracy?" Coralie asked, somewhat confused about how the paranormal beings ruled over their world in the new millennium.

"Yes and no. It doesn't matter what vampire house one comes from. Titles are given according to the donor and what one used to have as a title in daylight. My donor and maker is a warlord. Therefore, I was given the title of duke. It's a bit complicated, but all you need to know is that you don't do the dishes around here, and you don't clean after other people," he offered with gentle firmness.

Bruce was still holding her hand from the front as she followed him from behind, looking at his black fitted tank top and working her way down with her eyes. His curvy behind perfectly filled his denim jeans, and Coralie realized she wouldn't mind at least taking care of him.

"What if I want to clean up after you?" She asked with a slight smirk.

"That could be arranged," Bruce replied with his arrogant grin as he looked over his shoulder.

Coralie took a moment to look around and saw the silver-blue walls with old antique paintings. One, in particular, caught her attention not only because of the bright carved gold framing but also because of the man who was portrayed with so many details.

The man in the painting had long, black, wavy hair, and his deep blue eyes seemed to be staring back at her with a vivid passion. He wore a red, royal suit dating around the fifteenth century, with gold embroidery and a fur cape. The man had a full black beard, but it didn't detract from his royal, distinguished status.

In fact, Coralie thought the painting reflected absolute power in an incredibly raw, manly beauty. She asked shyly, still under the man's charm in the old oil painting.

"Who is this?" Coralie asked.

She found it hard to free her eyes from it, but when she heard Bruce's answer, she knew she would have dropped anything she had been holding.

“Vladislav Basarab Tepeş,” Bruce said.

"Who?" Coralie asked as she was not about to believe what Bruce just said.

"Vlad The Impaler. He is my donor," Bruce added.

Coralie let go of Bruce's hand as her jaw dropped.

CHAPTER 18

I CAN BE YOUR KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOUR IF YOU WANT

BRUCE CONFESSED THAT IT WAS VLADISLAV WHO HAD SAVED HIS LIFE. HE WAS about to be burned at the stake for something he hadn't done. He said that many people back then, just like today, were afraid of what was different. He wouldn't be accepted as part of their community. His parents were one the lasts of their kind until he was born and gave hope to a couple that was about to be forgotten into legend.

“Not too long after I turned twelve, people barged into our house and killed my parents. I was brought to a dungeon and then condemned to die in flames. I was stabbed and whipped. I was stoned with silver-covered rocks. I was starved and dehydrated. People were throwing rotten food at me, and when I was about to die, he showed up and saved me from Lancashire, England, it doesn't exist anymore. In its defence, England wasn't what it is today,” Bruce said as he recalled his past.

Bruce, rubbing the back of Coralie's hands with his thumbs, had his head leaning forward as he described his last memories as a breather, like he needed comfort.

“My donor brought me to Romania and raised me as his own. Most breathers from his lands believe he exists, you know. They love him. He's a hero to them, and growing up, I wished I'd become like him. He taught me all that I know, and so I try to rule as he does,” Bruce explained.

They sat on the edge of the staircase, Bruce's head leaning against Coralie, who noticed his eyes were slowly turning redder by the second.

“When I turned thirty-two, I returned from an encounter with another creature. I had been poisoned during the attack. No vampire blood could heal me from that poison, but my donor, just like me, is unique. Sadly, I was too

far gone, and my abilities were not strong enough to save me. Vlad took it upon himself to turn me into a vampire to save my life,” Bruce said.

“You keep saying that you are unique and mentioned that your parents were part of the last ones of their kind. Who, or more precisely, what are you?” Coralie asked.

“I was born a werewolf but was bitten by a moonwolf when I was nine, and that made me a lycanthrope. When I was saved by my donor, I turned into a hybrid. Because his blood was too strong in me, it suppressed most of my lycanthrope abilities. That’s why I call myself a vampire,” Bruce said.

“That’s why you need blood to survive?” Coralie asked, running her fingers through Bruce’s thick black hair as he rested his head on her shoulder.

“Yes. Now you know why some other vampires try to insult me with canine references,” Bruce added.

Bruce confessed that for him not to be referred to as a werewolf because of a feud that started ages ago between the two species, Vladislav requested that Bruce change his name and adopt his. He never did, even though that meant he would forever be called the oldest knight of the ancient Order of Malta. His family had been a part of the order for centuries.

The Order of Malta was born in the early twelfth century and was also known as the Knight Hospitaller for its devotion to helping people and building a hospital in Jerusalem in the Crusade era. As with any other society, it had a dark side, and the people of the night, the moonpeople, were taking sides.

While the vampires allied with the Knights Templar, the werewolves joined the Order of Malta. They tried to help those in need and were ordered to defend humans day and night. Long story short, the werewolves were the humans’ last line of defence since the beginning of the Crusades. He also explained that lycanthropes were those bitten by moonwolves, and the werewolves were bitten by lycanthropes.

“My donor tried to convince me to change my name to his to save the last lycanthropes of the Malta order so that I could survive. Vampires are very territorial, so werewolves were used as knights in most brotherhoods. This was because we were the only ones strong enough to fight vampires and kill them. For that, werewolves and lycanthropes were raised as knights and were hunted to extinction later on. They missed many of us, and one of them is me,” Bruce explained.

“Was?” Coralie asked. After all, he was sitting right beside her.

“Yes, I told you, once I was reborn a vampire, I lost most of my lycanthrope abilities. I’m not a lycan anymore, Coralie. I’m a sort of ‘lycanpire.’”

Coralie had her left hand resting on Bruce’s chest. She looked at her wedding band, and as she felt his kiss near her ear, she moved away to make Bruce’s red eyes look deep into hers and asked him a question.

“So, my name is truly Coralie Blackwood and not Tepeş?” Coralie asked.

“Would it matter?” Bruce asked with a frown.

“Not as long as you wear the same name as me,” Coralie said.

Bruce wrapped his arms around her, and as she felt his nose digging into her hair, she wondered how much of a moonwolf he had left in him. She felt his hand grabbing hers to help her up the stairs.

Coralie noticed they were not on the usual second floor of the house but on the third. Having been too captivated by Bruce’s stories, she had lost track of where she was. They stood in front of an ancient wooden door covered in silver.

“Where are we?” She asked.

“My bedroom,” Bruce answered, pulling on a black leather glove before opening the door to let Coralie in.

The room was the biggest she had ever seen, with a fireplace surrounded by stones in the right inferior corner. Three rectangular French windows were on the opposite wall from her and opened to a balcony that skirted the back of the house. The walls were navy blue while the curtains were white tightly rolled-up blinds hung from the superior corner of each window.

The maple hardwood floor seemed to have a very rustic polish, and the colonial furniture embellished the room with carvings in the wood. The king-sized bed faced the mural fireplace and highlighted the room with its white and blue colours and many decorative pillows.

Coralie moved toward the bed, and when she turned around, near the adjacent wall, there were two vintage chairs with dark blue cushions and a Cleopatra chair in the colours of cream and gold. The furniture matched items she’d only seen in her dreams. She walked to the Cleopatra chair and admired it, barely wanting to touch it as she could tell it was old, yet it was not worn at all.

CHAPTER 19

I WANT TO MAKE LOVE TO YOU LIKE A VAMPIRE

“THIS IS ALL YOURS. SIT,” BRUCE SAID, POINTING AT THE CLEOPATRA CHAIR while removing the black leather gloves.

Coralie suddenly felt uncomfortable in Bruce’s bedroom. It seemed like a private place for him, and she thought he never shared his personal space with anyone. Coralie might have loved the chair, but it was not enough to make her feel comfortable.

She heard Bruce telling her to sit again and felt a gentle push propelled her into the chair. As she settled into the chair, she noticed the smirk and a bit of his arrogance came through. When she turned around, Bruce had a broad smile on his face.

With one knee on the Cleopatra chair, he took off his tank top but left his wolf claw chain on and leaned forward. Coralie had her back against the arm of the chair, and the pillow kept her back arched. She looked at Bruce with hands on her knees. He was gently spreading them apart, trying to see if she wanted him just as much as he wanted her.

“I can’t hold back much longer, *ma belle*,” Bruce said with a voice Coralie knew was filled with anticipation and excitement.

Coralie handed him her wrist, and Bruce seemed craving something different. Coralie’s legs were spread apart just enough so he could hold himself right next to her body. His warmth increased all around her until she felt like a warm breeze caressing every part of her body.

“I’m not hungry,” Bruce whispered right next to her ear. “There are three reasons why a vampire’s eyes turn red. One, he is hungry. Two, he is angry. Third, he is aroused. Let me give you a hint.”

With a tight grip on her thigh, Bruce held Coralie’s right leg firmly

against him as he lowered himself to lie on top of her. She felt his manhood swollen against her, big and hard. When Bruce's eyes met hers, she quickly lowered her own to stare at his mouth. It was slightly open, with only the tips of his fangs showing as he approached her to kiss her once.

"Just kissing you isn't satisfying anymore," Bruce whispered.

His mouth opened wider, and he kissed her more firmly. While his tongue was tempting her. He found his way in once she parted her lips and danced with her own. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she held him closer as his kiss slowly moved from her mouth to her jaw and then down her neck in a more confident way. He lifted himself up just enough to unzip her hoodie.

"Let me," Bruce said.

Bruce was gone, his heat vanished, and she felt a gust of wind faster than her eyes could see. Suddenly, the only clothes left on her were her white cotton panties and sports bra. Coralie suddenly needed to cover herself, but a blurred silhouette appeared and held her arms apart above her head. The body lowered onto her own, and she recognized his arrogant grin.

"Let's make it all about you, Mrs. Blackwood," Bruce said with a longing, seductive voice.

"As you wish, Mr. Blackwood," Coralie replied, as she was enjoying being at Bruce's mercy.

"Say it again," he begged with his silvery voice.

As Coralie repeated his name, she felt his hand slowly going southward, caressing the soft and delicate skin inside her thigh. He moved to her crotch, sliding one finger underneath the fabric and rubbing against her nude skin.

She wanted him. Coralie felt it deep within as a fire ignited. She could barely stand his touch as the back of one of his fingers rubbed against her. She bit her lower lip, and her breathing quickened. He slid the tip of his finger inside and met her clitoris.

"Already? Should I slow down even more? I haven't started yet," Bruce said.

Coralie could barely keep her eyes open. She felt two of his fingers smoothly sliding inside her in a languid rhythm that made her pelvis rock back and forth to feel him more profound, but he stopped, wanting to torture her a while longer. When his fingers slowly came out, she felt one languorously pushing against her, but not enough to slide in. When she felt his warm breath caressing her skin.

"May I?" He longingly asked.

Her eyes opened, and she turned her head toward him with a bit of fear. He slid his fingers inside to have her at his mercy, and her nails were digging into his back. She saw his eyes glow in the dimmed light of the room like a moonwolf. Undoubtedly, the beast was still in him, leaving a flush sensation behind.

"You will enjoy it as much as me, I promise," he said, slowly moving his hand from her.

Bruce removed her bra slowly. He then lowered his hands to remove her last piece of clothing. He mentioned how much he loved her fair skin caressed with freckles making her just as unique as he was. He loved her hourglass figure and how shorter than him she was.

"Everything about you is so perfect. From your wild curly ginger hair to the tip of your little mouse nose and rosebud lips. I'm addicted to looking at you. I'm all yours," Bruce added, letting Coralie undress him without any resistance.

She tried her best to keep her eyes above Bruce's belt, but once he gave her permission to look down, she couldn't resist. It was as she had dreamed: perfect, big, and hard. She could not wait to feel his skin against her. She looked up, and their eyes locked.

"Now, where were we?" Bruce whispered as he slowly came closer to Coralie. As his body settled upon her own, she exposed her neck and heard him subtly chuckle.

"As you wish," Bruce said.

Quickly, Coralie felt something as soft and slick as porcelain against her flesh. It pressed harder and harder until she felt her skin give in to the pressure. Her thoughts quickly roamed to the memory of the night before, but Bruce pushed his pelvis against her.

At that moment, she felt him from the inside, and she was reaching her crown of excitement. He dug his fingers into her thighs and moved harder. A cascade of moans followed louder and louder as if he instinctively knew exactly what she wanted.

She felt her fingernails going through Bruce's back, tearing his flesh apart as she whispered for him to bite her harder. His up and down movements, rocking her in a desirable rhythm, left her eyes to roll back. She moved one of her hands up, holding on to his thick black hair, wanting him to be as close as possible.

"Harder," Coralie begged in a whisper.

Bruce moved his head from her neck. She saw his fangs scratching his tongue from side to side and as his blood submerged.

"As you wish," he said.

Coralie lifted her head and, with her hands, pulled him closer. His lips locked on hers, and she moved her tongue in to grab every single drop of him. About to push the last cry against Bruce's mouth, and feeling a fire was about to burst out from her, she moved her legs around him and opened her mouth to breathe louder.

She heard his growl, and as both contracted their muscles, a moment of pure ecstasy took over their minds in harmony, only to relax a vampire second later. Their skin was becoming increasingly sensitive with every touch.

Gently, Bruce pulled out of her, trying to make every single second last an eternity in an overly desirable way. As he lay upon her, both his arms sliding beneath and holding her as firmly as he could. She wrapped him in her arms and said,

"You have me addicted to you," Coralie said, to her surprise.

"So do you," Bruce answered. "You are perfect."

Bruce gently moved away and sat against the back of the Cleopatra chair. Coralie moved against him, and her fingers reached for his wolf claw pendant. Before caressing his hairless chest, she noticed his darker tan and asked how he could be so bronzed compared to the others. He explained that his lycanthrope genes permitted him to walk in the sun without being affected by the ultraviolet rays.

"I do it in moderation, though, because I still have to fool vampires into believing I am one of them more than anything else. They believe I'm no longer a threat because I am one of the last lycanthrope knights. They don't know I can walk in the sun, and it has to stay that way for reasons I'm sure you understand," Bruce said.

Coralie felt Bruce's fingers playing with her hair, moving a lock around. It slowly made her close her eyes, listening to his voice telling the story about Lautaro and how he came to hate Bruce.

"Vampires believe only in the purity of their blood. Hybrids are considered abominations. When my donor took me in, it was kept a secret that I was a lycanthrope knight. But once I was turned and decided to keep my name, it rapidly spread, and because Lautaro's donor is one of my donor's oldest enemies, Matthias Corvinus, he swore to kill me," Bruce explained.

"So, he will never stop chasing you because you were born a lycan knight?" Coralie questioned.

"Partially. See, by adopting me, my donor protected me, and it gave him the idea to start a new werewolf bloodline. We had to wait for decades until biotechnology would be at its peak to succeed. They were able to part my blood and extract that one gene that made me a lycanthrope—" Bruce said but was cut short.

"Your guards in bright daylight...their eyes. Lautaro knows about this," Coralie whispered as Bruce nodded.

Bruce walked over to a small desk next to the Cleopatra chair while Coralie got redressed. Bruce returned to her with a piece of paper and a password written on it.

"If you ever need to go into my things or look for something, use my password. It'll give you access to everything I have, from my computer to my bank account," Bruce said.

Coralie took it in her hands. His password might have been a little more complicated than she thought it should've been, but with her eidetic memory, there was no image or significant chain of symbols that she would forget.

"Will I soon be free?" She asked with a hint of confusion in her voice.

"You are free, Coralie. You'll be safe as soon as Sarah's sentence is given tomorrow night. However, I must say, as you know, I suspect someone else is involved in her scheme. You might have to stay longer, so I want you to feel comfortable and enjoy yourself," Bruce said as he kneeled before Coralie and leaned toward her to graze his teeth against her earlobe.

"I won't be your wife soon?" Coralie managed to say, fighting the desire to reach for his lips.

"If you wish not to be," His voice remained neutral, but there was a slight tremor behind it.

When Coralie was about to put down the paper with his password, she felt a bottle big enough to fit in her hand yet small enough that once her fingers closed on it, it held in her palm. She glanced at it and realized it was blood.

"If you ever are wounded or need to feel even more sexual. You now experience the true effect of what runs into my veins. Take a few drops, and it'll heal you or raise your libido," Bruce said.

"Are you planning on leaving?" Coralie asked hastily. She was afraid of losing the immortal source of youth but also the creature she found herself

falling for at a rapid pace.

"No, but you are rather clear on wanting to be freed of me, so consider it a farewell gift," Bruce answered, his gaze upon hers.

"I don't know if I want to be free anymore," she said, looking deep into his eyes.

"Good, because I don't know if I wish you to be," Bruce replied.

CHAPTER 20

THREE WEREWOLVES AND ONE WOMAN, MINUS ONE LYCANPIRE

THE LATE MORNING THAT FOLLOWED, CORALIE WOKE UP IN BRUCE'S SHEETS, covered in his scent. Now that she knew he didn't have to go anywhere, she expected to see him by her side as they had fallen asleep in each other's arms. She remembered closing her eyes, falling asleep to her husband murmuring that maybe he was meant to be hers and she his.

"I've never opened up to anyone like this, and honestly, I never thought of falling for you. But when you said yes to me when we signed our names as husband and wife, I felt something. I knew I wasn't just there that night to save you, but for you to save me too," Bruce said.

Coralie remembered Bruce saying those words with a low, sleepy voice as the first change of colours in the sky awoke. She could still feel him digging his nose into her hair and smelling her perfume. That early morning, Coralie fell asleep on her side, snuggled up against Bruce's chest. He wrapped his arms around her as he held her close and gave her a goodnight kiss.

She turned over with a smile, but there was nothing where Bruce's body should have been. She passed her hand over the sheet, still sensing his warmth, and brought his pillow near her face to smell his scent, which was a mix of cedar and bergamot.

She missed him.

Bruce had warned her about the vampire effect. The closer they became to each other, the more addicted to one another they would get. She could feel it deep within her veins.

She craved him.

Coralie could hear the water hitting the ceramic floor in the bathroom on

the left side of the bed across the walk-in closet. Coralie thought maybe Bruce had left the door open, so she decided to wish him a good morning and started walking toward the wardrobe. She noticed that her personal effects had been moved to his bedroom since they would now share the living space.

If I wish to stay Mrs. Blackwood, who am I kidding? Of course, I do, she chuckled. *I do.*

She pushed on the half-closed door that opened to a vast rectangular room painted in very pale sea green. The tiles were light grey with a design of lightly darker cracks on them, and they covered the back and sidewalls where the mural shower was, with a glass door blocking the view of an intruder walking in.

On the opposite wall was a double vanity and cabinets on both sides reaching the white ceiling with built-in lighting. Besides the vanity was the toilet, and standing before Coralie was a white freestanding, flat-bottom reversible drain tub placed before a large French window. It had a frosty bottom to hide the nudity of the person, even on the third floor of the house.

Looking to her right where the shower was, she was about to take her clothes off, but she noticed no one was there. The water was still running, and the glass was covered in steam. Looking to the ground, she saw a pile of towels scattered all around, and there were traces of blood leading to the window facing the tub.

“It’s open. It should not be open at all,” Coralie frowned.

Coralie walked to the wide-open window and saw branches broken by a fall or fight. She saw a plant by the shower that had fallen over. Dirt was all over the ceramic floor. Coralie then saw Bruce’s wolf claw pendant and grabbed it, holding it tight to her chest before putting the chain around her neck. She looked outside the window and screamed until her voice cracked and her heart broke to pieces.

“Bruce!” Coralie shouted at the top of her lungs.

Coralie ran outside the bathroom in a flash. She hastily put on a pair of jeans, one of Bruce’s shirts, and running shoes. Coralie sprinted down the three-floor stairs as fast as she could, screaming for Ryan to come and help. She looked around her at the entrance, hearing loud and quick footsteps coming her way. She turned to the left and saw Ryan approaching her in a hurry, asking what was happening.

“It’s Bruce. He’s gone!” Coralie was fighting tears back.

“I know. We heard the fight upstairs. We tried to get in, but the door was

locked, and it was impossible to bring it down. By the time I put on the leather glove, it was quiet. I was so scared you had been killed, and to be honest, I didn't even know you were in his bedroom," Ryan said.

He embraced her tight in his arms for the first time since Coralie and Ryan had met. Her breasts were propped against his broad and robust chest. Her face was at the base of his neck. She felt his hands squeezing against her shoulders and then moving down her arms.

Coralie wondered why Ryan would show so much affection in public, especially when all he ever repeated to her was that he wasn't allowed to show fondness toward her. Only Bruce had the right to come in physical contact with her, and although she wished to rectify that, they still had to observe the rule for the moment.

When looking around, Coralie realized that everyone was staring at them. When she realized Bruce was gone, her screams had probably been heard all around the property. Gasps were heard, and many murmurs spread across the house regarding Ryan's strange behaviour. It had Coralie beginning to suspect a few things.

"Lautaro and his goons are the ones responsible for Bruce's disappearance. Lautaro wanted revenge on Bruce for what he did to him. After all, it was a bold move on his part to have almost decapitated such an important ranked vampire. He should've seen it coming," Ryan said.

"You called Bruce by his name...it's the second or third time you've done it," Coralie mentioned.

Coralie was no fool. She had read enough Detective Comics to assemble the pieces and make reasonable deductions. She was a good body language reader, too, and it didn't take a degree in psychology to know that something was wrong in the house. It had only amplified since Bruce had been captured.

"Mrs. Blackwood, I am in charge when your husband is away. My best men will solve this. You do not have to worry. Your husband will be returned to you soon," Ryan said.

"If you don't mind, I would like to begin an investigation of my own," Coralie demanded.

"Of course, but you really know nothing about the moonworld," Ryan insisted with a modulated tone that tried to comfort Coralie.

"Maybe so, but clues are clues, and regardless of the world you're in, two plus two will always equal four," Coralie rectified.

Coralie stalked to the second boudoir and crossed over to Bruce's office,

which she remembered she had seen when visiting the house by Ryan's side. Ryan asked what she expected to find as she shifted through her husband's belongings.

"This is too perfectly timed. Bruce is abducted while I'm about to be safe and free to leave. I need to find who is behind this and who put a mindspell on me. I didn't hear a thing when he was being abducted," Coralie stated with a stentorian voice.

"I have told you, Mrs. Blackwood, Lautaro did this, and my guards are on it," Ryan said as his eyes narrowed.

"Bruce's guards," Coralie shot back.

Coralie was now standing in front of Bruce's computer, and because of her unquestionable memory, she entered the password and gained access to his files. She immediately went to Bruce's email and looked for recent correspondence.

If all Coralie knew about him was right, if he suspected anything wrong, he would have contacted the only person he ever trusted: Vladislav, his donor. With her smartphone, she discreetly took pictures of dates when seeing exciting details in emails so she could access the information later in private.

"Either you believe me to be rather dumb, Ryan, or you are not much for detective material," Coralie answered, about to be done with Bruce's computer. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but vampires are not known to abduct people in bright daylight."

CHAPTER 21

NO JOKE, GOOD DETECTIVE WORK, SHERLOCK!

CORALIE KEPT READING OVER ONE EMAIL THAT INDICATED THAT BRUCE'S guards were now in the process of being genetically modified to become werewolves, including Ryan. The information added was nothing new.

I know vampire blood is addictive. Believe me, I crave it every single minute I'm awake.

She then noticed Bruce's note that werewolf blood was just as addictive because the paranormal abilities grew much faster and left a desire to become even more powerful.

Ryan walked toward Coralie, who lifted her eyes to meet his.

"Is there at least something I could do?" Ryan asked with a well-played smile that Coralie wasn't about to fall for anytime soon.

If Ryan had not acted as he did moments earlier, holding her in his arms before the eyes of all those who lived in the mansion, maybe Coralie wouldn't have suspected anything, and she might have been shocked to have seen his name appear quite often in Bruce's conversations with his donor.

However, because Ryan's behaviour had radically changed, Coralie wasn't surprised. She decided to bring out the actress in her soul when answering Ryan.

"No, no, you were right. I think Lautaro and his goons did come to capture Bruce. It makes perfect sense. They must've come in the early hours of dawn," Coralie said, sounding disappointed as her tone changed to a murmur.

"He didn't give you his password, I presume?" Ryan asked as he walked toward Coralie, who tried to hide the machine with her body. She lied and shook her head.

“No. He has not,” she answered discreetly while logging out of Bruce’s computer to avoid having Ryan’s eyes on her husband’s private correspondence.

When Coralie left Bruce’s office, she moved toward the central staircase to her husband’s bedroom. She heard Ryan’s voice requesting her presence for dinner.

Walking up the stairs, a floor above Ryan, she followed the blue carpet in the middle of the stairs. Coralie had to quickly figure out how to free herself from his invitation.

Sadly, he made her understand that it was an order, not a request in her house. The small part of her adjusting to being a duchess bristled at his arrogance.

Ryan’s voice sounded like an echo within the mansion. The silver-blue painted walls resonated with his tone to her ears, and she wished Bruce would come out from above on the third floor and make things right.

Coralie thought that she had gone through enough craziness in the past week. She slowly hugged herself before turning around to look at Ryan. His face had been so friendly since her life went astray, and now, he appeared to be the devil in disguise, hiding in plain sight.

“My life has been pure chaos since I walked into this house. Now, my husband, to whom I have only been married a week, has been taken captive. I am sorry if dinner is not the first thing on my mind right now. I need to be alone, Ryan,” Coralie said.

Her fingers were rubbing against Bruce’s wolf claw, and she hoped Ryan would, in fact, understand. However, he walked up a few stairs and fixed her right in a stare as he used his most friendly smile and the calm voice she now feared.

“I didn’t want to say this, Coralie, but you have to think about the possibility that your husband might never return. This leaves you in the middle of a dark and vicious world that only I can protect you from now,” Ryan said.

His voice sounded seductive, and his hand rested on the wood banister before him as he climbed the last few stairs toward Coralie. His eyes fixed on the wolf claw pendant.

“You, of all people, should know that Bruce is much more than he looks,” Coralie said as she took Bruce’s pendant and slid it under her shirt, the wolf claw resting against her chest.

Coralie now knew Ryan was the help Sarah had needed. Lautaro knew it, and so did Bruce. It showed in his correspondence with his donor. Ryan was eager to gain power and form his pack. To do so, he needed to get rid of the alpha and take over whatever and whoever was his.

“It is only a precaution if Bruce does not return, Coralie. I only wish for you to be safe,” Ryan said.

She heard Ryan’s words as she turned her back and climbed the stairs to the third floor. She voluntarily decided not to reply to the one man she had thought her friend since arriving at the mansion.

About to walk past Vlad the Impaler’s painting, she stopped, and a cold chill crawled up her spine, making the hair on her neck stand straight. She turned her eyes toward the painting, and as if the lord impaler’s gaze had hypnotized her like a mindspell, she stared and heard something. It was in her mind. That was impossible! It was only a painting!

“*Argh!*”

The cry was loud and clear, but there were mumblings of words between the screams. Coralie tried to make it all out, and then she detected the tone of voice. It was clear.

“*V...lad...I need you...argh!*”

The voice was his. Coralie could hear it now, but how could she listen to him so openly? They’ve only spoken through each other’s minds a few times. Even Bruce thought it was because they were standing reasonably close to one another.

“*Vlad...protect my wife. Claim her as your protégée,*” Bruce said.

Bruce’s voice pleaded, with pain seeping through the words.

Coralie held both her hands over her mouth. She ran to Bruce’s bedroom and locked the door behind her. She moved to the Cleopatra chair, grabbed a wooden chair beside it, and used its back to block the doorknob as protection.

When she was sure the door was somewhat reinforced, she ran to the bedside table on Bruce’s side, remembering how he’d used it to put his personal effects in the night before. She grabbed his smartphone.

As she was about to reach for the Cleopatra chair, just before the cushion, she fell on her knees onto the hardwood floor, and her eyes quickly filled with tears. She finally understood what was going on. Everything she had read in Bruce’s exchange with his father now made perfect sense and reinforced her hypothesis.

“It was Ryan all along. He was the one who orchestrated everything with

Sarah. Bruce mentioned that she had telepathic abilities, and Lautaro's glance at Ryan proved he knew it was him who had betrayed Bruce," Coralie said aloud to herself.

From the moment she had been attacked, Ryan had been there, staying close to her. On the third day, she fell crying in the kitchen and then noticed the different behaviour of the givers in the home. One thing remained the same: Ryan was there with her.

"I might not know the reasons behind Ryan's betrayal, but he wants Bruce's place. Because Ryan's not entirely a werewolf, he needed someone with telepathic abilities. Sarah doesn't want to lose her privileges and become obsolete, so they join forces. But then, why keep me alive?" Coralie hypothesized.

CHAPTER 22

ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR RYAN

CORALIE DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO READ EVERY EMAIL BRUCE HAD WRITTEN TO his donor. By taking pictures of specific dates and searching for keywords, she knew exactly which ones to look for when turning on Bruce's phone and opening the email application.

"Vlad, following your advice, I have given all the men a few drops of my enhanced lycanthrope blood at a repetition of four times a week. They all feel the effects and are grateful to have been granted asylum in my home. Lautaro had savagely treated those givers.

Freeing them, with your influence in the council, was very difficult. I am happy to report they have healed from the wounds Lautaro and his goons inflicted on them, and they have agreed to become my security officers. They will guard my property when my lycanthrope gene activates the mutation and grant them the werewolf gift.

Now, I am reaching out for your advice, Vlad, because Ryan has changed since the night he asked me to turn him into a vampire. I have refused to make him my scion as you have recommended because you found him unworthy of our trust. You never saw the qualities in him that I have witnessed. You always said they were empty gestures meant to make me believe he would be worthy of being turned into a vampire. I see it now, Vlad. You were right.

Things have changed around my home. I see it in the givers' behaviour. The only ones I entirely trust are my old vampire friends from Romania and the four werewolves we had turned together a few years ago. Ryan, I believe, is slowly turning them against me. I do not feel safe in my own home anymore, Vlad.

I seek your advice. I am not a leader like you. I lack the years of command and maybe your impartial judgment. As I wait, I will—

Vlad, I have been warned that Lautaro has stepped on my property yet again, and Ryan has just alerted me of his attack on the beautiful young woman I have talked to you about. I have seen her for quite a few summers around here. She is in grave danger. I will protect her, Vlad, just as you once did for me.”

Coralie then clicked on the email that followed. It was written by Bruce’s donor. A man he had the most respect for, Vladislav Basarab Tepeş.

“My protégé, I am happy you have sought my counsel again. Although I firmly believe that you are ready to take your place in the moonworld, reaching for help in times of doubt is the sign of a natural leader and proves that my opinion about you and your ability to rule is well-founded.

I am happy that the rescue mission to save the givers from Lautaro’s hand has gone well, and only a few had to suffer. I am happy to know my influence is still as strong as it once was in North America. I am sad to report that England has rejected my advice to join forces against our common enemy: Lautaro’s father, my nemesis, Matthias Corvinus of Hungary.

I will not say that I told you so, for I despise those who find pleasure in other people’s misery. However, I am pleased that you have finally seen that not all deserve to be saved and given a second chance. My advice to you would be to end Ryan in the ways that I have taught you so that no coup could be done against you by the newfound werewolves that you have fathered.

The first enforcement of punishment is always the hardest and let me assure you that it never will get easier, as they will always appear worse than before. But it is never as awful as the first one.

Before I end this letter, I have looked into the woman you have grown somewhat attached to, who seems to have rented the summerhouse on your land for the past six years. Her name is Coralie Bellefleur. Her mother’s ancestors are of the Bourbon House. Coralie is one of the last descendants of the Duke of Orléans of France, and I believe you know exactly what this means. It was no coincidence that she was attacked, and I hope that you are safe, my protégé.

Please write to me as soon as you have this letter or summon me, and I will come to you and save you as I did before.

My protégé, I worry that I brought this upon you because I should have

forced you to take my name as yours. I am sorry. Your donor, Vlad.”

Coralie could barely hold her tears back. She didn't know she had been a pawn in Ryan's plan to take over Bruce's place. Wouldn't he see what Vladislav would be capable of should he get to his *protégé* and save him?

There was another response. Vladislav only answered his protégé yesterday. The last email was from two minutes ago.

“I have your protégé. He will be exposed, just as you did with your enemies. After I force him to turn me into a vampire, now that I know who Coralie truly is, I will ascend to the throne and marry his wife. We will become the duke and duchess. That will give me enough power to end Lautaro's house and make every vampire pay for what they did to me when using me as a blood bank,” Ryan wrote.

No...this can't be happening. Bruce, please, I need to know you are alive, Coralie pleaded in her mind.

Coralie barely found the strength to stand up. She slid Bruce's smartphone into her front pocket and walked to her side of the bed. She thought about a thousand ways to flee the house, only to be recaptured and brought to Ryan, who would now claim her as his for being one of the last descendants of a French royal family. She reached for the bible, hoping to find a prayer that could save her from a horrifying fate.

I can't use Bruce's phone. It's undoubtedly been traceable by Ryan's guards. It's only a question of time before they find me here: what can I do?

Her thoughts were racing through her head.

Coralie's first thought was not to call the authorities—after all, what would they do against a bunch of werewolves and vampires? They would be killed in a heartbeat. Her first thought was to call Vladislav, but then they would know she was aware of all that had been discussed between Bruce and Vladislav about Ryan.

It might be enough to end her life.

What am I to do?

She put the bible back, and a thought flashed through her mind. She moved to the Cleopatra chair and found the phial of Bruce's blood that he left for her in case of an emergency.

Let's see if this can help me speak to him faster and more precise. Please, it has to work.

Coralie opened the phial and let a few drops fall on her tongue. Nothing. She feared maybe now it was too late, and either Bruce had lost

consciousness or something worse had happened. No, Coralie refused to believe he was already gone. She drank a little more, and suddenly, a cool breeze took over.

“Ma belle?”

CHAPTER 23

THE UNDERGRONUD TUNNEL OF PARANOIA

CORALIE PUT THE PHIAL CONTAINING THE REST OF BRUCE'S BLOOD IN HER front pocket and tried to focus on his voice. It sounded almost disembodied, and it frightened her. She feared he would be only a ghost of himself.

Still kneeling against the hardwood floor, her hands spread apart before her, she closed her eyes and tried to locate him, as if the cool breeze would be a link. Like a hound, she tried to follow the trail of his scent, voice, anything that would bring her to him. Again, faint and ghost-like, she heard his voice.

"Ma belle?" Bruce repeated.

Bruce! Bruce, I found you!

"Ma belle...you...are safe?" Bruce asked.

Yes, yes, I am, she whispered in her mind.

Almost fearing Ryan could spy on her thoughts. She refused to let Bruce know it would only be for a short time that she would be safe.

Where are you? Tell me.

"You must leave...find my donor," Bruce said.

Coralie didn't have the strength to let Bruce know his father wasn't present. She was frightened that, despite his reputation, it wouldn't be enough to keep him from Ryan's allies. She feared the number of his helpers was growing.

Bruce, I will not leave without you. I will search this entire house from top to bottom if you don't tell me exactly where you are.

Her deduction had to be good. Bruce couldn't be that far away. Their connection, although faint, meant he must be somewhere nearby, on the property. She could feel his presence because of his blood running through her veins, almost calling him home, so he had to be closer than she thought.

“It’s over for me, Coralie,” Bruce said.

His voice was lower, and Coralie had difficulty making out his words. It pained her to know he had lost hope, but this woman wasn’t near ready to let go.

Not as long as there’s one last Duke of Orléans’ descendant alive, she shot back at him.

“You, you read my correspondence with my donor?” Bruce asked.

Flourishing, Bruce’s voice sounded enthused and invigorated, and at that moment, Coralie knew she had done right and wanted to tell him that all wasn’t lost because the last of the Duke of Orléans’ descendants was one tough cookie.

Yes. I had to find out what was happening in this house of madness. Now, tell me where the hell you are so I can save you, and after that, we’ll call it even.

Noises. Heavy steps were going up the stairs, quite a few heavy steps. Coralie might have been strong enough to hold her own against humans and maybe werewolves, but vampires? She had the proof on her ring finger that she couldn’t do anything.

“Ma belle? Coralie, I feel your anxiety. What’s going on?” Bruce’s voice was hasty, worried, and agitated, and so was Coralie.

I hear footsteps. They’re coming for me, Bruce.

Coralie backed up against the half wall separating the bed area from the reading space. She took out the rest of Bruce’s blood and held the phial in her hand. She had a crazy scenario in her head, one she knew was dumb but thought about regardless.

Closing her fist onto the phial, hoping that maybe if she threw herself out of the window, there would be enough left in the bottle to heal her. At least enough to heal her so she could run to the trees and hide in the woods. She heard Bruce’s comforting but broken voice telling her that it was a dumb plan.

“Okay, it’s okay, ma belle. Are you in our bedroom?” Bruce asked.

Yes.

“This house is filled with secret passages. Go to the armoire and look behind it. There are a few wood panels. Press them all, and one of them will open. Walk inside, and I’ll guide you from there,” Bruce said.

Coralie ran to the window in the corner and opened it. She let one of the chairs fall loudly by the corner. Screaming as convincingly as possible, she

walked silently behind the armoire. She reached behind the immense heavy wood piece of furniture and pressed every panel.

The steps sounded like stumps, so many it felt like a rumbling coming down the corridor toward the door of Bruce's bedroom.

There was a heavy hit on the door, and she jumped a little. Coralie had to find that stupid panel. She tried to reach the last one and heard her name being shouted on the other side of the door. It was Ryan's voice.

"Coralie! Don't jump!" Ryan shouted.

His voice might have been filled with anxiety, but the reasons were those of a maniac who wished to rule over a paranormal kingdom.

"Take the doors down! Now, before I bleed you and make an example out of you like I did with your old master!" Ryan kept shouting.

The panel finally opened. Coralie slid behind the armoire carefully, pulling the panel back into place as heavy as it was and decided to listen when the guard answered.

"He wasn't our master. He saved us from Lautaro. He was our donor. He fathered all of us. He didn't control our minds against anyone," one of the guards said.

No one willingly turned against Bruce. They were all mindspelled. However, one had a specific resistance to it, for he stood against Ryan. The heavy bang on the floor and uneven rolling motion that Coralie heard following the statement proved that if anyone dared rise against Ryan, they would pay a horrible price.

A soft contact of something hefty slid down the bedroom wall from the other side where she stood in the false wall. There would be a dead body in the hallway, no doubt.

"*Ma belle?*" Bruce said.

Yes. I'm inside the false wall now but can't stay here too long. He'll find me eventually.

"*I know, but unless you can move now without making a sound, wait, and I'll guide you through the underground tunnel below the house,*" Bruce replied.

Coralie tried to remember the history classes she took in college but couldn't remember everything she had learned. The house was old enough and was obviously filled with false walls. The question had to be raised.

The house was part of the railroad— she started, but Bruce cut her off.

"*No, not exactly. Let's just say that vampires and werewolves are*

paranoid, so they build tunnels under their homes in case of improbable events such as this. To be honest, tonight, I'm very thankful for it. There are entire underground highway systems for the moonworld or, as you'd call it, paranormal world," Bruce explained.

It was twice now that Bruce saved Coralie's life, and she would not soon forget any of it. But when the doors were finally shut, and she heard the werewolf guards barging in, she wondered if it had all been in vain.

The tunnel was dark and smelled like old wood. It felt very compact, only large enough to contain a body moving sideways. Coralie breathed as slowly as she could, knowing that werewolves' senses were very keen, as much as their beast counterpart. She knew they could smell her very distinctively, but no one could pinpoint where she was.

"She is close! I can smell her!" Ryan snarled as he moved around the room.

"Master, her smell is all over the room. We can't track her in here," one werewolf guard answered with a modulated tone.

Soon after, Coralie heard the guards moving things around, and some decorations and frames were thrown onto the ground. Then, some distinctive heel sounds were heard, like a hollow stick hitting the floor. Coralie couldn't let any of it get to her. She had to stay focused, calm, and control her thoughts so no change would occur internally.

"I can hear her heartbeat! She's close!" Ryan said suspiciously with a tone almost proving to Coralie that he somehow knew she was hiding in the room.

"It doesn't sound erratic, master. It could be the givers below us. It could be anybody that lives below because there is a wall breaking the sound," one of the guards said.

"All right, let's look around the house. Do not leave any stone unturned. I want Coralie brought to me alive and unspoiled. She's too important to have her flee us," Ryan ordered before leaving the bedroom.

Coralie stayed in place for a few minutes before she warned Bruce of what was happening, thinking that maybe Ryan stayed behind to spy and ensure she wouldn't come out of her hiding place.

Yes, it might have been briefly paranoia, but it quickly became a good instinct. When she was about to move inside the wall, she heard Ryan's steps walking out of the room.

"*Ma belle, are you clear now?*" Bruce asked.

Yes, Coralie answered Bruce.

She hoped that she was now safe to move. Blinded by the wall and deprived of an x-ray vision, she had to constantly focus on the noises coming from outside the walls.

“All right, the trajectory might be a little perilous, but I’ll guide you—” Bruce started.

If you walk me out of this house without you, husband, I swear I’ll run right back in. Have I made myself clear?

“Yes, you have,” Bruce replied with a broken voice, huskier than usual.

Coralie suspected that whatever state she would find him in wouldn’t be what she saw when he waltzed into her life.

CHAPTER 24

YOU HAVE A WHOLE IN YOUR STOMACH

CORALIE HAD WALKED THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE, WORKING IN AND OUTSIDE the false walls. Having to step out of the secret passages facing stairs and distinctive corners, she managed to stay low and not be detected by anyone.

Her jeans and Bruce's powder blue wide scoop neckline shirt had been ripped. She thanked herself for putting on her running shoes instead of her go-to flip-flop sandals and was now near the entrance to the basement. Bruce had warned her that it wouldn't be a typical man cave.

Coralie grabbed her hair tie and pulled her hair up into a messy bun before turning the doorknob and walking in. The walls were made of concrete. She thought the house had to have been renovated from the ground up, as old as it was. It had probably needed some repairs when Bruce acquired the property, and so did the foundation, and maybe a few sinister additions, most likely.

The smell of metal, iron, and burnt rubber floated in the still air while it felt damp and humid. It was not as chilling as Coralie thought until she felt a creeping sensation going up her spine. She exited the darkness as the stone stairs brought her below ground. She walked into the dim light of a torch hanging against the concrete wall, leaving her skin covered in goosebumps.

Several heavy iron chains hung from the ceiling and looked to have been dipped in silver by the reflection of the flames on the tarnished manacles. A mythical iron maiden torture device was placed against the inferior corner of the basement. Coralie now called it the dungeon.

As she walked toward Bruce, unseen yet, she saw splatters of dried blood against the walls. It turned the area into a maze where torture devices had been placed and hooked. She observed ropes attached on both ends of parallel

walls tied to rotation devices, robust enough to dislocate any arms and probably prepared to even tear flesh apart.

Coralie found breathing harder as she approached the corner, where she could hear someone hardly breathing. As she looked over, she saw a dark red, wooden sharp spike pointing up, bent knees above ground. Coralie knew what would appear but doubted she could look without passing out. She felt her stomach in a knot, her eyes watered, and her hands clammed up.

Bruce?

Coralie walked around the edge of the wall and saw the wood beam covered in blood. Lowering her eyes to the ground, she saw the pond of red, and at that moment, she thought she would faint. She felt her insides catching fire.

She looked up at Bruce, his eyes bloodshot and from his partially parted dried lips, where blood and saliva were falling onto the stained beam. His body continually tried to heal but was not strong enough. It could only barely keep him alive and unconscious, she hoped.

I'll save you, but I need something to cut this beam first.

On the ground, in the corner, she saw a medical saw, probably a bone saw. Not surprised, Coralie picked the tool up in her hand. She remembered from the email that Ryan wished to plant Bruce in front of the Bourbon House, so Coralie started cutting the wood beam.

As the blade came into contact with the wood, Bruce's mouth opened as wide as it could, leaving his four sets of fangs exposed as he tried to shout and howl. His voice was broken as the blade cut through the beam, leaving the wood to roughly move and splint.

Coralie hoped the loud crying sound from Bruce didn't go through the concrete walls of the dungeon, and Bruce was slowly choking on his blood, now pouring down his chest, mouth, nose, eyes, and ears.

I've got you, Bruce, she said soothingly.

Coralie pulled his broken body. She slowly held it against her, and she saw his tears covering his pained face. Some could have said he had a taste of his donor's medicine.

Coralie knew it had unfairly fallen upon Bruce, who only tried to protect those he cared for from a madman who wanted to turn into a vampire to avenge himself.

Bruce's body rested against Coralie's chest, as it had done a few nights ago. His head against her breasts, she kissed him repeatedly, trying to hold

back the sadness she felt when finding him impaled in his basement as if to humiliate him before everyone he had ever helped.

"I...I...lo—" Bruce started.

Shhh, drink.

Coralie pulled him up against her, showing her neck in the nude, and pressed Bruce's mouth against her delicate flesh. She could now feel him deep inside of her, craving for something that could heal him faster. Coralie witnessed Bruce sniffing her skin, then felt not two fangs as she was used to, but eight of them piercing through her neck as she suffered through a bold, sharp scorching sensation.

No cool breeze was taking over her mind, guiding her into a phantasmagorical state away from the brutal pain such a bite would inflict, the bite of a moonwolf.

Just when Coralie was about to try to free her neck, throbbing in pain, she felt a frosty wind and heard Bruce's voice through the cries she buried in her mind.

"I'm sorry," Bruce whispered inside of her head. *"It wasn't my doing. I was afraid, and my lycanthrope instinct took over, and so did my fangs. I'm sorry."*

As Bruce's body gained strength against Coralie, she witnessed her husband's supernatural ability to take over. The hole left on his lower back by the wood beam slowly closed before her eyes. His torn flesh softly grew over the cavity, and his spine and ribs, unbroken, gained back their original structure.

CHAPTER 25

THE ONE AND ONLY MR. BLACKWOOD

“I AM HEALED,” BRUCE SAID ALOUD, LETTING GO OF CORALIE’S NECK. “YOU saved me...why?”

“You have done the same for me twice. I came for you and freed you from your torture device. Then I healed you,” Coralie replied with a sting in her heart, remembering that if ever safe again, she could walk free.

“I guess we are even now, aren’t we?” Bruce shot a grin her way.

As Coralie helped Bruce up to his feet, she felt his hands around her neck, grabbing the chain she had picked up from the bathroom floor. She took it off, and Bruce shook his head to her surprise. He untwisted the claw from the chain and brought the pendant to his mouth. He moved his head back as if taking a shot and swallowed.

His body rejuvenated right before Coralie, and she gasped. She saw his eyes turn bright crimson, lighting up the basement as his werewolf fangs appeared, glimmering in the light provided by the torch. There was a glow to his skin that made it appear slick and unstained. When staring down at his forearms and hands to the tip of his fingers, she saw every muscle contracting up and down his limbs.

“What’s happening?” Coralie asked not only about Bruce but also about the heavy footsteps coming down the curved stone stairs.

“Ryan messed with the wrong alpha,” Bruce replied, moving Coralie behind his back. “Pick up as many wood sticks as possible from the beam’s splinters and stay by my side.”

Coralie barely recognized Ryan as he moved toward Bruce. Ryan was dressed in black slacks and a black tank top. His copper gaze crossed her own, and she saw disappointment as he shook his head.

The room suddenly felt colder as more werewolf guards walked in and circled Bruce, who never flinched. He never even showed concern. His eyes were fixed on Ryan as he ordered him not to look at his wife.

“You thought you could make us your slaves? You thought you were better than vampires? You tried to make us believe you wanted to free us when all you ever wanted was to feed your donor more disposable guards!” Ryan shouted at Bruce.

Bruce stayed silent, standing straight and not moving as Ryan paced around, pointing his index at Bruce to make him feel guilty for his actions.

“You fed us your blood, a little at a time, in hopes of having us change into werewolves, and once one would turn, you’d stop and say that he’s ready for training and become a guard. We fought against Lautaro’s vampires. We fought against others who joined forces with his donor. We are fighting your family feud!” Ryan kept shouting.

Bruce lowered his gaze and looked around himself. When his eyes met Coralie standing beside him, she saw his lips parting.

“Why don’t you say what drove you to turn against me, Ryan?” Bruce asked as Ryan stepped away. “You want to become what held you on your knees all your life. You want to have immortality and power. You want revenge on all of those who hurt you. You want vengeance, but I want justice for my kind,” Bruce said calmly.

Coralie raised her eyes to look at Bruce as he finally said why Ryan betrayed him.

“From the first night, you knew who and what I was. You wanted to befriend me. I believed your lies and made you my chief of security. Then, you turned against me because I was on my way to becoming the next alpha of this sector. You thought I’d be your fountain of youth and power by holding me here. You haven’t accounted for Coralie, my wife, who would come and save me,” Bruce stated.

The guards moved in closer, and Coralie lowered her eyes to Bruce’s forearms and hands, seeing that in between the muscles contracting was the movement of blood pulsating. The veins were bigger, and the blood was so much brighter through his flesh.

“She is the last one carrying the Duke of Orléans’ genes. By marrying her, I upgraded to archduke myself, outranking anyone else. That’s why she was so dear to you, wasn’t she? I die, you marry her, and she makes you a duke. I stay alive; I’m the archduke outranking Lautaro, the prince, making

all werewolves back at the top of the food chain as part of the brotherhood again. Justice, not vengeance,” Bruce stated with a stern voice.

Bruce never took his eyes off Ryan.

“You could’ve been at the head of my guards, leading them, but you betrayed me. Your desire for selfish revenge got the best of you. Let me tell you the first rule of werewolves: don’t bite the hand that feeds you,” Bruce shouted.

In a blink, Bruce was gone. Instantly, the guards circled tighter around Coralie. She held sharp wood stakes in her hands from what she gathered like her husband advised. Wood stake killed vampires but when you think about it, who wouldn’t it kill? She heard growls, and Ryan smiled, ordering his guards to bring her to him.

Abruptly, an agonizing feminine body was thrown at Ryan’s feet, gasping for air with a part of her neck missing. Her last breath was drawn in horror on the cold concrete floor of a dungeon. The woman wore a tight yellow dress with a sweetheart neckline, on her feet were white five-inch heel sandals, and her beach blonde hair was cut short and aligned with her earlobes.

“Now let’s see how you lead your guards without a telepath repressing their will to fight against you,” Bruce said with a calm tone to his voice.

Just like that, Coralie witnessed the end of Sarah, the telepath, who had made her life harder than it should have been from the night she met her husband, Mr. Blackwood.

“They listen to me! I freed them from you!” Ryan shouted, pointing at Bruce in a fury with his eyes.

“Let’s test this theory, shall we?” Bruce replied with a smirk.

“Attack!” Bruce shouted, as his eyes turned bright red and the blood of his donor flowed through his veins like the lord impaler that he could one day become.

Loud growls and howls echoed in the dungeon, making the chains clink against one another. Each guard closed in as they all jumped on the one who wrongfully took over their minds in an attempt to rule over them.

Clothes were torn, as Coralie witnessed Ryan screaming and pointlessly fighting against those he had believed would never turn on him in his delusion to take Bruce’s place in a twisted move of pure selfish vengeance.

“That is enough, my friends. Bring him to me,” Bruce ordered.

Coralie saw Bruce nodding to one guard, who then touched her shoulder. She looked behind her and saw a tender smile on the guard’s face. It wasn’t

the same as Ryan's. This time, it felt pleasant and friendly. After all that had happened in the past week, Coralie refused to let Bruce out of her sight, fearing for his life again.

"I will be with you shortly, *ma belle*," Bruce said with a smile, his fingers caressing her cheek.

"No! I won't leave. You won't order me around like I'm one of them. I'm your wife!" Coralie stomped her foot in anger.

"All right, my friend, let her go," Bruce ordered his guard, but his smile almost whispered an 'I told you so' in advance.

Two guards held Ryan's body as his knees barely rested above ground, his head leaning forward. Coralie saw his eyes swelling more as every second went by. Her heart sank once she heard Bruce's powerful voice ordering his guards.

"Prepare the beam outside and plant it deep in the back of the mansion. I'll be there shortly," Bruce said with a nod.

"Aye! Aye! Sir," the guards said in unison.

Bruce looked over his shoulder. Coralie's eyes were lost in his, and she saw his irises changing back to royal blue. She let him come close. The moment his arms were about to wrap around her, she stepped away, afraid of all that impaler blood pumping through his veins.

"What was in the phial? Something else to order your werewolves around?" She questioned.

"No, it was my donor's blood, as you figured out. His vampire blood is one of the most powerful, and it healed me back to my most dominant state. His blood triggers something only werewolves carry, which is some supernatural current. Because of my blood in you and your bond to me, you saw the blood pulsing through. I told you I was unique, and there's more where that came from," Bruce said.

Coralie almost felt like she didn't know Bruce at all. But then again, she recalled only having met him a week ago.

When his arms wrapped around her. They held her in a sweet embrace, where she felt his strength protecting her from possible harm. It brought her closer to him than she had ever been.

Coralie lifted her eyes to look into his, a cloud of red dancing around his royal blue gaze.

Coralie knew he had to go, but she wouldn't follow. She had seen more than enough violence in a week than anyone should have. She walked by his

side to the main floor, but once standing next to the main entrance, she held his hands.

“I think you know I will not follow you outside,” Coralie said.

“I wouldn’t let you. You’ve seen enough for a long while,” Bruce replied.

CHAPTER 26

AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER

THE MOON WAS BRIGHT AND HIGH IN THE SKY. BOLD AND BROAD, IT LIT THE firmament with its white sunlight reflection. The windows were open, and in the room's darkness, Coralie stood by the curtains that danced in the midnight wind.

She heard the screams, buried, and it broke before cries followed. She felt peace as if the heaviness lifted, and she was free. Looking up into the sky, tears caressing every delicate curve of her face, she saw a black stain hovering over the moon.

"That's my donor, Vlad the Impaler," her husband said, his voice coming from behind her.

Bruce's silvery voice caressed her ears like a melody as he approached her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Her back against his chest, she felt his head rubbing against her own.

His grip was now tighter, and his kiss was harder on her head. She felt his arms moving, one against her waist while the other wrapped around her chest, holding her as close as he could.

"I missed you, too," Coralie whispered before turning around to face him, seeing his eyes filled with tears.

"I said I would let you go once you were safe if that was your wish, and I would. But I don't know if I have the strength to let you go yet," Bruce said in a husky voice.

Coralie stared at the floor, but the tip of Bruce's fingers lifted her chin and guided her to his eyes. She never thought she would see a vampire broken one night because of her. Yet as she touched his face, her heart shattered to pieces.

"It's okay. I don't know how to leave you yet," Coralie said.

Bruce's eyes lit up as Coralie's smile widened through her tears. She caressed his face and heard his voice whispering to her.

"Let's do this right," Bruce said.

Coralie barely felt his fingers sliding her rings off as he got down on one knee.

"Coralie Bellefleur, Duchess of Orléans, will you do me the honour of being my wife?" Bruce asked.

Nodding hadn't been this comfortable in so long. She had never felt this confident and happy in her entire life. She felt Bruce lifting her up from the ground and twirling her around.

"Yes, I will take you as my husband and archduke, Bruce Blackwood," Coralie said.

"Forever, and I mean forever?" Bruce asked as an immortal 'lycanpire.'

"Forever as your vampire wife so we can live happily ever after," Coralie answered.

Coralie needed Bruce just as much as he needed her. Somehow, somewhere, the one who had written their story believed that sometimes, in the darkest of places, we might find the brightest of light, and that night, it glowed from his lycanpire's eyes.

"Mrs. Blackwood," Bruce said with a grin.

ANNEX

NAME – PLACES - TRANSLATIONS

The spelling of place, names, and translations from their original linguistic to American English was uncertain research done to the best of my capabilities. Adaptations were accomplished with the help of fellow authors, including Andreea Pryde (@andreeapryde) and various online translators, as well as the Oxford English Dictionary. As Ivy Wayne is French from the French-Canadian province of Québec, she was capable of doing the French translation herself.

Ivy recognizes that history is a great and wonderful beast filled with secrets and mysteries when it comes to a bloodline such as Tepes and The Order of the Dragon. The research done on historical figures, as well as places and dates in history were accomplished with the help of written encyclopedias, Wikipedia, Britannica, BBC, History, Published Work, among other reliable sources.

NAMES

Vladislav Tepes III: Vlad III, also known as Vlad Tepesh, i.e., the Impaler, saw the light of day for the first time between the years 1428 and 1431. No one knows his actual birth date and can only estimate it to be around those times.

Vlad III was born Roman Catholic and would eventually become the voivode, ruler, warlord, of Wallachia, today known as Romania.

Although Vlad III's bloodline is a noble one, the truth is, due to Romania's history, it was hard for his father to maintain his reign. The era Vlad lived in was unstable due to the constant attacks from Matthias Corvinus and other Muslim-based countries invading countries such as Romania.

Matthias Corvinus: King of Hungary and Bohemia from 1469-1490. Vladislav marched to Transylvania to seek assistance from Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary, in late 1462, but Corvinus had him imprisoned. Vladislav was released in 1476 and had to fight for Matthias.

Elizabeth Báthory: Let's dig into Elizabeth Báthory, the Blood Countess. Elizabeth Báthory, born on August 7th, 1560, was a noble Hungarian woman. She reigned over the Kingdom of Hungary which now is part of Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania.

When young, the countess suffered from many seizures that led historians to understand those were probably from epilepsy and possibly transmitted from inbreeding from her direct parents. Between the years 1585 to 1609, Elizabeth lived a secret life as a murderer. Some believe that the number of murders she committed goes up to six hundred and fifty. However, it is not official to this day.

Ragnar Lodbrok: Lived in the 9th century and was a Norse King. He is a historic character, as well as a legend at the same time. His life was not as documented with precisions as other later Vikings of his caliber.

Cennétig mac Lorcaín: Dál gCais dynasty and maintained sovereignty by becoming king of Ireland. In 1002.

Akhenaten: Pharaoh of the 18th dynasty and known for bringing Egyptians under the reign of one god. Because of his strange ways during his reign, once he passed, statues and monuments were destroyed.

Nefertiti: Queen of Egypt, she reigned alone for a short period after her husband, Akhenaten, passed. She is known for the revolution of worshipping the Aten god, i.e., the sun disc. She also lived in the wealthiest Egyptian period.

Tutankhamun: The young king of Egypt was the last of his dynasty and became most famous due to the discovery of his tomb in 1922 and the curse surrounding his treasure and sarcophagus. King Tut is also believed to have died between the age of 19 and 21.

Lycanthrope: Also known as werewolf developed in the parallel belief of witches. In the Middle Ages, like witchcraft trials, werewolves were also perceived as witches. The most popular place being Switzerland, most likely, Valais and Vaud.

Viking: Scandinavian people from the 8th to late 11th centuries, Vikings were known for raiding, trading, and explored Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland. Northern European were known to be the place for Vikings to go and originate. The Viking Age is between 793-1066 AD.

Stregheria: It is a form of Catholic-rooted folk magic having little if any relationship to other types of Italian Witchcraft.

PLACES

Moosham Castle: One of the most haunted castles in the world is Moosham Castle in Unternberg, Austria. Also known as Witches Castle. Moosham has been the site of not only gruesome witch trials in Austrian history but werewolf hunts as well. If you Google Moosham Castle, you'll find story after story of witch trials and werewolf hunts.

Moosham was first deeded in 1191. Before that date, not much is known. It's believed to be built on the foundation of a Roman Fortress. Austria was part of the Roman Empire up until its fall in 476A.D.

Poenari Castle: Vlad III ordered for one castle's construction, the Poenari Castle. However, it is almost sure that he never walked inside the Poenari Castle.

It is at the top of a mountain overlooking a large part of Romania, strategically placed, like most fortresses at the time. It was easy to stand guard and see anyone coming their way. Nevertheless, Vlad most likely, himself, never set foot in the Poenari Castle and had prisoners sent to the location to build it for him.

The castle is highly placed and looked overly gloomy and terrifying for anyone daring to attack the homeland of the Impaler.

Wallachia: Found in the early 14th century by Basarab I. It was after the rebellion against the King of Hungary, Charles I. The first mention of Wallachia dates back to 1246 by Béla IV of Hungary.

Battle of Posada: The battle took place November 9th, 1330, to November 12th, 1330. The fight occurred between Basarab I of Wallachia and Charles I of Hungary, i.e., Charles Robert. Despite the numbers of the Wallachian army being small, they defeated 30'000 Hungarian knights.

Montréal: Founded in 1642 named Ville-Marie or City of Mary, is named after Mont Royal or Mount Royal, which is the triple-peaked hill right in the heart of the city. The French island itself took the name after the mountain.

TRANSLATIONS

Romanian

Printul: Prince.

Voivode: Warlord.

La revedere: Au revoir.

Îngerul meu mic: My little angel.

Îngerul meu frumos: My beautiful angel.

Înger: Angel.

Fiu: Son.

Dă-i drumu: Let go.

Dute din cale: Get out of the way.

Pulă: Dick.

Ești slab: You are weak.

Întotdeauna ai fost: You always have been.

Acum veți plăti: Now you will pay.

Eliberează-mi tatăl: Release me, Father.

Vin după tine: I am coming for you.

French

Au revoir Madame Lefèbvre et bon voyage: Goodbye miss Lefèbvre and have a good trip.

Madame: Miss.

Mademoiselle: Young lady.

Révolution Française: French Revolution.

Général: General.

Ma belle: My beautiful.

Protégé / Protégée: Person under the wing of a mentor. It also means protected.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IVY WAYNE

Psychopathic Romance & Gothic Romance

Ivy Wayne grew up in the artistic and publishing world. She studied visual art as well as imaginative literature, classical ballet, acting, and storytelling.

Despite her extremely introverted and antisocial personality disorder, Ivy wrote the story she always wanted.

Ivy's love for the series *True Blood* and the *Swamp Thing* gave her the inspiration she needed to combine horror and science together. Her favourite books, *Batman The Court Of Owls* and *The Saxons Stories*, taught her much about the writing she wanted to do.

With a personality of extreme introversion and clinical OCD, Ivy expressed herself in her novels and follows this quote, "*Men have limits and they learn not to exceed them. I choose to ignore them.*"