

a masie kicklighter story

VAMPIRES,
WHISKEY,
and
SOUTHERN
CHARM

New York
Times
Bestselling
Author

Mimi Jean

PAMFILOFF

“I am a vampire, Masie. And though you will likely scoff at the notion initially, you’ll soon realize it is the only explanation that fits what you have witnessed.”

“A vampire,” I repeated, trying to sound like I actually believed him.

“I have been coming into your establishment every night for weeks since I caught your scent. I hoped you might be working so I may introduce myself in a public setting. Less threatening that way.”

I blinked, trying to keep my breathing steady. He’d been stalking me at the bar, waiting for me to pull a night shift. “Are you the one who’s been coming around my house at night?”

“Yes, but I have a good reason.”

I sat as still as possible, sensing this conversation with the crazy, dangerous man could go in any direction. I just wanted it to end.

He continued, “My mate Anna died two centuries ago. She was a cold and sometimes violent woman, but mostly she was reckless and impractical.”

“That sounds like it was...difficult.”

“No,” he declared. “She was the love of my existence. She was loyal, highly intelligent, and beautiful—the most precious thing this world has ever known.”

He made no sense. And where were the cops? I’d completely lost track of time sitting here on the couch, listening to a psycho tell me he’d licked blood from my body and thought he was a fictional being.

“Then you were lucky,” I said. “I mean, to have loved someone so perfect.”

“Yes. Indeed.” He lifted his head and stared toward the pine ceiling as if reliving a precious memory. After a long

moment, he sighed and got up from the couch to stare out the open window.

All I had to do was survive until the police got here. I just had to play along.

“Are you going to explain what this has to do with me?” I asked.

“Your scent is the same as hers.”

CONTENTS

About the Book

Other Works by Mimi Jean Pamfiloff

Title Page

Copyright Page

Warning

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

Excerpt from The Immortal Tailor

About the Author

OTHER WORKS BY MIMI JEAN PAMFILOFF

COMING SOON!

Draco ← **Still happening!**

Mr. All Out of Love (RevoLUVtion #3) ← **Will love finally be
his?**

She's Got the Time (M.O. Mack, Suite #45 Series) ← **I got
this!**

The Immortal Tailor, #3 ← **Title TBD**

THE ACCIDENTALLY YOURS SERIES

(Paranormal Romance/Humor)

Accidentally in Love with...a God? (Book 1)

Accidentally Married to...a Vampire? (Book 2)

Sun God Seeks...Surrogate? (Book 3)

Accidentally...Evil? (Novella, Book 3.5)

Vampires Need Not...Apply? (Book 4)

Accidentally...Cimil? (Novella, Book 4.5)

Accidentally...Over? (Book 5, Finale)

THE BOYFRIEND COLLECTOR DUET

(New Adult/Suspense)

The Boyfriend Collector, Part 1

The Boyfriend Collector, Part 2

FANGED LOVE

(Standalone/Paranormal/Humor)

THE FATE BOOK DUET

(New Adult/Humor)

Fate Book

Fate Book Two

THE FUGLY DUET

(Contemporary Romance)

fugly

it's a fugly life

THE HAPPY PANTS SERIES

(Standalones/Romantic Comedy)

The Happy Pants Café (Prequel)

Tailored for Trouble (Book 1)

Leather Pants (Book 2)

Skinny Pants (Book 3)

IMMORTAL MATCHMAKERS, INC., SERIES

(Standalones/Paranormal/Humor)

The Immortal Matchmakers (Book 1)

Tommaso (Book 2)

God of Wine (Book 3)

The Goddess of Forgetfulness (Book 4)

Colel (Book 5)

Brutus (Book 6)

God of Temptation (Book 7, Finale)

THE IMMORTAL TAILOR SERIES

(Standalones/Paranormal/Dark Humor)

The Immortal Tailor (Book 1)

Vampire in the Jungle (Book 2)

THE KING SERIES

(Dark Fantasy/Suspense)

King's (Book 1)
King for a Day (Book 2)
King of Me (Book 3)
Mack (Book 4)
Ten Club (Book 5)
The Dead King (Book 6)
Lord King (Book 7)
Never King's (Book 8, Finale)

THE LIBRARIAN'S VAMPIRE ASSISTANT

(Standalones/Mystery/Humor)

The Librarian's Vampire Assistant (Book 1)
The Librarian's Vampire Assistant (Book 2)
The Librarian's Vampire Assistant (Book 3)
The Librarian's Vampire Assistant (Book 4)
The Librarian's Vampire Assistant (Book 5)
Vampire Man (Book 6, Finale)

MASIE KICKLIGHTER SERIES

Vampires, Whiskey, and Southern Charm (Book 1)

THE MERMEN TRILOGY

(Dark Fantasy/Suspense)

Mermen (Book 1)
MerMadmen (Book 2)
MerCiless (Book 3)

MR. ROOK'S ISLAND TRILOGY

(Contemporary/Suspense)

Mr. Rook (Book 1)
Pawn (Book 2)

Check (Book 3)

THE OHELLNO SERIES

(Standalones/New Adult/Romantic Comedy)

Smart Tass (Book 1)

Oh Henry (Book 2)

Digging A Hole (Book 3)

Battle of the Bulge (Book 4)

My Pen is Huge (Book 5)

Wine Hard, Baby (Book 6)

Baby, Please (Book 7)

Two Sticky Nuts (Book 8)

REVOLUVTION SERIES

(Romance/Action/Dark Humor)

Mr. Ultra Mega Love (Book 1)

Just Mr. Love (Book 2)

Mr. All Out of Love (Book 3) ← **Coming soon!**

SUITE #45 SERIES by M.O. MACK

(Thriller/Suspense/Action)

She's Got the Guns (Book 1)

She's Got the Money (Book 2)

She's Got the Time (Book 3) ← **Coming soon-ish???**

WALL MEN TRILOGY

(Dark Suspense/Paranormal)

A Haunted House (Book 1)

A Vow Broken (Book 2)

A Promise Kept (Book 3)

WISH, a Standalone Novel

(Romantic Comedy)

VAMPIRES, WHISKEY, AND
SOUTHERN CHARM



A MASIE KICKLIGHTER STORY

BY

MIMI JEAN PAMFILOFF

Copyright © 2024 by Mimi Jean Pamfiloff

Kindle Edition

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the writer, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks are not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Developmental Editing: Kelli Collins

Copyediting and Proof Reading: Pauline Nolet

Formatting: Paul Salvette

WARNING

This author doesn't do trigger warnings. She insists on treating her readers like mature adults who know how to close a book or skip pages. If this triggers you, then go no further.

Otherwise, get ready for some fun with all the bumps, gore, fistfights, murder, violence, alcohol, appallingly mean vampires, and a good time. Yum, yum. Delicious!

VAMPIRES, WHISKEY, AND SOUTHERN CHARM



PROLOGUE

To the editor of the *Supernatural Inquirer*:

My name is Masie Kicklighter, and in the interest of transparency, you should know a few things about me before jumping into my story, a story that just *might* save your readers' lives.

First, I use obscene language when I'm nervous. Lately, that's every waking second. You'd be swearing, too, if you were in my shoes.

Second, despite my use of nasty words, I'm a good girl. Don't smoke, do drugs, drink, or believe in premarital sex. My body is a temple worth saving for the right man. Mamma raised me that way, and I feel no shame for being old-fashioned. After all, what has new-fashioned done for my sorry, poor ass besides get me into trouble?

Which leads to point number three: I'm now a convicted murderer, writing to you from prison, where I'll be spending the rest of my life for a crime I did *not* commit.

Fact! You can't murder someone who's already dead! Though, I *am* guilty of a crime worse than murder. I betrayed someone important.

In closing, just know that I don't deserve to leave this cell, but I hope you will publish my enclosed story. It is not for vindication. This is for you, your readers, and humankind, even if no one will believe a word I'm about to say.

Because he's still out there.

Yours truly,

Masie Kicklighter

P.S. Please excuse the fact that it is written on toilet paper.

CHAPTER ONE

“Kiss my doughnut hole, cowboy. I wanna speak to a lawyer.” I stared defiantly at Thomas Rowlan—aka Sheriff Idiot—who had a fresh coffee stain down the front of his beige uniform. His dirt-brown hair stuck up on one side like he’d just rolled out of bed. Probably because he had.

It was just past four in the morning—an ungodly hour—but that wasn’t going to stop me from screaming at the top of my lungs to anyone who’d listen. I was being framed!

You’re not getting away with this! You hear that, you evil vampire? I wasn’t Montgomery Stark’s first victim, but I’d be damned if I let some other poor sucker be his last. That honor would be mine, since I was the world’s only hope for stopping him. Over the last few weeks, I’d learned all of Stark’s tricks.

Well, except for the one that landed me here at the Leiper’s Fork Police Station, located in the heart of Tennessee, just forty-five minutes from Nashville.

Mamma, my older sister Maybell, and I moved here from Paducah, Kentucky, about ten years ago, when I was fifteen. Daddy had already been in Leiper’s Fork for almost a year, working hard at the whiskey distillery for his brother, the owner, Uncle Jimmie.

Needless to say, Daddy couldn’t afford much in the way of houses, so he bought a run-down shack and did what men in our family had always done: used their own two hands to build something better.

Sadly, after the house was complete and we all moved in, Daddy died of a heart attack. At least he got to see the smile on Mamma’s face when she saw the place for the first time. She especially loved the wraparound porch he’d built her, just perfect for sipping iced tea on a hot summer day.

She never did get to enjoy that tea with him, but at least the property was paid for, so we weren't going to be homeless—the only comforting thought during the worst year of my life. I'd had to start a new school in a new town with just the three of us as sad as we could be.

Little did I know how hard it was going to get after that. Don't get me wrong, there were good times, too, and those were the memories I clung to when things got crazy. Lately, that was all I had. Crazy with a side of dang-crazy.

It all started a few years ago when rich folks began moving to town, building luxurious country estates. Overnight, home prices went through the roof, and most of the locals couldn't resist cashing in. Mamma was one of them. Sold our two-bedroom "Southern charmer" and one acre for a million bucks. Now she lived in Florida in some old people's community. Not my thing, but good for her. God knew something positive needed to come out of all this, because I recently learned that those rich folks weren't folks at all.

Most of 'em were vampires.

Yep, you heard me right. The cursed, the children of the night, bloodsucking devils, the immortal. On the outside, Leiper's Fork was a quaint Southern town with its local mom-and-pop café and quilting store, but beneath the historical charm, something dark and sinister was brewing: Montgomery Stark. And he was one sneaky SOB.

"Masie, you can drop the tough-girl act. I know you," said Sheriff Idiot. "Tell me why you stabbed that man. Let me help you."

Did I mention that Sheriff Idiot was my ex-boyfriend from high school? He cheated and then blamed me. Said I drove him to it because I wouldn't put out. "*Your big titties drive me crazy, Masie. I got calluses as thick as baseball gloves on my hands,*" he'd said.

Funny how I'd always thought Thomas was the worst boyfriend ever. That was because I hadn't gotten involved

with a vampire yet, one who now hated me with every undead fiber of his being.

“Masie, please.” Thomas took the seat across the table from me in the tiny interrogation room. “Tell me why you sliced him up. There must be a reason.”

My hands fidgeted under the table while I focused on the dark bags under Thomas’s eyes. He was way too young to look so worn, but he’d married Lizzy, my best friend in high school. Yes, the one he cheated on me with.

I could pretend I was still angry, but the truth was, I felt sorry for him. Living with a woman who thought her only job was *lookin’ perrty* had to be miserable. Not that I objected to taking personal pride. I was known to put on a little lip gloss now and again, and I always braided my hair, but that was to keep it out of the food at work.

Lizzy, on the other hand, refused to get a job, lift a finger to help anyone, or even read a book. She was about as useful as a pile of pig turds. Thomas had to do everything himself or pay someone else. Not so easy on his meager salary.

I folded my arms over my chest, still wearing my pink satin jammies. I was dirt poor, but I liked to pamper myself where it counted. Silky sleepwear was the equivalent of fine wine in my book. *A girl’s gotta sleep*. And to sleep, you had to be comfy.

“Yeah, I have a reason,” I said. “But you’re not gonna believe me, so what’s the point?”

“The point is I can help.”

I choked down a laugh. Did Sheriff Idiot really think his badge and gun were a match for a vindictive vampire?

On the other hand, what did I have to lose?

“You want to help?” I asked. “Then go to the morgue.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re missing a body.”

“Masie, what’re you talkin’ about?” He frowned.

“He’s. Not. Dead!” I slapped my hand on the table. “That’s what I’m talking about!”

Thomas arched a dark brow.

“I knew you were a waste of time.” I looked away and directed my fuming at the plain white wall.

“I saw the body with my own eyes,” he whispered. “God help me, but I did, and it ain’t something I’ll be forgettin’ anytime soon.”

That was because Montgomery Stark had put on a big ol’ show in my living room this morning with his organs—heart, lungs, liver—all laid out around the edge of an open wound in his chest, like a buffet for vultures. His face had been peeled halfway off, too. Completely unrecognizable. But I knew exactly who he was. No one could forget a nice body like Stark’s. Also, his arms were covered in tattoos of vines, snaking up from the wrists toward his wide shoulders. On those vines were random symbols, almost like a charm bracelet.

Still don’t know what they mean.

“You know what else you won’t forget?” I turned my head and offered my sincerest rage. “The moment I fry like bacon in the electric chair because you wouldn’t help me, Thomas.”

He leaned closer, across the table, to whisper, “Just between you and me, Masie—why’d you kill that man? Who was he?”

I leaned forward, whispering back, “That man, that disgusting, violent creature, isn’t what you think. And if you’d get up off your ass and take two minutes to go down the hall to the morgue, you’ll find an empty body bag.”

Thomas leaned back in his chair, not bothering to hide his skeptic smirk. “And if it’s not empty?”

I held out my wrists. “Send me to prison. But if I’m right, you let me go.” *Because Montgomery Stark isn’t dead, and I*

won't stop until he is.

Thomas stared for a long moment while my heart thumped inside my chest. Would he check? Was there a tiny piece of this man that could tell the difference between a woman who'd gone insane and a woman well on her way but not quite there yet?

Thomas shook a finger at me. "I'll go look, but when I get back, I want the truth. I want to know why you eviscerated that poor man, Masie." He got up and left the room, dragging my confidence out with him.

Poor? Now that's funny. Montgomery Stark had more money than he had minutes alive.

But what if I was wrong? What if he hadn't already skedaddled before anyone noticed he was healing? What if he wasn't out looking for a snack to replenish the blood he'd lost before the sun came up?

Rancid pangs of doubt filled my churning stomach. Stark would do anything to ensure I suffered for the rest of my natural life. Maybe he planned to sit in the morgue until I was firmly on my way to prison.

God knew that Montgomery Stark was a patient man.

Sheriff Idiot promptly returned, his tired face not giving anything away.

"Well?" I stood, eager to know what he'd seen.

"Masie, what the devil is going on?"

"He's gone, isn't he?" I said.

Thomas just stared.

"Tell me!" I slapped the table again.

"The body's still there. Now, you tell me why you killed that man."

I felt like the world had been pulled out from beneath my feet. I sank into the chair, the weight of my body too much to

hold up.

“Masie?” Thomas pushed.

I nodded, feeling myself drift further away from any hope of getting out of the mess and stopping Montgomery Stark.
“You remember last month, when I was attacked?”

CHAPTER TWO

One month earlier

“No, Ashley. I’m not taking your shift.” I shoved the twenty back in her hand. “You know I hate workin’ Friday nights.” And twenty dollars wasn’t nearly enough to change my mind. The customers at the Flaming Rooster always got lit up and handsy on Friday nights, which was why I stuck to daytime shifts.

“Please, Masie? Beau got us tickets to see Travis Roads and the Wash-Ups.”

Beau was her boyfriend who worked as a bouncer at some big bar in Nashville. I didn’t go to bars, concerts, or anywhere temptation might be lurking for this good girl. The Flaming Rooster was the only exception. I needed the work, and technically, it was a family business.

My uncle Jimmie owned the Flaming Rooster and the distillery next door. I started working in the warehouse in high school to help out Mamma with the bills. She worked here, too, up until she retired. As for Jimmie, he was a good man but didn’t believe in handouts. If you needed money, he’d give you a job, but that was all. Not that I minded working. I liked paying my own way. It just felt right.

“Well,” I said, swapping out the saltshaker on table thirty with a fresh one from my tray, “then Beau should’ve asked you last week when Jimmie was makin’ up the schedule.” Plus, it was my time of the month, and my back was killing me. If I weren’t working for tips, I’d be wearing sweats instead of my respectably short denim skirt.

I moved to the next table, helping the evening shift get ready. We usually had three servers, a busser, a bartender, and three in the kitchen. Any more than that and we were all bumping into each other.

Luckily, speedy service wasn't why the locals came to the Rooster. They came to kick it, drink, listen to the jukebox, and eat fried food. Chicken, frog legs, alligator, and even string beans. If it could be battered, we fried it and served it. Sides of slaw and sour cream cornbread complimentary, of course.

Ashley was right behind me like a dog chasing a bone. "Please, Masie? I promise I'll take your early shift tomorrow. I know you love sleeping in. Plus, you'll make twice as much tonight in tips. It's a win-win." Ashley batted her thick black lashes. She wore way too much mascara, in my opinion, and her hair was so bleached out that it sometimes blended in with the bales of hay stacked against the wall near the entrance. Ashley also wore her cutoffs just below her labia. One false move, and you just might see some ovary.

Still, she was as sweet as pie and impossible to say no to. Ashley was the type of friend who'd bring soup when you were sick or bake you sugar cookies just because.

"Fine. I'll take your shift, but I'll need your extra shirt." I'd been working since ten a.m., and mine smelled like French fry grease and stale beer. Ashley usually had an extra clean shirt in her locker. Like I said, Friday nights got rowdy, and that meant spilled drinks, food down your cleavage, or wearing whatever happened to be on your tray when a drunk cowboy slammed into you.

"You're the best." She jumped up and down and then hugged me, nearly toppling my tray.

I rolled my eyes. "I know."

She let me go. "Oh, and can you tell Jimmie we swapped?" She bit her lower lip.

"You didn't tell him yet?"

She shook her head, fresh guilt on her frosty pink lips.

"Girl, you're the worst," I said.

"I know. But that's why I have you. We balance each other out." She sounded like my older sister, Maybell, who was two

years older but acted five years younger. She was always getting in trouble and then saying it was okay because I “balanced out” the universe with my good nature.

“Go get my shirt, but when you’re back there, *you* tell Jimmie.” People here thought I got some kind of special treatment for being the boss’s niece, but nothing could be further from the truth. Jimmie did not like people messing with the schedule, mostly because he was so busy running two businesses.

“Deal.” Ashley scurried off, returning a few minutes later with the shirt.

I took one look at it and groaned. “No, Ashley.” It was her “lucky tip” shirt with the big flaming rooster on the front, just like mine. Only hers had the sleeves cut off, the neckline split down the middle to show maximum cleavage, and the bottom was cropped just above the belly button. “I’m not wearing that.” It would barely cover my double-Ds.

Jimmie came out of the kitchen through the saloon doors. Jimmie was a big man in his fifties, with muscled arms, thinning brown hair, and warm brown eyes like Daddy’s. Maybell and I had espresso eyes and long, straight black hair like Mamma.

Anyway, Jimmie never took a day off, whereas Daddy had been a hard worker, too, but loved lazy days by the river, just fishing and hanging out. He took the time to enjoy life when he could. Kind of ironic that it was my daddy who’d died of the heart attack.

“You sure you got this, Masie?” Jimmie asked, wiping his big greasy hands on a rag. He’d probably been in the back fixing something. Between the Flaming Rooster and the distillery, equipment was always breaking down. “I know you don’t like dealing with the evening crowd.”

What Uncle Jimmie was really saying was that he didn’t think I could handle it. All because I’d requested day shifts a few years back. And being the honest person that I was, when

he'd asked why, I'd told the truth: "Men don't tip much when I slap 'em, Uncle Jimmie." Which I had. Twice. Because who the heck did they think they were? Serving a man a drink was not an invitation to help themselves to my lady pumpkins.

"I'm good, Uncle Jimmie." I offered an unwavering stare, as if to say, "*I said yes, didn't I?*"

He nodded, accepting my unspoken answer, and then disappeared into the back.

I snatched the skimpy shirt from Ashley's hands. "Can you finish table prep? I need to wash up and change." A little hand soap from the ladies' room on my face and pits. Good as new.

"Sure, hon. Oh! Before I forget," she whispered, "I should warn you. There's been a new customer comin' around. He likes to show up just before closing."

"And?" I raised a brow, expecting her to say the guy was hitting on the servers or something.

"I don't know."

I frowned, waiting for more.

"He orders a glass of Jimmie's VIP stash but never touches it. Then he leaves."

That bourbon cost one hundred bucks a pop. It was strange not to drink it.

"You tell Jimmie?" I asked.

"He said as long as the man ain't bugging nobody, let him be."

I shrugged, not particularly worried. "Maybe he's in AA and just likes a smell of the good old days."

"I'm telling you, Masie, somethin' just ain't right with that man. He's...I dunno."

That was too vague to get me worried. Leiper's Fork had its share of tourists and people just passing through. There weren't that many places to eat, so whoever came to town, we

generally got them here. Still, it wasn't anything to fuss over in my opinion.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll be on my guard.” But I’d mostly be watching for drunk cowboys.

CHAPTER THREE

Like clockwork, Jimmie cranked up the music at ten o'clock and played "Achy Breaky Heart" for the star of the evening: Big Barney the rooster. Barney was a show-winning Derbyshire Redcap that loved to strut his long black tail feathers for the crowd. At the end of the song, he'd stick out his red chest and let loose the biggest *cock-a-doodle-doo!* Jimmie claimed that Barney just did it on his own, but I knew my uncle had spent months training him to crow on demand.

Normally, I didn't approve of lying, but Uncle Jimmie just loved that dang bird, and I loved the way his clucking made people laugh. 'Sides, a little white lie every now and again was okay. I saw it as just being polite.

After Barney made his appearance, the customers always got livelier, to put it politely, but tonight felt different. There was a group of eight guys about my age—twenty-five—who'd staked out a tall round table by the dartboards in the corner. Looked like a bachelor-party deal, but I didn't like the way they were eyeing me and Deedee, the other waitress. Lots of strange side glances, like they were talking about us.

I could handle myself, but little Deedee was the sweetest person in the world. We called her little because she was just over five feet tall. Compared to her, at only five five, I was a giant. Anyway, she wouldn't hurt a fly and never raised her voice even when people behaved rudely. She'd just smile and wish them a good night. But most people instantly took a liking to her.

I squared my shoulders, gave a tug on my ponytail to reposition it at the top of my head, and marched up to the table of sketchy men, preparing to kill them with kindness. "Hello, boys. Whatcha all celebrating tonight?"

The tallest one, with dirty-blond hair and a stench of old fish, replied, "We're celebrating you, sweetheart! You're about

to have the best dang night of your life.”

Someone needed to get this boy home and give him a bath. The whole gang smelled pretty ripe.

“Oh, you gonna tip me a winning lotto ticket?” I smiled playfully, trying to keep the mood light. Sometimes it worked with customers like these, who looked like they were out to get rowdy. Keeping it fun kept them in a good mood until they staggered to their trucks and got pulled over by one of Sheriff Idiot’s deputies.

“I got something better than the lotto, darlin’.” Tall Guy proceeded to do a few hip thrusts.

Nasty.

I smiled sweetly, adding extra sugar to my voice. “Cool your boots there, lover boy, or you’ll be gettin’ Joe as your server, and the only crap he takes comes with a cup of coffee in the morning.” I winked.

The men all laughed and ordered drinks, but I sensed it was going to be a long night.

“Hey, Joe,” I said to the bartender, whom I’d just used as a threat. Joe was six five and had soulful blue eyes, a full red beard, and the demeanor of a lazy porch hound. He’d been working here for years and grew up in Franklin, about ten miles down the road. “You seen Jimmie?”

I was going to tell my uncle to keep an eye on table ten. They were making me feel like the last juicy steak in a den of hungry cavemen.

“Jimmie went home twenty minutes ago. He wanted me to tell you.”

I blinked, sliding the Cromags’ drink orders across the counter. “Is he okay?”

“Looked like he sprained his finger trying to fix the mill.”

Not again.

“Hey,” Joe added, “he asked me to close up, but I forgot I have a date. Can you do it?”

Who did Joe think he was fooling? No one went on a date at two in the morning. He had a hookup.

Well, good for him! Just because I didn’t believe in giving out the milk for free didn’t mean I thought everyone should live that way. Joe was single again and had been since he’d split with his girlfriend last year. The man was lonely. Also needed help with his diet. Deedee said he ate pretzel mix for dinner every night. Maybe a little *boom-boom* would motivate him to eat healthier and get back in shape.

“I can close. No problem.” I could always call Sheriff Idiot if the clowns in the corner started up.

“Thank you, Masie.” Joe moved down the bar and started prepping my drinks. Mostly tap beers and whiskey. Only the rich newbies ordered the fancy stuff like sidecars or martinis, but those patrons were few and far between. They mostly kept to themselves. *Thank God.*

Maybe that was what I loved about Leiper’s Fork. As fast as things were changing, some things stayed the same, like the annual turkey shoot, our model airplane competition, or the Christmas parade. This bar still looked like a hole-in-the-wall with its tin roof, barnwood siding, and rocking chairs on the front porch. But Uncle Jimmie’s Tennessee whiskeys were making good money after going head-to-head with the best in the world.

Now Jimmie’s smokey Southern hooch and flaming-hot whiskeys were getting orders from places as far away as Japan. Who could’ve imagined that?

Of course, it didn’t matter how much money Jimmie made. He’d never stop working with his own two hands or give up the Flaming Rooster. Leiper’s Fork was his home, and he believed in staying true to his roots.

Joe served up my ticket, and I loaded my tray for the group of sketchy men. I wove through the crowd toward table ten.

When I got there, Tall Guy greeted me.

“You ready for the best night of your life, honey?” He put his hand on my shoulder.

I set my tray on the tall round table to his side, plucked his hand up by the index finger, and pushed it away. “Look, sugar, tip me. Don’t tip me. I’m only filling in for a friend tonight after working a full shift this afternoon. But lay one finger on me and—”

He reached under my skirt, swiftly sliding a hand up against my inner thigh, and jabbed his finger at my privates over my panties.

My mind sputtered with confusion, unable to believe he’d just done that.

He smiled and winked.

I jumped back, my mind flooding with the sort of rage that leaves a permanent burn mark. I wanted to scream. I wanted to say something that’d make him realize how disgustingly low he was. But the words didn’t come.

I picked up my tray, the drinks on top crashing to the floor, and I belted him upside the head. “No one touches me without permission, you got that, you piece of shit?” I wound up the tray like a baseball bat, ready for another home run. “Darnit. You made me cuss. I promised Mamma I’d stop.”

Tall Guy stumbled back, cupping the side of his head. Blood trickled down his cheek. “You fucking cunt. I’ll kill you.”

“Boy, you say one more word, and this entire bar is gonna take turns washing out your mouth. With the heels of their boots.” I jerked my head over my shoulder. I knew the patrons had stopped what they were doing because, despite the loud music, they’d heard me screaming, and people in this town didn’t appreciate assholes like him messing with people like me.

I turned my head slightly so Joe could hear me. “Call the sheriff.”

“Dude, let’s go,” said one of Tall Guy’s friends with cropped dark hair. “You’re getting married tomorrow. The last thing you need is jail time.”

Someone actually wanted to marry this dirty pile of molasses?

“Shut the fuck up,” Tall Guy replied. “Trailerpark pussy don’t scare me.” He turned and looked down at me. “You think a sheriff can protect you, bitch?”

His friend stepped between us, digging out a wad of cash and shoving it into my hand. “Here. For your trouble and the drinks, miss.”

I kept my eyes on Tall Guy, not acknowledging the money. “I’d leave if I were you. Before this gets ugly—Leiper’s Fork kind of ugly.”

Tall Guy stepped closer, hovering over his friend’s shoulder. “What are you going to do, cunt? Cream some more on my finger?” He popped his index finger into his mouth and sucked. “Tastes pretty stale. Like it’s been recycled by rednecks a few hundred times.”

Suddenly, I found myself eyeing the shards of glass on the floor. How hard would it be to pick one up and stab this son of a Bisquick in the eye?

Joe appeared, sliding an arm between me and these guys like a roadblock. “Gentlemen, the police station is one block over. Which means you have ten seconds to leave. And the sheriff? He don’t swing like a girl. Neither do I.”

Gee. Thanks, I thought. Because going by the blood on Tall Guy’s face, I swung like a champ.

“I’ll see you again real soon, Trailerpark pussy.” Tall Guy turned and headed for the door, his moronic posse of Cromags trailing behind him.

I snarled and watched the guys walk out, half of them stumbling over themselves as they left. Tall Guy, though, he stopped and locked eyes on me, a promise in his glare. This wasn't over.

Joe scooped up the bills from the floor and began counting. "At least they paid."

I was still frozen with balled fists, my eyes fixed to the front door. Part of me hoped Tall Guy would come back in so I could watch Sheriff Idiot arrest him. The other part didn't want to see him ever again.

Suddenly, a cold gust of air slammed into the side of my head.

I pressed my palm to the spot and winced. "Baby jumping Jesus."

"You okay?" Deedee came up.

I couldn't move. The sensation was like having a shard of cold steel spiked into my skull.

"I'm going to go get the plate numbers for the sheriff," said Joe to Deedee. "You stay with Masie."

"Masie, you don't look so good." Deedee tugged at my arm. "What did those boys do to you?"

I pried open my eyes, my gaze pulling toward a shadowy figure in the corner of the bar. A man with a predatory gaze sat staring. I couldn't make out all the details of his face, but I could tell he had long dark hair, thick black lashes, and pale eyes.

We locked gazes for a moment, and then he looked away, as if completely disinterested in me or the commotion.

"Let's get you some water. You can chill in Jimmie's office." Deedee led me by the arm through the kitchen into the back, but my mind was still out front with thoughts of that man.

CHAPTER FOUR

Just after one a.m., the sheriff waltzed in. Joe had insisted on staying, but I made him leave ten minutes early to get ready for his big “date.” After the altercation, most of the patrons went home anyway. Something about those nasty boys left behind a bad vibe, so I was about to close up early. No use in Joe sticking around.

“Hey, Masie,” said the sheriff, taking a seat at the bar and removing his brown cowboy hat. “We combed through town and put out an APB on those men. Nothing’s turned up, so I’m gonna assume they went on their way.”

I raised my brows, drying the clean glasses from the back and stowing them neatly under the counter. “Good riddance.”

“Don’t you worry, Masie. I doubt he’ll press charges.”

I stopped drying. “Press charges? *He* assaulted *me* first.”

“Either way, Joe could only give us a partial plate, but if we hear anything, I’ll let you know. I gotta jail cell with his name on it.”

“Jail is too good for men like that.” Who the heck went around poking strangers in their precious oyster and then called them the c-word?

“Just wanted you to know there’s no sign of ’em.” He leaned back in his chair, like he owned the place.

I didn’t even have to look up to know that Thomas was drooling over my boobs. “You’re married. And I’m not interested.”

“Don’t mean I can’t look.” He offered a flirty smile.

I knew he was just kidding around—sorta—but I wasn’t in the mood. “That is *exactly* what it means.” I stashed the last glass. “Thomas, I’ve been through enough already tonight. I’m gonna lock up and head home.”

He raised his hands in the air. “I’m leaving. Robert’s on duty tonight, but call me when you’re ready to go. I’ll be sure he escorts you home.”

That was kind but, “I’m good. Got Betsy in the truck.” Betsy was my shotgun.

“You buy that handgun for your purse I told you to get?”

“Bye, Thomas. Say hi to your wife.”

He took the hint and got up. “You know, that shotgun won’t do you no good if it’s all the way outside. That’s why I told you to buy yourself a—”

“I geddit!” I barked. I knew he was right. A girl on her own had to have protection, especially because I lived thirty minutes outside town at the Carlins’. They were gone most of the year, so I stayed in the guesthouse for free. All I had to do was watch the place, feed and water the horses on weekends (they had a hand during the week), and oversee the cleaning people when they came to tidy up. The Carlins were good friends of Uncle Jimmie’s, and nice people, so I didn’t mind being their caretaker. After all, that was what my last name meant, *caretaker* in German. Or “chicken ladder.” The internet wasn’t exactly clear.

Either way, I didn’t mind watching their animals or being their security. Thus the shotgun I owned to mostly scare off critters. For example, something had been spooking the horses at night these past few weeks. Still wasn’t sure what it was.

“Sorry,” I said to Thomas. “Didn’t mean to bark. I just don’t need a handgun. I usually work the day shift. Safe as can be.”

He strolled toward the front door. “I’ll get you some of that pepper spray I bought for Lizzy. I’ll drop it off tomorrow.”

Why did Thomas still feel like I was his to look after? Our relationship ended seven years ago. “Thanks, but if I want something, I’ll ask Santa. Or Amazon.”

He walked out with a grunt, closing the door behind him. I was about to lock it when I heard a beeping in the back.

“Dangit! Deedee! You trying to make a grilled cheese again?” She knew Jimmie didn’t like us cooking here. “*Make your messes in your own damned kitchen,*” he’d say.

I stormed into the back and skidded to a halt. Tall Guy was standing there, smoking a cigarette next to the back door. The angry look in his bloodshot eyes was nothing shy of sinister.

My heart fell to my knees. “Where’s Deedee?” I asked, a terrified shiver in my voice.

“She’s just taking a little nap in my truck.”

I swallowed hard, adrenaline surging through my veins. “What did you do to her?”

He pulled a buck knife from his waistband. “Same thing I’m gonna do to you.”

Fuck. My eyes toggled side to side, searching for a weapon. Unfortunately, the night cook had already cleaned up, and the knives were in the drawer ten feet away.

“Aren’t you supposed to be gettin’ married in a few hours?” I asked, thinking my question might jar some sense into him. “Do you really want to remember this day forever with blood on your hands?”

He shrugged. “Blood always makes the occasion brighter.”

His response wasn’t only weird, it was downright crazy.

“Look, honey,” I said, trying to keep calm, “I’m sorry about earlier, but if I were your sister, I bet you’d be proud that she stood up for herself.” I wasn’t really sorry. I was petrified. *Where the devil is Deedee?*

He took a step closer, flinging his lit cigarette to the tile floor. “Ain’t got no sister.”

I took a step back. “Mother, then?”

He took another step. “She’s dead.”

Of course she was. He seemed like the type who didn't have a mother. Or, at least, no one who loved him unconditionally.

"I'm not going down without a fight. You know I won't," I said, raising my chin.

He flashed a lopsided smile. "I like it when they fight."

My heart thumped against my ribcage, my lungs screaming for more oxygen. Every cell in my body knew I was going to have to run or fight for my life.

Or both.

There were several big knives behind the bar, which was a few steps behind me through the saloon doors. All I had to do was reach one before he made it to me.

I pointed to the back door. "Deedee! Ohmygod. You okay?"

He turned his head toward the empty space, and I took off toward the front of the house through the double doors. I pushed them so hard, they slammed against the edges of the wall on either side and clipped me in the back as I jumped through.

I scrambled toward the knives under the counter and tripped on the mat. I plowed face-first into the floor, tangling with the rubber mat and spilled beer. *Ooph!*

I quickly got to my hands and knees, my eyes zeroing in on the tray. I reached hard, stretching my entire body to grab hold of a knife. *Got it!*

A strong hand yanked me back by my ponytail. I yelled, feeling my scalp lifting from my skull by the roots. Thankfully, my hair was long, and his grip was more toward the end of my ponytail. I twisted my body to face him and kicked his shin. With a yelp, he let go and fell back.

I held the knife in front of me with my shaking fist. "Stay the fuck back!" I yelled, jabbing at the air between us, but my knife didn't seem to register with him.

Tall Guy got up, glaring with empty feral eyes that reminded me of an angry bull at the rodeo. He lunged, not giving me time to strike him head-on, so I maneuvered the tip of the blade at an angle into the meat of his bicep. I felt it hit bone.

But you know when they say that people in accidents, who are pumped with adrenaline and endorphins, don't feel pain? That was what I was dealing with.

He straddled me with his large body and wrapped his hands around my throat. I tried to yell, but no air came out. I stupidly dropped the knife, hoping to slide my hands between his arms and dislodge him from my airway, but his grip was like a gator latched onto dinner.

I pounded my fists on his forearms, completely aware I was losing consciousness—the black fuzz around the periphery of my vision, the limp ache in my legs from lack of oxygen, and the sense of fear turning into a strange sleepiness.

Fuck me. This was no way to go. Sheriff Idiot would find my body and say to himself, “See. I was right. That gun in her purse would've saved her.”

How unsatisfying a death was that?

Tall Guy closed his hands with more force, causing the blood and oxygen flow to stop.

“How you like that, Trailer Park?” He laughed, red veins popping from his forehead.

“How do you like this?” said a dark, gravelly voice. Through the thick haze of impending death, I saw a shadow hovering behind my killer.

Tall Guy turned his head and jumped off me, his hands flailing defensively. I couldn't see what was happening because the man with the gravelly voice moved with fluid motion and speed.

Blood went everywhere, showering me, the floor, and the ceiling. Everything around us turned red.

I drew in a breath, savoring the air entering my starving lungs. In the background, muted whimpers mixed with the sound of someone eating cold, crisp watermelon on a hot summer day. And then I went to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Masie! The ambulance is on the way. Can you open your eyes for me, sweetheart?” Uncle Jimmie kneeled over me.

“Uncle Jimmie?” I mumbled with a raspy voice, feeling like I’d swallowed broken glass. I slid my hand to my neck and winced. My skin was raw, my throat throbbing in time with my accelerating heart.

“Don’t you move, darlin’. We’re getting help. Can you tell me who did this?”

“That guy,” I sputtered.

“Which guy?”

“Joe and Deedee saw ’im.” Suddenly, my stomach knotted. *Oh God. Deedee!* “Is she okay? I think he hurt her.”

Uncle Jimmie’s eyes filled with tears. In all my life, I’d never seen him cry. Not even at my daddy’s funeral. Not that Jimmie didn’t cry over losing his brother. I just never saw it.

I sat up, defying the blaring pain in my body. “Uncle Jimmie, where is she?”

His voice came out hollow, like he couldn’t believe what he was saying. “I found her out back in the parking lot.”

“Is she dead?” *Please tell me I’m reading you wrong. Please, please, please...*

He nodded with a heavy sigh, his tearing eyes glued to the floor next to me.

Deedee, no... My soul instantly felt like a bite had been taken out of it. Deedee and I were never the best of friends, but I knew her better than most. Maybe because we had an easy relationship from the get-go. We were both the type who believed that people had more in common than they realized. It was how we connected with our crazy customers and each other.

Especially each other.

She was introverted and cared about everyone. I had a loud mouth and kept my heart safely guarded. I was steak on the grill, and she was fancy mushroom burgers with weird sauces. I was old-school rock and Patsy Cline. She was country pop all the way. All day. Every day.

But what we had in common was so much more. Neither of us expected others to take care of us or to fix our lives. We were both fiercely independent.

I can't believe she's gone.

Off in the distance, sirens shrieked while my eyes flooded with juicy tears. "Why'd he have to kill her? What'd she ever do to anyone?"

"I'm just glad you're alive, Masie. I can't...I can't even think about what I'd tell your mamma if he'd gotten you, too."

I knew he didn't mean that Deedee's life was worth less than mine, but he understood, like I did, that Mamma never got over Daddy's death. If something ever happened to my sister, Maybell, or me, she'd never come back from that. The last thing he wanted was to deliver the kind of news that would put Mamma in the ground.

The sirens were suddenly right outside, and within seconds, Sheriff Idiot was rushing in, his beige shirt untucked, his hair shooting every which direction. He looked worse than I felt.

"Don't you worry, Masie," he stammered. "We'll catch the SOB. With the partial plate, he can't hide for long."

Catch him? But wasn't he... I frowned, my eyes gravitating to the floor by my side. "Wait. Where is..." I pointed to the spot where Tall Guy had died. "Where's the body?"

"Deedee's outside," Jimmie said softly.

"No, the tall guy who attacked us. I watched him die right here."

Jimmie and the sheriff exchanged glances.

“Where’d he go?” I asked.

“Darlin’, I think you’re in shock,” said my uncle. “The man probably thought you were dead and took off in his truck.”

“But,” I blinked, “that’s impossible. I saw him die with my own eyes.” Or had I? Because clearly there was no body. Not a drop of blood either. I was completely clean, too. “Maybe, I dunno, maybe I dreamed it.” After all, I *had* lost consciousness.

On the other hand, if I merely imagined the man killing Tall Guy, then how was I still alive? Someone had stopped that futhermucker from murdering me.

I rubbed the front of my neck, massaging the very real ache.

The paramedics rushed in, and Uncle Jimmie waved them over.

“We’ll sort this all out later,” he said.

“*You* just worry about *you* right now, ’kay?” said Sheriff Idiot.

How could I think about myself? Deedee was dead. I wasn’t. Her parents would never be the same. Neither would I or Jimmie or this town. The Flaming Rooster was the heart of this community—at least for the people who grew up here—and they saw us as family. We celebrated birthdays, anniversaries, and half the dang town had met their spouses right here in this bar. Friends, community, and whiskey. Okay, and horny drunk cowboys, though the women had their fair share of rowdiness, too.

The Flaming Rooster would forever be marred by this tragic loss. So would I.



After a thorough examination and three X-rays, the ER doctor determined I had strained neck muscles and deep bruising, but

no broken bones. I was lucky, he'd said.

"Still, no physical activity for the rest of the month," he warned. "No lifting, and absolutely no more psychotic stranglers, young woman." He smiled.

I got that he was trying to cheer me up, but this wasn't a busted arm like when I fell off my bike at ten. Deedee was dead, and I blamed myself. I hadn't taken the threat seriously and sent Joe home early instead of taking precautions. I'd leaned on the fact that I lived in Leiper's Fork. "*It's safe here. Nothing bad ever happens.*" These are the things I'd believed before last night.

"I'm giving you a prescription to help you rest, Masie." The doctor put his hand on my shoulder. "You need anything else, you just give me a call."

I bobbed my head, wanting to get home and crawl into bed, where I could cry as much as I needed. I wasn't a fan of showing my emotions to anyone. Not even now.

"Thank you," I said stiffly.

His voice unexpectedly shifted gears, lowering to a whisper. "Deedee wasn't a good girl like you, Masie, but her death is still a shame."

I didn't know what to say to that. Yeah, I tried to be good. I wanted to live a life I felt proud of, but it wasn't like Deedee was some sort of evil she-demon. She'd been a kind soul who loved with an open heart.

"I don't get your point," I said. "And why are you whispering?"

"Maybe you were spared for a reason, Masie. That's all." He looked over his shoulder toward the door and abruptly stepped back. "You'll be just fine," he said in a normal voice.

Why was he acting weird, like we were being watched?

As he left the exam room, he added, "Take it easy, Masie. I'll be rooting for you."

I frowned as he shut the door behind him.

“Rootin’ for me?” I muttered.

My cell rang, and I slid it from my pocket. The caller was unknown. I usually didn’t answer those, but I thought it might be the police trying to reach me.

“Hello?”

A slow, deep voice came over the line. “Are you all right?”

My blood pressure hit the floor, and my heart skipped a beat. “Who is this?” I asked, but I knew darn well who that voice belonged to. I just didn’t want to accept it. Because if I did, it meant the gory scene last night had been real. The blood on the wall, ceiling, and floor had all been real. And it had been cleaned up while I lay helpless and injured on the floor.

“The man from last night has been taken care of. Him *and* his friends. And I’m quite thorough, so say nothing to the police. If you do, they’ll only call you into question.”

I swallowed down the sticky lump in my throat. “You killed them all?” I said, with a terrified tone.

“I saved you. Don’t expect me to do it again.” The call ended.

CHAPTER SIX

After being kept all day for observation, I called Jimmie for a ride. Honestly, I couldn't recall ever being so dang exhausted. Last night's drama had been bad enough, but then I had to spend an hour on the phone with Mamma, convincing her not to come.

What was she going to do anyway, other than get in the way? I needed privacy to cry. Also, she was the type who thought talking about herself nonstop was a good distraction when Maybell or I was upset. Mamma also loved talking about herself when we were happy, too. Pretty much any occasion was fair game. Thankfully, Maybell pitched in and steered Mamma away with a few quick texts saying she was going to look after me. She wasn't, but I was okay with that.

The moment I stepped outside into the night air to wait for Jimmie in his flaming rooster truck, I found myself feeling grateful that spring was finally here. The days would start getting warmer and longer.

What a weird thing to think. Maybe because last night had delivered so many horrors into my life. More than anything, it had brought the familiar pain of loss. It was a darkness I didn't welcome or ever hope to relive. Still, it was weird wanting summer to come faster.

After Jimmie got me, we drove in solemn silence until arriving at the Carlins' cattle gate.

Jimmie punched in the access code. "Betsy's in the back of the truck, and I'll have Joe drop off your ride tomorrow."

I nodded, relieved that I wasn't going to be all alone unarmed. I'd actually come close to telling Jimmie about the man with the gravelly voice but was too afraid. My uncle wouldn't believe me, and that was a fact. There'd been zero traces of Tall Guy's bloody death, and if I kept on insisting my

story was true, I'd be sent for psychiatric care. I'd rather take my chances out here in the wild.

That didn't mean I wasn't terrified of the shadowy man. If what he'd said was true, he'd killed a total of eight people last night.

I swallowed down a cold lump as Jimmie parked in front of the guesthouse, where I lived. It was a good fifty yards from the main house, just on the other side of the horse stables, all surrounded by towering chestnut oaks and beech—some over two hundred years old, according to the Carlins.

“You want me to keep you company?” he asked.

“Thanks, Uncle Jimmie, but I'm just going to crawl in bed and sleep.” *And cry in private.*

“You need anything, anything at all, just call.”

“I will.” I opened the passenger door and hopped out.

“Don't forget Betsy.”

“Got it. See you in a few days,” I said.

“Take as much time as you want. Just—just let me know if you're not coming back.” His voice was forlorn, like he assumed I wasn't going to work at the Rooster again.

“I'm coming back. I just don't know when. Gimme a week maybe.” I needed to get through the funeral first.

He nodded.

I was about to close the door when he blurted out, “The sheriff said he'd send one of his deputies by tomorrow.”

Were they going to question me about Tall Guy and his friends' whereabouts? “For?”

“They need a statement about last night.”

My stomach relaxed. “Oh. Yeah. I'll be here.”

“Night, darlin'.”

“Night.” I closed the door, grabbed Betsy’s soft carrying case, and watched the truck’s taillights disappear down the long dirt road.

Suddenly, the hairs on my arms stood straight up, and the horses in the barn started nickering. I whipped my head over my shoulder, hugging my shotgun case tightly. My fingers slowly glided up to the top zipper, and I slid down the tab.

The air around me picked up, the breeze unseasonably cold.

With a shiver, I beelined for the front door, digging my key from my purse while clumsily trying to hold my shotgun. Something was out there watching me—I could feel it—but I wasn’t about to run around in the dark, looking for whatever wild animal was lurking. Sides, the barn was locked up tight. The horses would be fine.

I rushed inside and deadbolted the door behind me. I leaned Betsy against the wall, grabbed my phone from my purse, and pulled up the security app. It covered the front gate and the entirety of the back of the main house. The Carlins had installed it in case any of the horses ever got out of the stable. The app sent a text to alert if there was movement.

The app showed nothing except Jimmie and me driving in.

This was just like the past few weeks. Something kept spooking the horses at night, but the cameras were never triggered.

I blew out a breath. “Get it together, Masie. Probably just a big ol’ owl.”

I grabbed my purse and Betsy and went to the kitchen, which was really just part of the great room—a twenty-by-twenty space with steep pine ceilings. The room also served as my dining room and living area. I pretty much did everything in here except sleep or read. My books were piled on a shelf next to my bed since that was where I loved to read.

I flipped on the lights and set Betsy on the kitchen island, which served as my breakfast bar.

“Hello, Masie,” said a deep voice behind me.

I froze, fear flooding my body. My eyes slowly gravitated toward Betsy resting to my left on the white tiles. I suddenly realized that the room felt ice cold. He’d come in through the window.

“Do not bother with the shotgun, Masie.”

I swallowed hard. “What do you want?” I asked, trying to figure out exactly where he was in the living room behind me so I could grab the shotgun and point it at him with one fluid motion. I’d just been attacked last night because I’d underestimated a psychopath. I wasn’t about to make the same mistake twice.

“You did not sound convinced on the phone,” he said.

He was to my left. “About?”

“You are not to discuss anything with the police regarding the fate of the men from last night.”

“If you didn’t want me to say anything, then why tell me?” I asked, preparing to reach for Betsy.

Suddenly, a shadow swept past me, and Betsy was gone.

Fuck. I swiveled on my heel, finding his large frame towering over my five-five body. With wide, terror-filled eyes, I took in the monster standing less than two feet away. He was six three or four, maybe, with shoulder-length, shiny black hair that reminded me of obsidian. His eyes were pale, somewhere between ice blue and a moss green.

I said that because his irises kept shifting colors under the light, like opals. His pronounced cheekbones and angular jawline gave his face an air of refinement, yet nothing about him was delicate.

Just the opposite.

Especially the clearly defined swells of muscled arms beneath his tailored black dress shirt. Or maybe it was that I

knew he'd just killed eight men and somehow taken my shotgun.

“Who are you?” I stammered.

With a calm expression, he tilted his head, studying me with a wicked gleam in his iridescent eyes.

I had the distinct impression he was contemplating whether or not to attack me.

I quickly reached for the drawer beside me and grabbed a set of kitchen scissors. “I’ll fuck you up if you come anywhere near me, asshole.” I hated speaking that way, but it had to be done. He had to know I was serious.

I jabbed at the air between us.

Like a switch had been thrown in his head, he smiled. Not sadistically, cruelly, or vindictively, like Tall Guy had, but warmly. “You really think I am here to hurt you?”

“You broke into my house.” I jabbed the scissors at the air again.

“True.” He turned, strolled to the living room, grabbed the remote, and turned on the TV. He sat on my brown leather sofa and leaned back, making himself at home.

What the hell?

Heart racing and adrenaline on max, I stood frozen in the kitchen, unsure what to do next. Run? Go for a better weapon?

Call for help, moron!

My phone was sitting inside my purse on the counter, so I grabbed it and hit the emergency feature.

“Come. Sit, Masie. Let us relax,” he said, just as the nine-one-one operator came on the line.

“Hello?” I said. “I need the police. There’s a man in my house.”

“Stay on the line, ma’am,” she said calmly. “We’ll have someone to your house...” The operator paused. “As soon as

possible.”

She probably noticed my location and knew I was screwed. It would take twenty minutes, fifteen at best, for a deputy to arrive.

“Can you get somewhere safe?” she asked. “A bathroom or bedroom door with a lock?”

“Hang up, Masie,” the man on the sofa said with a deep, unencumbered tone. “I’ll be gone before they get anywhere near here.” He kept his gaze focused on the TV.

“Leave. Just leave,” I barked.

“I will go after we’ve had our little chat.” He paused, sighing with impatience. “I could’ve killed you twenty times by now if that were my desire. Now, hang up.”

I’d seen him take out Tall Guy last night, so he was telling the truth. I’d be toast already if killing me was his sole reason for being here, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t hurt me. With the police on the way, my best bet was to stay calm and make nice.

Or, at least, distract him for a while? I really didn’t know.

I ended the call and set my phone on the counter, taking a deep breath.

“How did you clean up all the blood at the bar?” I blurted out. Why I’d chosen that topic, of all the things to talk about, I didn’t know either. Maybe I just wanted to understand what I was up against.

“I consumed it,” he replied bluntly.

That wasn’t the answer I’d expected. Was he kidding?

“Consumed...it...?” I said.

His eyes still fixed to the TV, he added dispassionately, “I even sucked the blood from your rather small T-shirt. Tasted like hell with the nacho sauce and beer soaked into the fabric, but I did it all the same.”

What the...?

He continued, "As for your face, that I licked. Every inch of you, really." He turned his head toward me. "The places with *his* blood, anyway. You are on your moon cycle."

I swallowed down a vile lump in my throat. "You examined me? Down there?"

"Do not be ridiculous. I am a gentleman, not some sexual fiend."

"Do gentlemen enter a woman's home uninvited?" I threw back.

"They do if they have something important to say." He turned his attention back to the TV, which had on some *Antiques Roadshow* rerun. "I love this program. It is like a walk down memory lane." He patted the couch, inviting me over. "I can smell your fear, Masie. But as I've already pointed out, if I wished to harm you, I would have done it already. Now, come and sit. Listen to what I have to say, and then I will be gone."

"Will I be alive when you leave?" I asked.

"Yes."

"And you'll never bother me again?" I asked.

"Yes. Now do as you are told. My patience grows thin."

Fuck. Just keep calm. Stay alive. I moved my shaky legs to the living room and sat on the sofa, farthest away from him, the sharp scissors still in my hand. "Talk."

He shut off the TV and turned his tall frame towards me, resting a strong arm over the back of the sofa. "Would you like to know why I saved you from that depraved fool last night?"

I nodded.

"My kind believes there is one and only one mate for each of us. And while we do not know when we will cross paths with that individual, once it happens, the pull is undeniable."

My mind latched onto his first two words. “Your...*kind?*”

“I am a vampire, Masie. And though you will likely scoff at the notion initially, you’ll soon realize it is the only explanation that fits what you have witnessed.”

“A vampire,” I repeated, trying to sound like I actually believed him.

“I have been coming into your establishment every night for weeks since I caught your scent. I hoped you might be working so I may introduce myself in a public setting. Less threatening that way.”

I blinked, trying to keep my breathing steady. He’d been stalking me at the bar, waiting for me to pull a night shift. “Are you the one who’s been coming around my house at night?”

“Yes, but I have a good reason.”

I sat as still as possible, sensing this conversation with the crazy, dangerous man could go in any direction. I just wanted it to end.

He continued, “My mate Anna died two centuries ago. She was a cold and sometimes violent woman, but mostly she was reckless and impractical.”

“That sounds like it was...difficult.”

“No,” he declared. “She was the love of my existence. She was loyal, highly intelligent, and beautiful—the most precious thing this world has ever known.”

He made no sense. And where were the cops? I’d completely lost track of time sitting here on the couch, listening to a psycho tell me he’d licked blood from my body and thought he was a fictional being.

“Then you were lucky,” I said. “I mean, to have loved someone so perfect.”

“Yes. Indeed.” He lifted his head and stared toward the pine ceiling as if reliving a precious memory. After a long

moment, he sighed and got up from the couch to stare out the open window.

All I had to do was survive until the police got here. I just had to play along.

“Are you going to explain what this has to do with me?” I asked.

“Your scent is the same as hers.” He stared with an intense gaze. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he had the look of a man coveting something. “And as impossible as I thought it to be, I’ve recently learned that some do find love again.”

“You mean...me?” I pointed at my chest.

He nodded.

No. No, no, no. “You said you wouldn’t bother me again after tonight.”

“I did.”

“But now you’re saying you think—”

“That you are my second chance,” he said. “If so, I could never walk away from such a rare gift.”

I squirmed on the couch, trying to think of something—*anything*—to discourage him from entertaining this insane idea. On the other hand, I didn’t want to rile the man up. He wasn’t right in the head, and I wanted to live.

With a sympathetic voice, I said, “I bet you miss her, your Anna, but I don’t know why you’d think I’m her replacement. Sounds like she was very special.”

“You understand me well, Masie. The chances of you being such a rare gem, one as special as Anna, are close to impossible. Which is why I must divine the truth: If I had not shown up last evening, what would you have done?”

“I don’t understand the question.” Suddenly, I heard sirens outside.

He pointed toward the front door. “Answer the question, Masie. They are but a minute away, and I will not be leaving until I have my answer. I will kill them all if I must, but you *will* answer me.” He walked over and bent down in front of me, putting us almost nose to nose.

I stared into his eyes. *So beautiful...* My mind drifted into a state of utter calmness, like a soft, warm blanket had been wrapped around my thoughts.

“What would you have done?” he repeated.

“Don’t know. Died, I guess.”

“You would’ve forfeited your life?” he hissed in my face, his pale eyes narrowing with disgust.

I suddenly snapped out of my momentary blip.

“*This* is what you were contemplating when I entered the bar?” he added.

I’d set him off. I needed to correct course if I wanted to make it through this. “I was...I was gonna kill him.”

His face relaxed, and he stood up straight, staring down his nose at me. “And if he had died by your hand, how would you have felt about it?”

He seemed calmer with my last answer, so I kept going. “I would’ve felt relieved. Safe. Alive.”

“And if you had to face his family, who would most certainly accuse you of taking their sweet angel from this world?”

Why was he asking me all this?

“I would’ve told them that their son was a piece of shit who murdered Deedee and therefore deserved what he got. I would’ve told them that he tried pushin’ his finger inside me while I was serving him suds, and he laughed about it. That was who their son was, and the world is better off without him.”

My captor's face contorted into a hard mask, as if trying to hide his reaction. "He...penetrated you?"

"Tried. You were there. You saw it happen." And why did my story surprise him? Didn't he know who he'd murdered last night? Tall Guy was a monster.

"I did not. Very fortunate for me, I suppose. I would have been compelled to kill him in front of your patrons and then dispose of them, too." He clicked his tongue. "Witnesses."

I wasn't sure if I should take him seriously, but I did wonder about his comment. "What do you mean you didn't see? I saw you there."

"When I arrived, I witnessed you hitting that man in the face with your tray. Later, I returned to speak with you and caught him lurking in the parking lot. He attacked your friend."

"You watched him *kill* Deedee?" I snarled, forgetting whom I was talking to: a crazy person.

"You are wondering why I did not save her."

Hell yes. I nodded.

"I was there for you. No one else."

I looked down at the floor, rage building in my chest.

Suddenly, I heard a car rolling up just outside my door—the deputy must've pushed open the front gate.

"They are here, Masie. So now you must answer one final question before I go."

"What?" I asked.

"Do you trust me?"

No. Absolutely not. Not in a million years. "You saved me last night. You haven't laid a finger on me, and such a powerful vampire like yourself could've ended me minutes ago."

He nodded his approval. “Be sure to tell the authorities that there was no one here. You were merely frightened after being attacked last night, and you heard a noise—a raccoon trying to get in. And when they come again tomorrow to question you, you will say you remember nothing about your attack.”

How did he know the police might come by tomorrow? He must’ve been outside listening when Jimmie dropped me off.

Wait. No, that didn’t make any sense. He had already been inside when I came in.

The man headed toward the open window. “Your shotgun is under the couch. I will be in contact soon.”

“You promised you wouldn’t come back.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “I *said* I would not *bother* you. I mentioned nothing about *enjoying* each other’s company.” He disappeared out the window into the night.

My entire body turned ice cold. *Oh God. Oh God.* He thought I was his special someone, a someone I would welcome into my life.

What was I going to do? Whatever the answer, I had to think carefully. If I told anyone what I’d witnessed last night, I’d be locked up in the crazy-coop. But if I did nothing, this man would be back like a bad summer heat rash.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Two weeks went by, and I still hadn't heard from the man with the gravelly voice. I should've been tickled pink, but instead the situation felt like a tornado warning. Danger was lurking nearby, threatening to rip the roof off my quiet life any second.

I honestly didn't know which I dreaded more: the terrifying anticipation of seeing him again, or knowing that when I did, he believed he was a vampire and I was his second chance at love.

Also, for the record, being a bloodsucking creature wasn't the only explanation that fit, like he'd claimed.

For example, when he attacked Tall Guy—whom I'd recently learned was one Ronnie Foreman, the son of a city councilman in Nashville—I'd been in a pretty sorry state. But I also knew what I saw: blood everywhere. And, yes, it had all been cleaned up by the time Uncle Jimmie found me.

However, by my own calculations, I'd been unconscious for over five hours, so he'd had time to clean up. As for my clothes, and as repulsive as the idea was, he could've removed them to wash, which would explain how he knew it was my shark week.

Yes, that scenario sounded improbable—I mean, where did he find a washer and dryer at two a.m.?—but it *was* possible. Especially if he'd had help.

Of course, that didn't answer a bigger question: Why go through all that fuss to hide Ronnie's death?

Ronnie had assaulted me, killed Deedee, and then tried to choke the life out of me. Most people would've stuck around to tell the cops why they killed a man trying to strangle a waitress.

Unless they're a fugitive.

If *I* wanted to hide a murder, I'd clean up the scene and make it look like the perpetrator had left. That was exactly what the gravelly-voiced man had done.

Then we had the incident involving Betsy. The man had taken away my shotgun in the blink of an eye. How? A sleight of hand, like those fancy Vegas magicians.

Finally, there was the question of Ronnie's seven friends. Where had they gone? I had an answer for that, too.

After Sheriff Idiot tracked down this Ronnie guy's address, we discovered that he'd never shown up to his wedding, and neither had his posse of groomsmen. The families filed missing persons reports, and that was when they discovered the last place the eight men had been seen alive: the Flaming Rooster, where Ronnie sexually assaulted one waitress and then returned to kill her, murdering another woman in the process.

After that discovery, the families went silent, and the search for the missing men ground to a halt.

Jimmie figured that the families didn't want to tarnish their good names, and assumed the men had taken off to Mexico or somewhere until things cooled down. In short, the other seven men were probably still alive.

When I really mashed everything around in my head, I'd found plausible explanations that were a hundred times more rational than vampires being real.

"You ready to go?" Ashley asked, picking up the last chair and flipping it upside down on the table so the floors could be swept by the new cleaning crew tonight. Jimmie didn't want us working alone late anymore since he believed Ronnie was still out there.

Today, though, we were closing early due to Deedee's funeral. Because her death had been a homicide, the county had taken extra time to collect evidence before releasing the body.

A sad knot formed in my stomach. *Her poor parents.*

“I’ll see you over there,” I told Ashley. “I have to lock up.” Jimmie had already left to ensure everything was in order. He’d insisted on paying for the funeral on top of making the arrangements. He was a good man.

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly three o’clock, but the church was only a minute away. After the service, we’d all go to the cemetery.

I locked the front door, grabbed a heaping pile of napkins—aka free Kleenex—from under the bar, and went to retrieve my things from the back. I filled my purse, preparing for the second-worst day of my life—the first being Daddy’s funeral.

I set the new alarm system, complete with a panic button under the bar, and went out the back door to my powder blue truck. My heart felt like it had a million porcupine needles poking at it. I hated funerals, but this one would be impossible to get through with dry eyes, even for me.

I hopped behind the steering wheel, and my phone rang. Caller unknown. “Hello?”

“How have you been?” asked the gruff voice.

I froze with fear. The tornado had finally touched down. “What do you want?”

“I understand your friend’s funeral is today. Sorry I cannot accompany you, but the sunlight and I do not get along.”

Sure. Right. “What do you want?” I growled.

“You did well, lying to the police and everyone else.”

“How do you know what I did? Maybe I told them everything. They might be lookin’ for you right now.” I hoped my words might ward him off.

He laughed. “If that were true, I would have been made aware. I have many friends in this town, Masie. Never forget that.”

Liar. Who the heck would want to be friends with him? “Again, what do you want? I have a funeral to get to.”

“After our last encounter, I realized that I need to make a grand gesture in order to win your trust.” He paused. “I like that about you. Any woman of mine should be skeptical of everyone—see the world as their adversary.”

“I am *not* your woman.” *You crazy asshole.*

Sorry, Mamma. I just can't stop the bad words.

“But you will be after you see how sweet life is when you share it with someone who understands you. You will never have to hide your dark soul from me, Masie. I will embrace it.”

Dark soul, my ass. For heaven's sake, I was still a virgin—not that being a virgin indicated saintliness or purity of heart, but it spoke to how I lived my life. I only did things that felt right. I lived a good, honest, and wholesome life. Well, as best I could. Nobody was perfect.

“You will meet me tonight at Deedee's grave. One o'clock. Do not be late,” he warned.

“Scuse me? Absolutely not.”

“Do you not wish to see my gift? It is an atonement for not saving her.”

I scoffed. “What? You gonna bring her back from the dead with your vampire sauce?” That was how they did it in the movies. The vampire made a person drink their blood, and then they woke up all pale and fangy.

He laughed. “I am not about to ruin the surprise, but I promise you will thank me. Do not be late, or there will be blood on your hands.”

The call ended.



The funeral was just as miserable as I'd imagined, filled with enough tears to fill our local swimming hole. There were touching photos of Deedee's first steps and school dances, and cherished memories shared by everyone who knew her. Most of the stories centered around how Deedee had been there for

people at one time or another, never judging, never saying things like “Well, whaddya expect? You’re an idiot.” She’d helped people in their times of need without expecting anything in return.

All the while, I kept thinking how lucky I’d be if that many people showed up after the good Lord tapped me on the shoulder to rejoin his bowling team. Yes, that was how I imagined heaven. Bowling, outdoor movie night, sack races, and pink lemonade—all the good stuff.

Anyway, it wasn’t that I didn’t have friends or family. But did I truly let people in like Deedee had? Did I show them I cared?

Truth was, I didn’t.

Sure, I was polite and kind. I treated people with respect except when they didn’t deserve it. I was trustworthy and responsible. Still, at the end of the day, I kept my heart just out of reach from the entire world.

Maybe because my daddy died when I was at such a vulnerable age. Maybe because everyone in town immediately identified me as that “poor new girl from Kentucky” who’d just lost a parent, and they pitied me. In response, I buried my feelings and pasted on a sweet smile. I let them see the person I wanted to be. Strong.

After a while, I just got used to pretending.

Not that I wasn’t strong for real—no one survived my kind of grief and didn’t come out the other side with a certain preparedness for the world. Still, my need to survive emotionally had pushed me inside myself.

Sad how it took a funeral to learn all that. Sweet little Deedee had been a bona fide superwoman. I was not.

After the burial, I went home and locked up the house tight. I wasn’t going to the cemetery tonight. No way in Sam Hill was I ready to see Deedee’s grave again so soon, and I was much safer here with Betsy and her bucks.

I placed my box of extra buckshot on the nightstand and gave it a pat. “We got this, boys. Don’t we.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Just past one in the morning, my vibrating cell began line dancing across the nightstand. I was in bed with the lights off, Betsy tucked under the covers by my side. I hoped that the crazy man wouldn't come to my house once he realized I was a no-show, but I had to be prepared, which was why I wore black sweatpants and a black T-shirt instead of my favorite pink flannel PJs. I wasn't about to confront him looking like I was going to a pajama party.

I looked at the number on my cell. This time there was a name attached to it. *Ronnie Foreman?*

My heart skipped a beat, and I answered. "Hello?"

"You think I am playing a game?" the gravelly-voiced man asked.

"How are you callin' from this number?"

"If you had bothered to show up, you would know," he said.

"Didn't you say you admired my lack of trust? Well, here's me. Not trusting."

"You are a wicked little thing." He snickered. "But you have a valid point."

"What do you want?" I growled.

"I want you to receive your gift; however, seeing as you do not wish to come and get it, I have brought it to you."

There was a loud knock at the front door.

I jumped from bed, nearly peeing myself.

"Don't keep me waiting, Masie." The call ended.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck! I dialed Sheriff Idiot, slid on my tennies, and bolted to my front door with Betsy.

I checked the peephole and stumbled back. “That’s not possible.” I looked again.

Standing on my porch was Ronnie Foreman, the man who’d murdered Deedee.

“Hello? Masie? What’s wrong?” Thomas’s voice came over my cell.

I looked at the phone and then at the door. Then I looked at Betsy.

I pressed the phone to my ear. “Sorry, Thomas. I musta butt-dialed you. Go back to sleep.” I hung up and opened the front door, pointing the barrel of my gun at Ronnie’s chest. “How the hell are you still alive?”

Ronnie stared, a blank look on his bluish-white face.

“I have instructed him not to speak.” The man with the gravelly voice appeared behind Ronnie, as if stepping out of a cocoon of shadows.

“What the hell is this?” I kept my gun pointed at Ronnie’s chest.

“Your gift.” He smiled, flashing his bright white teeth, including two sharp fangs.

My mouth fell open. “But I saw you kill him.”

“Let’s just say that a vampire my age always has a few tricks up his sleeve.” He jerked his head of long, silky black hair at the murderer on my front porch.

“And what-what sort of trick is this?” I stammered.

“Is it not obvious? I turned him, though he has not yet fed and is very weak. Either way, he is mine to do with as I please—torture, kill, command.”

“You’re telling me he’s a vampire.”

“As are his friends. One can never have too many thugs at their disposal. However, this fine specimen, I gift to you.” He shrugged. “You may make his suffering last a lifetime. Longer

if you give yourself to me. Or,” his pale eyes focused on Betsy, “you may end him right here and now.”

My mind began spitting out any logical reason it could come up with for what my eyes were seeing: Had I dreamed Ronnie’s death? Was I dreaming now? Did he have a twin? Was I going mad? *No. Maybe. Probably not. Absolutely, yes.*

Still, there was only one explanation, albeit totally impossible, to explain what was happening. *Ronnie is a vampire.* Which meant the shadowy man was also one?

My fingers tightened around Betsy. “I can’t believe it.”

“If you do not believe, shoot him. In the chest. He will not die.”

I wasn’t going to do that. If Ronnie was still alive, he belonged in jail. “You just told me I could end him.”

“Not with your gun. You merely need to command him to die. I have instructed Ronnie to obey your every wish.”

“Die, Ronnie.” I slapped my hand over my mouth. I didn’t mean it. I wanted him to live in prison.

Ronnie collapsed on my front porch.

The man hunched over Ronnie, stroking back his sticky blond hair. “You are free now. You will leave your body and roam the earth until the end of time.”

I watched a smokey wisp rise from Ronnie’s body and dissipate into the air.

“Sweet Jesus, what was that?” I took a step back, my fear and confusion turning to sheer panic.

He shrugged. “His soul. It will drift with the wind until this world is no more. A man like him does not deserve peace.”

“Did I really kill him?” I stared down at the lifeless body.

“Technically, you cannot kill something that is already dead. But yes.”

This wasn't me. I didn't take vengeance. I was a good, good person.

"I see that I have finally caught your attention, Masie. So allow me to formally introduce myself." The man bowed. "My name is Montgomery Stark."

I took another step back into my doorway.

He stood upright. "I am going to dispose of Ronnie now, but know that your disobedience tonight will cost a life."

"A life?" What was he talking about? Nothing made sense anymore. Not words, not my thoughts, and certainly not what my eyes were showing me.

"I will have to carry this body back to the cemetery, where his shell will be buried next to his victim, an eternal reminder to his spirit of the reason for his suffering."

He was going to bury this heap of turds next to Deedee? He had to be joking. "Why will this cost a life?"

"Like a fine sports car, I require fuel, and you made me come all the way here." He flashed a stern look. "Next time I tell you to show up, do as I say. Tonight's blood is on you."

"Like hell it is. I'm callin' the police."

He tsked. "Do as you like, Masie, but humans who meddle with me tend to die."

So the blood would be on my hands again if I involved anyone or didn't obey. "What do you want from me?"

"You, Masie. Have I not made that obvious?" His pale eyes washed up and down my frame.

Oh, Lord. Help me. I hugged Betsy close to my chest. "Well, I don't want *you*. I never will," I said nervously.

"But you haven't given me a chance yet." He flashed a sinister grin.

"And I won't."

"I am a patient man. You will come around."

A sharp gust of wind slammed into my porch, taking with it Ronnie and the man with the gravelly voice. *Montgomery Stark.*

I stood there shaking, knowing two things were absolutely true: One, I'd been lying to myself. Montgomery Stark was a real-life vampire. And two, I needed to get away from him.

CHAPTER NINE

“So you’re quitting?” Uncle Jimmie sat behind a large stack of invoices piled up on his oak desk. His office was a combination of your typical chaos with a mess of boxes, containing corn and rye samples, piled against one wall. The other wall was filled with awards and plaques. In the center of the room was his faux-cowhide couch that faced his desk.

“More like a leave of absence,” I explained, standing in front of him. “I have a little money saved up and thought it might be good to take some time to myself.” *So I can figure out what to do about this terrifying vampire.*

He sighed deeply and then swiveled in his leather chair toward the large gray safe behind him. He punched in a few numbers, and the door popped open. He grabbed a manilla envelope and held it out.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Take a look.”

I slowly took it. “Is this money?”

His eyes urged me to open the darn thing, but if it was money, I just might break. He never gave handouts, and if he was doing it now, it meant he pitied me. In my opinion, there was nothing worse than being pitied by a man like Jimmie. He never shied away from hard work, never whined, and never took his success for granted. I looked up to him.

I inhaled slowly and opened the envelope, sliding out the contents. It wasn’t money. My eyes scanned the first page of the document.

“You’re giving me the Rooster?” I met Jimmie’s serious gaze. “Did your head get caught in the barn door this morning?”

“You just have to sign the papers.” He leaned back in his chair with a big proud smile. “And when I retire, the distillery

will be yours, too.”

“You’re serious.”

He gave a nod, and I choked up. This was crazy. Those businesses were his life.

“It’s-it’s too much,” I said. “I can’t accept this.”

“Can’t and won’t are two different things, Masie.”

I stood there blinking, my mind a swirl of emotions threatening to bubble to the surface.

I pushed them back down where they belonged.

“Masie,” he said, “I’m planning to retire soon, and I don’t have any children of my own. I want the businesses to stay in the family.”

“Why not Maybell or my mamma?”

He gave me a look.

Okay. Stupid question. My mamma was not in the frame of mind to take on anything this stressful, and Maybell wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. Don’t get me wrong. I loved my big sister for her fun-loving ways, but she didn’t take anything seriously, *especially* her responsibilities. When we were younger, about eleven and thirteen, her idea of babysitting was locking me in the closet with a cup of juice while she went outside with her friends. Sad part was, she honestly thought she was protecting me. Mamma and Daddy were not happy when they found out.

Jimmie’s smile melted away. “If you don’t want it, I’ll understand, Masie. The Flaming Rooster is a lot of work. But that’s why I’m holding off on giving you the distillery. You need to get comfortable runnin’ the stable before takin’ on the entire farm.”

His whiskey “farm” was a lot of responsibility, but this was...wow. Just wow. “I wasn’t expecting this. I-I don’t know what to say,” I stuttered.

“Say thank you.”

This *was* the nicest, most generous thing anyone had ever done for me. Plus, it meant he trusted me. I was truly honored. I wanted to cry and thank him from the bottom of my heart, but as I tried to let it all out and form the words, nothing happened.

Then suddenly, I remembered why I'd come here. I had a terrifying creature after me. I thought if I could get away, it would give me time to figure out what to do. Up until yesterday, vampires were mythical creatures found in horror movies or cheesy romances. Today, they were real.

"You wanna take a few days to chew on it?" Uncle Jimmie asked. "Honestly, I'd planned to tell you this summer when I announce my retirement, but I thought you should know before you skipped town and never looked back."

I nodded, holding on tight to the whirlwind spinning in my stomach.

"It'll take time to get over what happened with Deedee," he added, "but you will. Someday, you'll remember her, and those memories won't hurt so much anymore."

I swallowed hard. "I know."

"So you'll consider it?"

I already was. I loved this bar. I loved that it was a place where people could come and forget the crazy world for a few hours. The Rooster made people happy. Plus, if I was running the place, I wouldn't have to worry about serving drinks and grabby cowboy hands during the evening shift. I could stay behind the bar or even hire a manager to help run things.

The distillery was a different animal, but if Jimmie wanted to teach me his craft, then I could make the effort to learn.

My only problem was Montgomery Stark. *And he killed someone last night because I didn't obey him.*

"What? What's the matter?" Jimmie asked. "You look like you just swallowed a bug."

"No, no. I, uh, I'm just overwhelmed. That's all."

He came out from behind his desk and gave me a big hug—another unexpected gesture. He was never a hugger.

He let me go, and when I looked up into his warm brown eyes, they were filled with deep pride. My heart felt warm and gooey. Maybe someday, I'd be able to show him how much this meant to me.

“We'll make the announcement and get started tomorrow,” he said.

Tomorrow. I replayed the word in my head. Did I want to stay or split town like I'd planned? If I left, it would break poor Jimmie's heart. He'd think I didn't want the Rooster—his pride and joy—when I actually did.

No, I couldn't do that to him. And more importantly, I really did want to take over the bar.

Change of plans. I'm stayin'. I'd just have to find another solution to my vampire problem.

I smiled at Jimmie. “Tomorrow sounds great.”



“I hear congratulations are in order.” Sheriff Idiot took a seat at the bar while I worked on adding a new server to the ordering system. After shadowing Jimmie for a few days and also waiting tables, we both agreed the transition would go smoother if I found a backfill, so I'd made a few calls and hired my friend Claire. She was trying to save money to go back to school. Maybell said she could fill in, too, until we could hire more regular staff.

It was strange, but Maybell hadn't batted an eyelash when I told her about taking over the Flaming Rooster. “That place is a dump. Good luck,” she'd said.

Dump, yes, but it made a ton of money and had authentic gritty charm. But whatever. I was just glad she didn't feel snubbed.

“Thank you, Thomas,” I replied to Sheriff Idiot, only giving him half my attention. The evening rush would start

soon, and I needed to finish. “Dangit.” I’d hit erase by accident. Now I needed to start over.

“So,” he grinned, “were you dreamin’ of me the other night?”

“Huh?” I said.

“That call.”

I glanced up. He was gloating.

“Yes, I guess I *was* dreaming of you,” I said blandly. “I was being attacked by a baboon’s behind.”

His smile melted away. “Go on. Keep making fun, Masie. But we both know I’m the one you come running to when you’re scared and need help.”

I stopped typing with my finger and stared. “You’re the sheriff, bonehead. Everyone calls you.”

He winked. “Keep tellin’ yourself that, darlin’.”

I made a sour face. I didn’t have time for this. Also, I needed to figure out what to do about this Stark creature. *Dear Lord, I can’t believe I just said “creature” to myself. Is this really happening?*

“Thomas, can I ask you a question?”

“No, I won’t divorce Lizzy for you. I can string you along if you want, but it’ll only be a sweet, dirty fling.”

“Ew. Stop it. Did anyone go missin’ the other night?”

He gave me a strange look. “Why?”

I needed to know if Montgomery Stark had really killed someone because of my disobedience. “I just heard some gossip around town. You know. And since they haven’t caught that Ronnie guy or his friends, well...”

“You got nothin’ to worry about, Masie. Those sons-o-bitches are on the run. They won’t be coming anywhere near Leiper’s Fork.”

Not exactly true. Yes, Ronnie was dead-dead, but it sounded like his posse was re-alive, or whatever you called a creature of the night. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Old Merrill’s wife called this morning. Says he never came home after his lodge meetin’ the other night. But you know how those old boys get. He probably passed out and ended up on someone’s couch. He’ll turn up eventually. Always does.”

God, I hoped so.

Thomas stood up, likely about to go fish for a snack in the kitchen. No one ever stopped him because he spent so much time in our parking lot. Of course, he was usually taking naps, but it was still convenient—like having private security. “Masie, I didn’t want to mention this, but you’ll probably hear it from someone tonight.”

“What?” I asked.

“Some kids were in the cemetery the other night.”

“And?” I raised a brow.

“They, uh, tried to dig up Deedee.”

“What?” I gasped.

“Yeah, they didn’t do any harm or nothing. Just a lot of loose dirt everywhere. Looks like they chickened out and stopped diggin’ after a foot or so.”

This was Montgomery Stark’s doing. He probably wanted me to know he’d kept his word about burying Ronnie next to his victim. It was a horrible way to honor Deedee.

“Some people are so sick.” I shook my head, truly feeling disgusted. “Hope you catch the little turds.”

“Yup. You have a good night, Masie.” He tipped his hat and disappeared into the back while I completed the setup. In the back of my mind, I was only just beginning to digest the reality of my situation. The Flaming Rooster was now my bar, and Leiper’s Fork was my home. So as terrified as I felt, I

couldn't let this dark, miserable creature run me out of town. Montgomery Stark could threaten me all he wanted, but I was not going to be his or vacate my life.

This left me with only one choice: to do what I did best. Show no fear.

CHAPTER TEN

Just before closing, Uncle Jimmie said goodnight. He informed me there was a deputy parked out back who'd make sure I got to my truck safely.

"We'll do bank deposits and books tomorrow afternoon," Jimmie said. "I gotta get home to feed Barney. He's been busy making baby Barneys all week."

"Wow. Such a stud. Give him a juicy worm for me." I smiled big, attempting to exhibit my joy over Jimmie's phenomenal gift, even if my life was being hijacked by a vampire. "Have a good night."

He gave me a nod and left. I got to cashing out the servers' credit card tips. It had been a good night for them, which was great.

The front door opened, and I heard the sounds of heavy footsteps on the hardwood floor.

"We're closed, sugar. But we open tomorrow at..." I looked up to find Montgomery Stark with his shiny black hair pulled back. He had on worn jeans and an untucked white T-shirt. His black cowboy boots gave him an extra inch, which only added to his towering frame.

On his muscled arms, I could see tattoos that looked like vines, with shapes and symbols where a real vine might have leaves. A portion of the tattoo peeked out from beneath the collar of his T-shirt, revealing it ended at his neck. I wondered what the ink meant.

"Sugar?" he said, his voice dark, smooth, and seductive. "I cannot say anyone has ever called me that, but I am pleased you are coming around."

Oh Lord. I felt my knees go soft. I wasn't ready for this, but for better or worse, I had to push forward. I couldn't fight an enemy I didn't understand, any more than I could wage a

war with unknown rules. If this was really happening, which it was, I was going to have to learn as much as I could about Montgomery Stark.

The plan was to run him out of town, but that meant knowing what would scare him off. Holy water, crucifixes, garlic, none of the above? I doubted he'd just come out and tell me his weaknesses, but if I got his guard down, he might say something useful.

As a last resort, I needed to know how to kill a vampire, but I'd already decided not to focus on that. Plain and simple, I just didn't have the heart of a killer, and Ronnie was proof. I still felt like a piece of crap after what I'd done, and he'd killed Deedee. If anyone deserved to die, it was him.

Welp, here goes.

The other servers, including Maybell, were busy cleaning the tables and putting the chairs up for the janitorial crew.

"Blazing a new fashion trail?" I arched a brow and returned to counting out tips, acting nonchalant. If my gift was burying my emotions, now was the time to use it to my advantage.

"Jeans and T-shirt are hardly new."

"I meant for you, Mr. Stark." I didn't know why I called him by his last name. Maybe it was simply what we did in the South when we wanted to show respect. That, or to keep people at arm's length. Last names lacked a certain familiarity.

"Please, call me Montgomery."

I kept counting money, acting like his presence didn't bother me.

"You're nervous and trying to hide it. Why?" he asked.

Dangit. Breathe, breathe, breathe. "What gives you that impression?"

"I can hear your heart beating. It's on fire," he said in a low voice.

I had to respond quickly. “Thought you said you were a gentleman.”

“I am.”

“Then why are you fishin’ for a compliment?” I sassed, looking into those chilling pale eyes. “I’m sure you’re aware of your good looks.”

Would he buy my lie? Because while he was an attractive man, he was still a monster.

He smiled, two deep divots forming in his cheeks.

Vile bastard had dimples. It felt like God was playing a joke. Dimples were for giggling babies and cute boys with good hearts. On him they were more like a weapon meant to deceive.

“I have learned of your recent good fortune,” he explained, “and I surmised you will be here late most nights.”

How did he know about me taking over the Rooster? The only explanation was that he hadn’t been lying when he’d said he had eyes all over town. “Yes.”

“Then I will be here, too,” he said, “looking after my proper...”

I narrowed my eyes. “You were just about to call me your property. Werncha?”

“You caught me.”

I leaned into the bar, closer to him. “I ain’t your property, Stark,” I sassed again. “And neither is this bar. Now get on your way. I’m busy.”

His pale eyes flickered with curiosity.

Had my con worked? I wanted him to believe he didn’t terrify me and that my racing heart was in response to his handsome face. The way I saw it, my chances of him letting his guard down were far greater if he thought I secretly wanted him. A little game of hard-to-get was in order.

My heart continued pounding away, knowing a vicious killing machine was standing two feet away. *A vampire. A real-life fucking vampire.*

Lord, I needed to stop swearing. What would Mamma say?

She'd say, "Who gives a flying weasel about your language, Masie. You need to fight this predator. You need to stay focused." Which meant I had to try harder to sell my story.

I quickly shifted my gaze to the bulge in his jeans.

He laughed. "You are a dirty little thing, aren't you?"

My gaze bolted up to meet his eyes. "You need to go now." I feigned embarrassment.

Smiling, he dipped his head. "I look forward to seeing you tomorrow. And the night after that and after that until—"

"I already told you, leave," I barked. "But let me add: don't come back."

I could hear Maybell gasp.

Stark's eyes narrowed, and his lips went flat. I could see the anger behind his pale eyes.

I had gone too far, but I couldn't backpedal. Not now. I was selling a story, and he needed to bite. Not literally, I hoped.

I cleared my throat, deciding to double down. "Look, I see that you're used to getting your way, Stark. It's clear as, well, night, in your case. But I am not for sale. I am not a mountain to be conquered, and I don't give a devil's left nut how good-looking you are. You can't have me." I whispered, "So if you ain't good with that, kill me now. Because my feelings are what they are." I folded my arms over my chest.

"You are...serious?"

Clearly, he didn't believe me. I twisted my neck to one side, exposing my flesh. "Do it. Go ahead. I ain't scared of

nothing except being owned by a man who thinks he's some sorta god—doing what he likes, when he likes. I'd rather die."

He stared as if he'd been punched in his soul.

After a long moment, I lowered my head while he sat there looking dumbfounded. "You...are...just like her."

"Who?" I hoped he meant his worst nightmare.

"My Anna." His Adam's apple bobbed on his strong neck. "She said those exact words when we first met." He took a step back, a haunted look in his eyes.

No, no, no. I'd just given him proof that I was his reincarnated love? I only wanted to toy with him and learn what I was up against.

On the other hand, having him believe I was Anna two-point-oh might get me to the goal line faster.

I played along. "I just speak from the heart like Mamma taught me."

He took two more steps back, his face a poster child for shock. "I must go."

"*Switcherself*, Stark." I shrugged coyly.

In a blink, he was gone.

"Who the hell was that?" Maybell appeared by my side, an amused glint in her brown eyes.

"A monster. Steer clear of him," I warned.

"You weren't treating him like any monster I've ever seen. Don't look like one either."

I couldn't lie. At first glance—and second or third—Montgomery Stark was an unusually handsome man. Unusual in that few men were so brutally perfect. Refined, but masculine. Fierce and wild, with a dash of predatory savage. Elegant with his words, yet his voice lacked smooth edges. *Crème brûlée filled with broken glass.*

Not that I ate fancy French food often, but Mamma had taken us out once to this place in Nashville. Le Blu Bovine or something.

“Trust me, Mayb, you want nothing to do with that... man.”

She giggled. “I think you’re sweet on him, Mas.” She poked my shoulder.

“And who says that anymore? And I’m *not sweet* on him,” I growled.

She shrugged. “Hey, now. Sisters before misters. Remember? You want me to steer clear, all you gotta do is say so.” Maybell trotted off, laughing.

Dear Lord. “Steer clear!” I called out.

I could only hope she kept her word about the “sisters before misters” thing. We’d never once competed for a guy, but she was a bona fide danger magnet. Show that girl a fire, she was the one grabbing a can of gasoline.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For the next week, Montgomery Stark came to the bar around one a.m. He sat in the corner, ordered the most expensive scotch on the menu, left a generous tip, and then disappeared.

Later, when I got into my truck, I felt his eyes on me just like when he sat at his table. The strange part was that while I drove, I felt him, too.

Was this a vampire mind trick, my imagination, or real? Did he fly above me? Run lightning fast? Turn into a bat? Vampires had all sorts of abilities in books and movies, but who knew if there was any truth to them?

Montgomery Stark knows.

This was exactly why I needed to learn as much as I could.

By the eighth night, I decided it was time to make my move. I had to get closer to him without igniting suspicion. The problem was I'd been putting on a strong front filled with constant rejection, so I couldn't simply say: "*Hey, creepy vampire man, wanna hang out?*" He'd see right through me.

This situation called for something sly, something that would create an opportunity for him to believe he'd won points. My advantage was that he didn't really know me or the fact that I wasn't a particularly emotional person. Tonight, he would meet Masie, the blubbering fool who couldn't handle rejection after a few beers. Everyone has a weakness, so why not this?

At the end of the day Stark was a man, and what man could resist coming to the rescue? They loved playing the hero. All I needed was for someone to innocently stomp on my feelings, and for me to overreact. *Hello, irrational and annoying Masie!*

Heck, if I got really lucky, maybe the whole thing would turn him off, and he'd skedaddle.

“Hey, Ashley,” I said at the beginning of the evening shift. “The schedule says you’re taking off early tonight.” She was already dressed and ready to roll with her skintight pink skirt and blonde hair straightened to a sleek shine—her date-night look.

She flashed a guilty-as-charged look. “You weren’t here, so I cleared it with Jimmie. I swear.” She held up her right hand.

“I know. It’s just that, I was wondering what you’re planning to do.”

“No,” she whined, “please don’t pull rank. I already told Beau I could get off early.”

“I wasn’t going to make you stay. I was going to ask to tag along.” I flashed a big, wheedling smile.

“Really? But you never go out.”

I scratched the side of my head. “That’s not true. I go out.” *To the library, for long walks, to the farmers’ markets.* I even went to church on Sundays. Sometimes. If I wasn’t coming in early to the Rooster, I was taking care of the Carlins’ horses. Squeezing in church time wasn’t easy.

“Well, Beau got us backstage passes to Banjopalooza,” she said.

What the heck was that?

She added, “He’s only got two VIP passes, but maybe he can pull some *strings* for a regular admission.” She grinned, playing an invisible banjo.

Oh. Strings. I get it. “That’s okay. I can pay for my own ticket.”

“Great. Then come along.” She paused. “But who’s going to close up?”

“I talked to Jimmie. Told him I needed a night off.” It was true. Things felt pretty chaotic lately, in both good and bad

ways. “He said he’d swing by and lock up.” It was Jimmie’s poker night anyway. He’d be up until three at least.

“Woohoo! I’ll tell Beau. Oh, and some of his buddies are coming.” She grinned. “You’re gonna *loove* them.” Meaning, I wasn’t.

“What’s wrong with his friends?” I asked.

“Let’s just say they like to get a little rowdy, but they’re all puppy dogs on the inside.”

Sounded perfect. *Because Masie Kicklighter is looking for trouble tonight!* Of course, the trouble would be in my head and lead to irrational drama.

But would my plan turn out to be the lure I hoped?



“Wow, Masie.” Ashley eyed my yawning face as we stood near one of the concession stands at the very back of the indoor mini-arena. The third band had just left the stage, and by band, I meant it was two dudes playing Beethoven on banjos, Banjoven. “How many drinks you had, girl?”

Not nearly enough. Tonight, I would need all the liquid courage I could get, though I never drank. To be real here, I’d sampled beer, wine, and your standard whiskeys at work, but sipping wasn’t the same as drinking. I just didn’t do it. *Except tonight.*

Tonight, I also wore tight jeans, my brown and turquoise Dan Posts, and a snug black tank to show off the ladies. My long black hair was up in a high ponytail to expose my neck. Vampire bait. Yes, there was a method to my madness.

“I dunno. Three or four beers, maybe. Lost count after they played ‘Symphony Number Five.’”

I never went to college, but I had a curious mind. Anything foreign to my world in Leiper’s Fork usually piqued my interest. I once spent an entire week watching sumo wrestling on YouTube just because one of my customers mentioned he’d gone to Japan over the summer and saw a match. One mention

of “men in giant thongs, giving each other wedgies,” and I was all in.

I also knew how to change my oil, fix a flat, and turn used cooking oil into biodiesel—ChrisFix fan here. I followed the MeatEater and could skin a deer or make jerky. Didn’t taste so great, but I could do it. I’d also spent several months sampling classical music—too dramatic for my taste, but I knew the major composers, just like I knew that banjo music hurt my ears. *Like listening to a cat suck lemons.*

“Well, you should slow down,” said Ashley. “We still have five more bands before the main event.”

“I was thinking of heading to the taco place across the street.” I pressed my hand over my empty stomach.

“Alone?”

“It’s fine. The place is ten seconds away.” I swiped a hand through the air, thinking it was best if we went our separate ways for the remainder of the night while I carried out my plan. “But you did kinda catch me. I’m not so good at drinking.” I fake hiccupped. “I might just take off after I eat—catch an Uber home.”

“All that way? Let me see if one of Beau’s friends can take...” She whooshed out a breath. “Never mind. They’re all trashed. You sure about the Uber?”

“Yep. I’ll text when I leave—give you the driver’s name and plates and everything.”

“Okay.” Ashley crinkled her nose, seeming conflicted. Here I was tagging along, and now I was taking off early, forcing her to break the sister code. Never let your girls leave alone drunk. But honestly, it was perfectly safe. *Minus the vampire stalking me.*

“By the way, have you seen any of Beau’s friends?” Ashley asked. “He wanted them to come up front so they could take pictures of him peeking out from the curtain backstage.”

I pointed toward the last row of seats in front of us. “Just follow the trail of angry women.” Beau’s friends had been hitting on anything with melons since we arrived, which was why I’d immediately ditched the idea of using one of them for my plan tonight.

I needed someone I could flirt with and who would reject me because I was too trashed. I.e., men with standards.

Then I could pretend to be a wounded little bird, shot down off her perch. Montgomery Stark, who I hoped was already here watching me like he’d been doing, would swoop in for the rescue. After a nice little “drunken” meltdown and some requisite fake crying about my messed-up life, I would pretend to see how he wasn’t so bad after all. Our friendship would begin. Each day after that, I would warm up to him and start asking questions, learning what I could to defeat my enemy. But it all had to come off as organic, starting with my fake breakdown tonight.

Unfortunately, I was ninety-nine percent sure that Beau’s friends would absolutely hook up with me, sober or not. All they cared about was getting some puddin’.

“I’m sorry the music’s not your thing.” Ashley gave me a hug goodbye. “Don’t forget to text me, ’kay?”

“You got it. Have fun.” I watched her disappear into the crowd, and then put on my best drunk-girl act. I mean, I was pretty tipsy—a must to sell my act in case vampires truly had a superior sense of smell—but I wasn’t wasted.

I wove through the concertgoers, my eyes scanning for a sober-looking guy with a kind face. Suddenly, I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand straight up. A cold shiver washed through me.

He’s here. I can feel him watching. It was time to make my move.

To my right was a tall guy with a beard, wearing a plaid shirt. He looked about my age. Cute. Wide shoulders.

“Hey there. I’m Masie.”

He wiggled his brows. “I’m Rick. You always this friendly, Masie?”

I shrugged. “Nope. But I am *super* drunk, so I guess it just makes me extra friendly tonight.” *Reject me. Break my heart. Come on. Do it.*

“Can I buy you a water? You look like you could use some hydration. Wouldn’t want you to miss the final band. Earth, Wind, and Banjo is amazing.”

Dangit! A polite one. Where were the rude guys with standards when you needed them?

I sighed and looked around at the crowd. I saw mostly happy people tapping their feet and having fun. This banjo scene wasn’t going to work at all. Much too fun-loving.

“Uh, I’ll be right back,” I lied. “Going to hit the little girls’ room.” I walked away with a slight stagger.

I entered the restroom, berating myself the entire time I stood in line. *What am I doing?* My plan sucked, and it was time to call it a night. I’d have to find some other way to make it look like I was having a ridiculous self-pity moment so Monty could swoop in and offer a heroic shoulder to cry on. *Or run away.*

I finished my business and was exiting the restroom when someone slammed into me. I went stumbling back, bouncing off the person behind me and landing on my hands and knees.

“What the fuck?” a female said behind me. Suddenly, someone was grabbing me by the hair, and a fist plowed into my face. Another person kicked me in the ribs, the pain knocking the wind out of me.

I managed to stagger to my feet and face my attackers. Four women were glaring at me, all of them tall and heavysset with the sort of scowls one gets from living a hard life.

I guessed I was wrong about the banjo crowd.

“Getchur ass outta here, bitch, before we rip off your legs,” said the brunette in the middle.

“Take her money first, Berdie,” said the other. “That dumb bitch spilled my beer.” The woman’s shirt was soaked down the front.

Berdie stomped forward, going for my pockets. A crowd had already gathered around us, and someone was yelling for the bouncers.

I pushed her hand away, and she swung, landing a punch on my jaw. My head whipped to one side on impact.

Mothersucker, that hurt. Red dotted my vision as images of being attacked by Ronnie flooded my mind. I would never be a victim like that again.

I lunged at the woman, cranking back my arm and punching her on the side of her head. She dropped to the concrete floor, and I leaped on top, pummeling her. As irrational as it was, in my mind, I saw myself fighting Ronnie that night at the bar after he’d touched me. I should’ve let him have it right then and there. If I had, maybe he would’ve ended up in the hospital instead of me. Maybe Deedee would still be alive. Why hadn’t I fought back harder? Why?

Her arms went up defensively, and then her friends joined in to defend her.

I elbowed one in the stomach, sending her off, but another had my hair again. I twisted my body to swing at her, landing a clean punch.

The woman below me on the floor managed to gain leverage and pushed me off, launching me sideways.

Before I knew it, the four women were on me. People around us started pulling them away, only getting tangled in the fight themselves.

The sound of a loud *clap!* echoed through the air, and the crowd around me froze.

“Very amusing.” Montgomery Stark stood at the edge of the onlookers, applauding. He wore blue jeans, some kind of vintage brown boots, and a black button-down shirt that

showed off his large biceps. With his long dark hair loose around his shoulders, his pale eyes glowed under the venue's low lights. He definitely stuck out like a sore thumb in this crowd, like a fine museum piece surrounded by the colorful finds of a flea market. "You really are ruthless, Masie."

Panting and pumped full of adrenaline, I snapped out of my rage. My head swiveled toward the frozen faces and glassy eyes surrounding us. What had he done to them?

He added, "I will still have to kill anyone who touched you."

"What? No!"

"I will begin with the large gentleman who tried to win you." Stark turned to walk away.

"Wait. Stop! You can't do that. *I* flirted with *him*, not the other way around."

The vampire paused and shrugged.

"You can't just kill all these people," I argued.

He held up his hand, splaying his five fingers. "I only count five who will die."

"No," I protested.

"Those women attacked you. Had I not been here to stop them, you surely would've ended up in the hospital. Again."

"But I'm fine." Not really. I had the worst headache, and my knuckles were throbbing like a son of a gun. I'd never hit anyone like that before and didn't know what to make of it. Maybe Stark was right; there was a darkness inside me. Or maybe the top was finally coming off of my bottled-up emotions. A whole decade of them.

"What do you care if these peasants become my feast for tonight?" Stark strutted over and pinched my chin, forcing me to meet his icy gaze. "You are a fierce, uncaring creature, Masie. The sooner you accept that, the sooner you will accept me."

Oh Lord. Think, Masie. Think. “You’re right. I don’t care about them. They’re nothing—not even worth the work you’ll have to do to cover up their deaths, but I’m sure you can find less problematic meals elsewhere.”

“And what about the male you were speaking to? Are you telling me you do not desire him? Because I will not have it, Masie. I will destroy anyone who tempts you.”

Okay. Wow. Vampire jealousy sure was easy to trigger—way worse than any human male I’d ever seen. All I did was chat the boy up for ten seconds. I’d have to be more careful.

For the moment, however, I wasn’t sure what to do. I had to convince Montgomery not to slaughter the poor guy, and begging seemed like a bad idea. Such a dark creature might not respect it.

I lifted my chin, staring him down. “Okay. Kill the guy. Just know that I’m a woman, and I have needs. I won’t apologize for it, or for the fact that my pleasure requires a...” *Forgive me, Mamma, for the X-rated words I’m about to say to this man,* “a big, hard cock. So I guess you’ll have to kill anyone who fits the bill.” I shrugged, a defiant gleam in my eyes. “Suit yourself, Mr. Stark.”

My argument was stupid at best. I’d never choose a man based on the size of his sausage.

The vampire bent his head, placing our lips an inch apart. “If you truly believe any large cock will do, then you have never been properly fucked. I will correct that immediately.” He took my hand. “Come now.”

I dug in my boot heels and jerked my hand away. “I ain’t sleeping with you.”

“Why not? You said you have needs.” His voice was all superior smugness.

“Because...because...” I would never, ever sleep with this creature. And I certainly wouldn’t let my first time be with a man I didn’t love. “’Cause I don’t like you.” I strutted past

him, trembling with pure fear while pretending I owned the world and everything in it, including him.

I stopped, pivoted, and flashed a sassy little snarl. “You want me? You’ll have to earn it. Otherwise, fu-fuck off.” I pointed a finger at him. “And if someone insults me, touches me, or violates my space, I’ll take care of them however I see fit. Not you.” I grinned ear to ear. “Welcome to the modern world, Stark. Catch up.”

His dark eyes glittered with what could only be described as excitement.

I strolled outside, holding in my beer. I wanted to throw up from nerves, but I had no doubt he was still watching. I had to keep it together.

It took several moments to realize that my little performance had worked. My ballsy show of strength completely defused the situation.

I pulled out my phone, summoned a ride, which was thankfully half a block away, and headed home. I texted Ashley to let her know my ride’s details.

Ashley: Good thing you left early. Bunch of losers started kicking the crap out of each other.

Montgomery must’ve unfrozen everyone, and they just continued brawling.

Me: Anyone hurt?

Ashley: No, but the cops are here arresting people. Concert’s a bust.

I exhaled sharply and flung my head back. I’d averted a massacre, but nothing had changed; I still didn’t know the rules or my opponent.

Wait. Not entirely true. Tonight I’d learned that Stark wouldn’t hesitate to act on his jealousy. Any tactics involving other men were off the table. I’d also learned that he only respected strength, and he liked a challenge. Stark hadn’t

flinched when I told him he had to win me over. In fact, he seemed genuinely into it.

Sweet baby Jesus. If I wanted to get closer to him, I'd have to let him seduce me. Okay, maybe *seduce* was the wrong word. I'd have to encourage his pursuit—push him to try harder instead of just pushing him away. He needed to believe I was all in with this game, and that we *both* wanted the prize at the end: to be together.

When my ride pulled up at my place, Montgomery Stark was already waiting on my front porch with arms crossed and his tall frame leaned against the siding.

How does he move so fast?

I swallowed down a hard lump in my throat. It was time to test my theory.

I got out, strolled past him without a glance, and opened my front door. Once inside, I called out, “Don’t waste my time, Stark. You coming or not? Because the way I see it, you have a long, uphill battle ahead. Might as well start turning on the charm and showing me whatcha got.”

I went to the kitchen, served myself a glass of water, and then sat on the couch. I could feel him moving around the room among the shadows, watching me.

“Come. Sit,” I commanded, mimicking his words from the other night. “I want to hear all about this Anna. Tell me why you think I’d ever love you like she did.”

I suddenly felt a pair of lips on my cheek. I froze, trying to keep my pulse steady.

“Another time, Masie,” said that deep voice. “The sun will rise soon, and I must be off.”

With that, he left, and I exhaled the weight of everything I’d been holding in. Had my tactic worked? He said he would be back. He’d sounded intrigued. I guessed I’d find out soon.

I checked all my doors and windows and then crawled into bed, where the release valve threatened to blow.

How much more of this could I take?

The answer: I'd have to take it all—see it through to the bitter end. Otherwise, Stark would never be out of my life or the town I loved so much.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next night, Stark didn't show up to the Rooster, and I didn't feel his eyes on me during the drive home.

I couldn't lie; it made me uneasy. Not knowing where he was pushed me off-kilter and sent my mind into a deep spin. Was he off killing some poor person? Maybe someone I knew? I needed to move faster with my plan and stop him before more bodies piled up.

When I arrived home around two thirty in the morning, the horses were restless in the barn, the front door was wide open, and the lights were on inside.

Was Stark here, or was something else going on?

I was about to call Sheriff Idiot but changed my mind. Thomas would only accuse me of flirting with him. Also, did I really want him tangling with a vampire?

As a precaution, I punched nine-one-one into my cell but didn't hit send.

I grabbed Betsy from under the seat in my truck and walked up to the open front door. "I'm armed. So whoever's here better—"

"Come to the kitchen," said that deep voice.

I let out a sigh of relief. It was Stark. Not that I was thrilled he'd broken into my home again, but at least he wasn't out chomping on people.

I slowly walked inside, heading to my kitchen, where I found an elaborate spread on the white tile counter. There were boiled potatoes with herbs, roasted chicken, and several salads made with ingredients I didn't recognize. A bottle of red wine sat in a decanter alongside two glasses. Stark was dressed in a tailored black suit with a white dress shirt and pale gray-blue tie that almost matched his eyes.

I placed my things next to the sink, knowing I had to pick my words carefully. If I gawked at this feast, I wouldn't score points. But if I swooned, he wouldn't buy it. I'd made it clear that I was like a ring toss at the county fair—not so easy to win.

“Wowy, wow. You prepare this yourself, vampire? Or did you force someone's poor mamma to cook up this storm?” I asked.

He flashed a subtle but proud smile. “Prepared the meal myself. All dishes from my village.”

“Which is where?”

“The land has had many rulers over the years, but today it is part of northern Italy.”

I'd have to read up on the region later. “This doesn't look like Italian food I've ever seen.”

“It is not. Each dish is an exact reconstruction of what my mother used to prepare on special occasions. Took me years to track down the recipes.”

Okay. This was good. He was honoring the memory of his mamma and his childhood. This meant there was a part of him that still remembered what it was like to be human. Maybe I could work with that somehow.

“I'm impressed.” I added, “Didn't know vampires can cook.”

“Why don't you try some?” He gestured toward the food.

“You joinin' me?” I asked.

“Sadly, no. I can drink wine in small quantities, but,” his pale eyes flickered to a dark shade of blue and focused on my neck, “I prefer to sate my thirst with other things.”

Not a smokey chance in hell, cowboy. “Well, too bad, because I'm not in a generous mood tonight.”

His pupils went wide.

Remember, Masie. You're a strong, sassy Southern girl. You don't take crap from nobody. “If you show me anything in your mouth that looks sharp, this night is over. So are you,” I warned. “Now, if you don't mind, I'm starvin', and Mamma always says it's a sin to waste food.”

He watched me grab a plate from the cupboard. I was so nervous, I grabbed a chicken leg with my hands instead of tongs. The meat fell off the bird like butter sliding off hot bread. I served myself heaping piles of potatoes and salad, too.

“I love how you take your sustenance in such bountiful proportions,” he said.

I sat at the counter and took a bite of the chicken leg. *Oh God!* It was bitter and tart.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

I'd rather eat at Al's gas station over by the Rooster. Everyone knew you only went there to lose ten pounds.

I swallowed down the rancid meat. “What's in this?”

He smiled like I'd never seen him smile before. “Are you asking for my mother's recipe?”

Something deep in my gut told me this was a test. But if I was wrong, this would be the end of my journey. In the South, it was a cardinal sin to insult a mamma's cooking. Couldn't be much different elsewhere in the world.

“I appreciate when any man makes an effort,” I said, “but this food should've kicked the bucket with the people in your village. It's nasty.”

He threw his head back and laughed.

I sighed with relief. I'd passed his test. “Laugh all you want, but I'll never eat anything you cook again.”

His chuckle fizzled out. “I should hope not. Vampires cannot taste anything but blood. Having one prepare a meal for you is like asking the comatose to perform surgery.”

“You said you drink wine.”

“True,” he replied. “But I cannot taste it. Not like you do. The effects of the fermented fruit still take hold, but there is no joy in the act of consumption.”

Yes. Another nugget of information. Vampires could get drunk.

He stepped toward me, cupped the back of my head, and stared deeply into my eyes. “I much prefer to drink my wine through a beautiful woman.”

My breath stuck in my chest. Being this close to him felt like being cuddled by a frisky rattlesnake.

I stepped back, breaking free from his grip. “Then too bad for you, because I don’t consent.”

His gaze softened. “I am beginning to think you are toying with me, Masie.”

“Says the man who just cooked an inedible meal to test my honesty.” I drew a breath. “When are you gonna stop the games, Stark?” He claimed to be serious about me being his special someone.

“As soon as you give in, Miss Kicklighter.”

“Then I hope you’re good with your hand.” I turned and headed for my bathroom. “Good night, vampire. I need to shower and hit the hay.”

I was almost to the bathroom when two strong hands grabbed my shoulders and spun me around. I gasped as his pale eyes drilled into me.

“You think I’ll let this go on for much longer?” he growled. “I see right through you.”

I blinked up at him. “If you see through me, Mr. Stark, then tell me what I want. What am I thinkin’ right now?”

He was about to speak, but instead pressed his mouth to mine.

I froze, trying not to panic. I had a deadly savage pressed to my mouth and two sharp fangs a centimeter from my lips.

Relax. Relax. Relax. He hadn't bitten me yet.

To my surprise, his lips were soft and warm, not cold or repulsive. He breathed into me as his tongue worked inside my mouth. I didn't join him, fearing I might cut myself.

After a few seconds, my heart started racing again, but for an entirely different reason. His kiss was really...passionate, sensual.

Once again, he'd caught me off guard. I couldn't get the upper hand.

He slowly broke away, staying close enough so I could still feel his breath on my lips. *Vampires breathe. Another piece of info.*

"Your heart is beating very fast," he whispered.

"It means nothing." A lie. I was out of my depth with this man. He knew what he was doing when it came to seduction.

"Nothing?" he replied skeptically.

"Lots of things make my pulse race," I said with a breathy voice, "scary movies, hot peppers, too much coffee. Oh, if you've seen my mamma drive, bring a defib." I turned my head away, needing a reprieve. "Try harder next time. Just remember, I'm mortal and don't have all day." I stepped into the bathroom, locking myself inside, where I pressed my back to the door. *Leave, just leave...*

After a few moments, there was a gentle knock.

"Masie?" His voice was low and tender.

"What?"

"I know the real reason you are pushing me away," he said.

"Do you?"

"Yes. You are still hurting over the death of your friend," he said quietly. "And I am sorry for that. Had I understood how precious Deedee was to you, I would have acted." He paused for a moment. "I am trying to make it up to you,

Masie, but please understand; I have not had to think of much besides myself for a few centuries. I am trying to relearn the skill. I want...to be good to you—what you need. You are the first thing that has made me want to stop killing and start living. Won't you give me a chance?"

He was playing me with this loving-and-gentle act. Right? Everything he'd shown me was that of a ruthless killing machine. Kindness, weakness, and pity were repulsive to him. Take the banjo concert, for example. He'd had no reservations about running off and murdering a bunch of people.

I had to decide right here, right now. If I took the bait, I might win the confidence of a man who secretly yearned to be good, loved. If I didn't take the bait, I might win the confidence of a man who reveled in being bad.

Think, Masie. Think! He's bad. You know he is.

I burst out laughing. "Nice try, vampire! Go home. Sell sucker to some other human."

A low chuckle rumbled through the door. "I think I underestimated you, Masie Kicklighter. You are nothing like my Anna. You are much wiler—a true match for a man like me. Goodnight."

After I heard the front door close, I let out a sigh of relief. I'd survived another night, but nothing with this creature was going as planned. He wasn't at all like I'd imagined—ancient, crusty, out of step with the world, and oblivious to human emotions.

This man was crafty, intuitive, sensual, and extremely powerful. How the heck was I going to beat him?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was official. Montgomery Stark was occupying my head every waking moment. Even in my sleep, I dreamed of fighting and defeating him. Well, except for last night when I dreamed he was naked and—

No. Not thinking about it.

I wasn't about to become his woman, and I sure as heck wasn't going down without a fight. Like I'd said before, Leiper's Fork was my home. Not his.

"You okay, Masie?" Uncle Jimmie asked as we went over spreadsheets on the computer in his office a few days later.

"Yeah. Sorry. It's like drinking through a firehose." His accountant did most of the heavy lifting, but I still had to track payroll hours, pay suppliers, and add up each day's receipts. On top of that, there was the actual banking and deposits.

"You'll learn. And I'm not going anywhere yet. Now's the time to be makin' mistakes."

I exhaled with a whoosh. "I'm more afraid of lettin' you down than anything else. You put your whole dang life into the bar and your whiskeys. What if I drive it all into the ground?" *Or I can't get rid of this vampire, and he eats all the customers?*

"The Rooster's in a good position, Masie. We got plenty of cash reserves, the distillery on its own can support the overhead for both businesses in case we have a slump, and we're insured up the gopher hole. It would take an act of God to sink this here ship."

How about an act of the undead?

"Sorry." I winced apologetically. "I'll try to chill out."

"You sure you want this?" he asked worriedly.

"Yes. Absolutely. Why?"

“You haven’t seemed too excited about takin’ over. I get you’re still workin’ through losing Deedee, but you’ve been lookin’ like the weight of the world is standing on your head. Maybe we should put all this on hold.”

This was a lot on top of everything else—the attack, Deedee’s death, my vampire problem, and even dealing with the whole killing-Ronnie thing—but I didn’t want to let him down. Jimmie had been there for me, Maybell, and Mamma for years and never asked nothing of me except to show up on time and do my work. “I’m really excited about it. I promise. Just tryin’ to soak everything in.” *And learn how to express my emotions like a functioning adult.*

“Hey, Jimmie?” said Joe, who appeared in the doorway.

“Yeah?”

“I was just in the warehouse, grabbing a few cases of beer, and noticed something.”

“What?” Jimmie asked.

“Well,” he scratched his scruffy red beard, “looks like a big animal’s been scratching up the floor.”

Jimmie frowned. “The floor’s concrete.”

“Come have a look,” Joe said.

Both Jimmie and I got up and followed Joe out past the back lot, which was pretty big since us employees used it to park and it was where the semis came in to drop off supplies or pick up loads of whiskey. The warehouse itself was just on the other side of it, and beyond that was the distillery. Most of us who worked at the Rooster never went farther than the front of the warehouse, where we stored the bar booze. Jimmie didn’t like anyone back where the whiskey magic happened. Trade secrets and all.

We entered the front of the warehouse, and Joe pointed to a spot behind two pallets of beer. “Take a look in the corner.”

Jimmie walked over, and his eyes went wide. “What the hell?”

I went over and took a peek. Something had smashed through the concrete and dug a giant hole straight down.

“I ain’t ever seen anything dig like that,” Joe said.

“What kind of animal is it?” I asked. Wasn’t no possum, that was for sure.

“Hell if I know. I’ll call Willie and have him set out a trap,” Jimmie said.

Willie was our exterminator, but he was usually dealing with mice prevention. “I hope he’s got a really big trap.”



Later that evening, I was helping out Joe at the bar during a sudden rush of customers who’d come from the art festival. Jimmie was working on some broken pipe in the warehouse. It looked like it was going to be a busy night.

“I should see if Claire can come in and help,” I told Joe. It was her night off.

“We got this. Unless you’re allergic to gettin’ your hands dirty, boss.” He smirked.

He knew I wasn’t a stranger to hard work. “Well, at least if anyone touches my honey cakes, I can eighty-six them now.” Depending on the severity of the infraction, Jimmie usually gave people a few chances before banning them. He said that everyone deserved second chances. Sometimes thirds. I wasn’t so sure my rear agreed, though I would give Jimmie credit; he never put up with anyone threatening us or getting rough. Getting handsy was considered bad manners in his book, not a cardinal sin.

“Here comes trouble now.” Joe’s eyes zeroed in on a group of three men coming through the door. They wore dirty biker jackets and had long scraggly hair and perma-snarls.

“Oh boy.” They looked like they’d just gotten released from *Mad Max*’s supermax. My first reaction was to let Jimmie know, but then I stopped myself. If I was going to run this place, I had to start dealing with customers. All the

customers. “I’ll take their table. Let Ashley and Maybell know to steer clear of them.”

The men sat at a large round table for six, closest to the jukebox. Normally, we’d ask people to leave those open for larger groups on busy nights, but I didn’t want to split hairs.

I pasted on my warmest, sparkly smile and walked over, preparing to feel out their vibe. “Well, good evenin’, gents. Welcome to the Flaming Rooster. Can I get you anything to start, or do you wanna chance to look at the menu? We have a special tonight: a flight of flamin’ hot Kicklighter Whiskeys, if that’s your poison.”

The shortest one, with greasy brown hair past his shoulders, stared with the coldest dark eyes I’d ever seen on a man.

Suddenly, I felt an icy gust of air circling around me.

Oh, baby Jesus. He was a vampire.

Instinctively, I took a step back.

The man closest to me, with a shaved head, smiled sadistically. “What’s the matter, sweetheart?” he said with a slithery drawl. “We don’t bite.”

And I’m the tooth fairy.

I tried to keep the smile on my face, but if they were vampires, they could already hear my heart dancing around inside my chest. They knew I was terrified.

The creepiest one in the middle spoke up with an ominous tone. “We understand Montgomery Stark frequents this establishment?”

I wasn’t about to respond without knowing the reason for the question. If they were his enemies, seemed like a bad idea to rat Stark out and risk ticking him off.

Not unless they can take him out. Even then, who was to say that these mean SOBs wouldn’t move right into Leiper’s Fork and take his place?

Better the devil you know.

Honestly, though? How many vampires were out there? Seemed wrong to have more rolling up into town when I hadn't gotten over the first one.

The man narrowed his black eyes, urging me to reply. "Yes or no?"

"Look, boys, I don't keep track of who comes and goes from our bar. So if you're not here to eat or drink—" I quickly clarified "—drink *alcohol*, just leave, okay?"

The three stared like I was a sad little horsefly, not even worth swatting.

I instantly wanted to kick myself for being so polite. I didn't presume to know if all vampires shunned politeness, but this bunch sure wasn't here to show off their good manners.

"We'll leave when you answer our question," said the bald one.

I switched gears, smacking my hands on the table, narrowing my eyes. "You'll leave *now*. And don't make me lose my temper."

The one in the middle chuckled and leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "Whatcha gonna do, woman?"

Me? I'm going to try to BS my way through this, because I'm no match for you.

I flashed a crooked smile and spoke slowly, praying they wouldn't call my bluff. "If you cross me, you'll find your sorry behinds in the cemetery next to the son of a Bisquick who killed my friend Deedee. Don't believe me? Go take a sniff." I paused for effect. "He didn't think much of me either." I stood up straight and smiled cheerfully. "Now," I whooshed out a breath with a smile, "out you go and make it quick, because I gotta nice, sharp woodchipper in my yard for the likes of you."

The three men exchanged glances.

“Do I look like a patient woman?” I asked.

They had no reply.

“Okay. I’ll give you gents a moment to chew on your next move.” I walked away and disappeared into the back, bending over to catch my breath.

“Impressive.”

I looked up to find Stark, wearing a sleek black suit, standing over me in the kitchen. His dark hair was neatly combed and tucked behind his ears.

“Son of a Bisquick, though?” He arched a dark brow, his pale eyes glittering with amusement.

“You need to stop sneaking up on me, Stark.” I righted myself. “By the way, your cuddly friends are lookin’ for ya.” I pointed over my shoulder toward the front of the house.

“They are not my friends, but I did enjoy listening to you run your little mouth. Very bold, considering who they are.”

“Who are they?”

“We call them wanderers, but they are more like vermin. They roam in small groups, going town to town, looking for a good meal. Then they move on.”

My eyes widened. They were here to kill people. “What do they want with you?”

He rubbed his chin slowly. “Ah, well, I happened to wipe out their leader a few months ago.”

I wasn’t about to ask why. Mostly because I didn’t care. “So they want revenge,” I concluded. This could be good, but like I said, the last thing I wanted was to trade Stark for three other terrifying vampires.

He laughed. “That is not how things work. They are here to offer their loyalty and to serve me. If I’ll have them.”

I cringed. So we were talking about adding more vampires to town. “And if you say no?”

“Then they will stay, kill, and move on.”

Kill? I didn’t like that option. “If you say yes?”

“They will serve me. And also wreak havoc on this town for many years to come.”

I blinked. “You can’t let them just run through town and start munchin’ down on everyone.”

“What would you have me do?” He folded his strong arms over his chest.

“Make them leave peacefully? Kill them? Either or.”

“What is in it for me?” he asked.

I’d fallen right into that one. “What do you want? And don’t say to accept me as your lover, mate, boyfriend, whatever.”

“I would like you to spend the night with me.”

A sour lump formed in my throat. “Like, as in, to do sex things?”

He nodded. “Not that I would force myself on you—rape is very unsportsmanlike as a vampire—but I see no point in hiding my intentions.”

“For the record, rape is never sportsmanlike for anyone. And I appreciate your honesty.”

“Do you accept my terms?” he asked.

Holy hot tater tots. I did not want to go along with this. Spending more than a minute in his presence was distressing, let alone an entire night. The thought made my stomach churn. Still, this was the opportunity I needed. An entire night together would allow me to dig deeper and learn my enemy. There had to be some way to scare him off. Everyone had a weakness. Even my aunt Loraina. Rest in peace. She died when I was little, but I remember thinking how the woman was made of rocks and spit. Nothing intimidated her. Finally, it was a bee that got her.

“I’ll be in your presence for the night,” I said, “but sex is off the table.”

He flashed a wicked smile. “Am I allowed to change your mind?”

He could try, but I wouldn’t be changing it. I was saving myself for marriage. Preferably with a living person. “Give it your best shot, cowboy, but don’t be breakin’ out the branding iron.”

He stared blankly.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” I clarified.

“Ah. Then we are in agreement.”

I nodded hesitantly.

“Are you certain?” he added. “Because I hear one of those men attacking your uncle in the warehouse as we speak.”

My stomach rolled. “What?”

“Your little woodchipper threat worked, and the three men left the bar two minutes ago. Now they are in your warehouse, dragging your uncle into their den.”

That hole was theirs? “Ohmygod! Stop them!”

Montgomery sighed. “Very well.”

I blinked, and he was gone. I sprinted out the back door, toward the warehouse, too frantic to even realize I had no weapon.

“Uncle Jimmie!” I pumped my arms and legs, moving as fast as my feet could carry me.

I entered the warehouse and found Jimmie lying facedown on the concrete. Stark was busy squeezing the life out of the bald vampire.

I rushed to Jimmie’s side and flipped him over. He had a gash on his neck where the blood trickled out at a liberal pace.

“Oh no. Oh no!” I took off my apron and pressed it over the wound to apply pressure. “Someone call an ambulance!” I

yelled.

Stark tossed the limp vampire across the room, the body slamming against the block wall and then sliding down.

“Help him,” I pleaded, holding Jimmie in my arms, trying to stop the blood. “Get him to the hospital!”

Stark came over and dipped his ear over Jimmie’s chest. “I’m afraid he won’t last that long.” Stark raised his wrist to his mouth and bit down. Two small pools of blood formed on his skin.

“What are you doing?”

“Saving him.” Stark made it sound like no big deal. *Just making a sandwich here, woman. Want pickles? Mayo? Some guac?*

“You can’t give him your blood!”

“Do you want him to live or not, Masie?” Stark asked blandly.

Yes, but not as a vampire. “Will giving him your blood turn him?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. It all depends on how close he gets to death, and that will depend on you. Do you wish to keep talking?”

“No. Fine. Do it.” I looked away, not wanting the image of this moment to haunt me forever. I didn’t really understand how one became a vampire, but I had to assume it involved giving a person vampire sauce.

I turned my head just in time to watch Stark’s wrist wounds close. This was insanity.

I covered my mouth, trying not to imagine how awful it would be to see my uncle turned into a strange, bloodthirsty monster. “How long will it take until we know?”

“Again, it depends. If his heart stops before my blood enters the organ, then he will die right away. If his heart is in the midst of a normal, healthy rhythm, he will heal.”

“And if *not* those two things?” I asked.

“If his heartbeat is erratic, only moments from stopping, he will become like me.”

I winced.

“Do not make that face, Masie Kicklighter. There are worse things in this world than becoming a vampire.”

I clenched my eyes shut. How had this happened? Why Jimmie?

After a few moments, I opened my eyes and stared at Jimmie. “He’s still breathin’.” That was good. It meant Jimmie still had a chance to heal.

I looked up at Stark, praying for a sprinkle of hope.

“Now we wait,” he said, hovering over us. “And do not forget, Masie. You made a promise, and I expect you to keep it no matter the outcome. In the meantime, you should tend to your customers. I will stay here with your uncle. If he rises a vampire, it will happen within the hour, and I will need to restrain him.”

Dear Lord. I dropped my hands. “What about the other... wanderers?”

“I killed two. The third one is down in that hole. But do not worry. I will keep my word and end him. Just as long as you do not double-cross me, Masie.” He bent over slowly. “I want my night with you. Tomorrow.”

That made one of us.

I nodded and got to my feet. “Be forewarned, I’ll be armed. I still don’t trust you.”

“Would not have it any other way.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I tried to tell myself I could embrace Uncle Jimmie as a vampire, that it was better than losing him forever, but as I served the guests and tried to keep a friendly smile on my face, my mind was playing through the reality of that outcome.

He would not be okay with it.

Jimmie was a hardworking man, dedicated to this community and to living life a certain way. Yes, mostly he lived to work instead of the other way around, but he prided himself on being an honorable, self-made person who gave more than he took.

He donated books and supplies to the school. He opened a teen center so the local kids would have a place to hang, do homework, and stay out of trouble. “Small towns are a breeding ground for boredom and mischief,” he’d say. He hired more help than he needed in summer, just so the older teens in town could make a little money and feel the pride of earning a paycheck. Yeah, he made them work their butts off—cleaning, painting, doing inventory, or sterilizing equipment—but I never saw any of those young people, including myself, stirring up trouble.

In short, Uncle Jimmie was a weighty thread that flowed through the fabric of Leiper’s Fork, and becoming someone—or something—other than who he was would not sit well with the man. He would be lost. Angry and bitter, too.

Which was why I felt so guilty. I didn’t care if he woke up healed or a vampire. Any outcome aside from death was fine by me.

I just...need him. It wasn’t only because of my lack of preparedness to run his businesses. Uncle Jimmie was the closest thing to a father I’d had these past ten years. I looked up to him.

“Hey, I can close up, if you want,” Joe said, catching me as I shuffled by with a case of our Screaming Rooster, Double Hot Whiskey to restock the bar. It was the kind that knocked your socks off. Even came with a picture of Big Barney shooting fire from his beak.

“Why?” I asked Joe.

“You look like you’re coming down with something—red and sweaty. Or maybe all the stress? You’ve been workin’ yourself to the bone lately.”

He was partially right. I had been working way too hard, but right now, that wasn’t the reason my stomach felt like I’d scarfed on nachos from Al’s gas station.

I set the heavy box on the bar, glanced at my watch, and took a deep breath. Stark had said we’d know the outcome in an hour. That was ten minutes ago.

“You sure you guys can handle it?” I said.

“Sure. The kitchen closes in an hour.” Which meant business would start winding down soon.

“Call if anything comes up, okay?” I pointed over my shoulder. “I’m gonna find Jimmie in the warehouse and say good night. See you tomorrow.” Everyone assumed he was knee-deep in mash or mechanical parts since that was usually the case. He rarely hovered over us while we worked unless we were shorthanded.

“Night, Masie.”

“Night, Joe.” I made my way toward the warehouse, my feet feeling like they were weighed down by concrete blocks. I had no idea what I was going to find.

Earlier, we’d moved him to a room just off the main warehouse, where we stored the more expensive scotch. I approached slowly, listening for any signs of...vampire? Human? Would there be a difference?

I crept toward the door, looking over my shoulder. I still wasn’t sure if that third vampire was hiding out in the hole.

“Hello?” I knocked.

“You may enter,” Stark said.

I slowly opened the door. Sitting up on the floor was Jimmie.

I covered my mouth, holding in a sob. “Is he...?”

Stark flicked his wrist dismissively. “He is fine.”

“Human fine?”

“Yes.”

I rushed over and kneeled next to my uncle, throwing my arms around him. “Thank you, Jesus. Thank you.”

“How about a thank you, Montgomery?” Stark said.

I flashed a quick glare at Stark. “Thank you.”

Jimmie mumbled something.

“What was that?” I asked.

“He is very disoriented,” Stark said. “He needs rest.”

“Jimmie, are you okay?” I asked.

He stared like he didn’t remember who I was.

“Like I said, he is disoriented. His body and mind are healing.”

“But he’ll return to normal, right?” I asked.

Stark shrugged. “May take a few days, but I believe so. These things are not an exact science.”

I gave Stark another hard look.

“Do not worry, Masie. The man will not become like me. Just as long as he is not fatally wounded in the near future,” he added.

“Sorry?”

“My blood will remain in his body for several months.”

“I don’t understand. You said if his heart rhythm remained steady, he wouldn’t turn.”

“Yes, but say he were severely injured...” Stark arched a brow. “If his heart nears death, he will turn.”

Uh-oh. “This is your insurance, isn’t it?”

“Whatever do you mean?” he said slyly.

I shook my head. *Point for Stark.* If I backed out of our agreement or crossed him in any way, he could just snap Jimmie’s neck and make him into a vampire.

Mothersucking sneaky...

“I’ll get him home.” I stood and helped Jimmie to his feet. Now, more than ever, my plan to run Stark out of town was critical. Clearly, he’d outmaneuvered me. He’d saved my uncle while also giving himself leverage against me. “Did you catch the third guy?” I asked.

“As promised.” Stark bowed his head.

“So no more vampires in town besides you.”

“I never said that.” He chuckled. “See you tomorrow night, Masie.”

I blinked, and Stark was gone.

“But I don’t know where you...live.” I guessed he would come find me when he was ready to begin our night together.

I just wished I knew what he’d meant. Were there really more of his kind in Leiper’s Fork?

Dear sweet Lord. They could be everywhere. Why hadn’t the thought crossed my mind until now? Montgomery Stark and these three vampires might be the tip of the iceberg.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I got my uncle home and tucked into bed, where he passed out immediately.

I put a tall glass of water on his nightstand along with his cell phone, where I left a note for him to call if he needed even the smallest thing. Otherwise, I'd come by in a few hours to feed his chickens and make breakfast. First, I needed to go home and sleep, even if only a few hours. My mind felt like mashed potatoes, minus Mamma's delicious gravy. *Ain't nothing good in my head right now.*

I put on my white silk PJs, which I reserved for emergencies only—aka very bad days—and slid into bed. But every time I closed my eyes, images of Jimmie's gushing neck came back to me. Then there was the anxiety of knowing I'd be spending tonight with Montgomery Stark, and he'd made it clear he was after sex.

Did vampires even make love like normal people? Did they bite during the act? Could a human get pregnant from the other kind of "vampire sauce" like I'd seen in movies?

Sickening thoughts of giving birth to some ghostly fanged baby who drank bottled blood stampeded through me.

"Jesus." I sat up, pushing back my damp hair. I needed to wrangle myself in.

What am I even worried about? It wasn't like I was gonna open up "Little Masie" for business just because Stark asked. I'd rather die than give my blossom to that creature, and it didn't matter how smokin' hot he was.

I am a Kicklighter. We can take the heat.

"Then why the heck are you so obsessed, Masie?" I asked myself.

Maybe because Stark seemed so confident about changing my mind. That meant I needed to be confident in the other

direction.

What I needed to focus on tonight was my information gathering. The goal was to remove this vampire from my life and my town. So how did one get rid of a vampire? Like I'd said before, I wasn't the killing type, but if it came down to that, I had to accept the hand I was dealt.

So how would a nice girl like me kill a vampire? Wooden stake to the heart? Silver bullet? Decapitation?

"Ew. Never mind." There were no nice ways to kill anything.

I hoped I could just find a way to scare him off. With luck, that information would serve us all well in the future, too. Who knew how many of those wanderers were out there.

Knowing I had a full day ahead and Jimmie wasn't quite himself, I showered, threw on my favorite jeans and a black Flaming Rooster hoodie. I would head over to check on my uncle and then get to the bar to make sure they were all set for the day—coins, cash, booze, food, and other supplies—before going back to care for Jimmie. Poor man. One minute, he was being attacked by dudes in leather. Next, he was waking up from death.

I stepped out my front door, almost tripping over a large rectangular box with a card tucked under a big red ribbon.

I grabbed the envelope and read the letter:

Dearest Masie,

As agreed, tonight you will be mine the entire evening. A car will pick you up at your home at seven p.m. sharp. You are to wear the outfit I've provided and take the pill included inside the box. You must take it at noon. Do not eat anything past that time.

If you do not follow my instructions, there will be blood on your hands.

Sincerely,

Montgomery Stark

I shoved the note in my pocket and opened the big box.
Leather?

I held up the black bustier. There was also a pair of leather pants and red spiked heels.

“Sorry, Mamma. But my clean-mouthed days are definitely over. Because...fuck that.” I was not going to dress up like vampire arm-candy.

I bent down and picked up a small velvet box, the kind used for rings. Inside was a red pill. I held it up to the sunlight. The thing had red, swirling, bloodlike syrup inside that shimmered in the light.

Whatever it was, I’d be insane to put it in my body. Totally and utterly dumb.

Yet, if I didn’t do it, if I didn’t follow his instructions, he’d made it clear that there would be “blood on my hands.”

My thoughts drifted to my uncle. All it would take was one snap of his neck, and life as he knew it would be over.

I threw back my head and sighed toward the big blue sky. Instead of getting an upper hand, my life had been completely railroaded by Stark. He knew I wasn’t likely to disobey him again. Not if it meant another person dying or losing my uncle.

I shoved the pill back in the ring box and placed it in my purse. Then I took my new outfit inside. “Seven o’clock. I become Leather-rella.”

But joke’s on you, Stark. I was a good girl, and these clothes wouldn’t change that any more than they’d open up Little Masie for a night of vampire seduction.

I closed my front door, not bothering to lock it. What was the point when monsters could come and go as they pleased?



To my surprise, when I got to my uncle’s house, he was awake and back to normal with his usual intense energy, all ready to kick the day’s butt and take names. Except for one small difference. He’d eaten raw steak for breakfast.

I saw the remnants on his plate in the sink. Not one sign of searing or heat. Just raw, uncooked beef stuck to a bloody bone.

Maybe this was a side effect of cheatin' the Reaper.

"So, you good?" I asked, watching him shovel hay into the coop, where Barney kept staring like he wanted to peck out Jimmie's eyes.

Weird.

"Sure. Why you askin'?"

I shrugged. "You know. After last night."

"What about it? A vampire attacked me. Another vampire, Montgomery Stark, saved my ass."

My mouth fell open. "You know about vampires?"

He stabbed his pitchfork into the soft ground to park it. "I had my suspicions."

"For how long?"

He raised his eyes, focusing off in the distance. "I started noticing things a few years ago, and then one night, I was working late on the grain dryer. I was all alone, and the thing fell right on top of my leg. I couldn't move. Then, out of nowhere, this woman appeared from the shadows, and I thought for sure it was a demon." He shrugged. "Next thing I know, I'm on my couch. Not a scratch. Except for this." He showed me his neck, just below the collar. There were two small scars.

"She bit you?"

"As far as I can tell."

"How come you never said anything?" I asked.

"Would you?" he asked.

"Probably not." I sighed. "I thought the same thing after Ronnie killed Deedee and attacked me. Montgomery Stark showed up and stopped him."

“I figured something like that happened.” Jimmie scratched his head. “I just didn’t want to ask and upset you.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“About?” he asked.

“We can’t have vampires runnin’ ’round town, gobbling people up.”

“The way I see it, they’ve saved me twice. And now you. So how are they the threat when it’s humans who do most of the killin’?”

That was only partially true. It had been a vampire who almost killed Jimmie last night. “He wants me, Uncle Jimmie. Stark thinks I’m his reincarnated bride or something.”

“What’re you talkin’ about?”

“He says I smell like her—it’s what caught his attention.” I held back telling Jimmie that the only reason he’s alive is because I agreed to spend the night with Stark.

“Do you think you’re her?”

“Heck no,” I replied.

“Well, I think he’s a good man, Masie. You should give him a chance. True love is a rare thing.”

I blinked. What in the world had gotten into my uncle? “You think I should date him?”

“Why not?”

“Uncle Jimmie, the man’s a killer. He drinks blood. He...” It suddenly dawned on me that something more was happening here. My uncle was very protective. He would never advocate for me to go out with a dangerous creature. “Stark did something to you.”

“Yeah, he saved my ass.”

“No, I mean, he turned Ronnie. Did you know that? And as a gift to me, he brought Ronnie to my house and told Ronnie he had to obey me completely. It was some mind-

control thing.” I left out the part about telling Ronnie to die and him actually dying.

“Well, I’m not under his control.”

“Really? Then why’re you encouraging me to hook up with Stark?” I asked.

“I was just sayin’ that the man can’t be so bad. He saved your life. He saved mine, too.”

“What if I told you I wanted to date Murrey Wilks? Would you be okay with that?”

Murrey was a guy in town who went to prison five years ago for murdering his parents. He claimed they were possessed by demons. The irony was that Murrey was a pastor and considered to be an upstanding citizen up until the murders.

“Why would I tell you to date that monster, Masie?”

See. My uncle would never want me to date a killer, but here he was pushing me to date a vampire? All they did was kill, kill, kill. Sure, maybe they saved a person every once in a blue moon, but so had Murrey. He’d saved hundreds of souls before being put away.

Uncle Jimmie’s been brainwashed.

“Never mind. I’m glad you’re feeling okay.” I turned to leave. “I gotta get to the Rooster and set up for the day. Joe has the lead tonight. I have some important business to take care of.”

“Tell him to call if he needs anything.”

It was a weeknight. “It should be slow. Either way, I think you need to stay home and rest.”

“I feel great. Thanks to Montgomery Stark.”

“Yep. A genuine hero.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Because I knew nothing about the effects of sipping on vampire blood, I was beyond worried for my uncle. Of course, my ignorance was something I intended to change tonight no matter the cost.

I looked in the mirror and adjusted my girls, which were pushed up so high they reminded me of weather balloons. “This bustier doesn’t leave much to the imagination, that’s for dang sure.” I turned and stared at my rear in the leather pants. I’d never worn anything this provocative, not even on Halloween when all my friends went as a pack of Daisy Dukes.

I put another bobby pin in my hair, which I wore up in a big topknot. My lips were bright red, to match my heels, and I’d taken great care to play up my dark eyes with smokey eyeshadow and thick lashes.

I took one last look in the mirror, hardly recognizing myself. *You’re still you, Masie Kicklighter. Don’t let that nasty ol’ vampire convince you otherwise.*

I grabbed my black satin clutch, the only one I owned, and added my lipstick, cell, ID, credit card, and new pepper spray. *Thank you, Thomas.* For once he’d come in handy.

At seven on the dot, a black sedan rolled up to the front gate. I buzzed the driver in and went outside to wait.

As I stood on my porch, I looked up at the sky, noting how the lack of moonlight made the stars shine brighter than ever. A great metaphor for my life. The darker things got, the more determined I became to show strength. Not that I was special. People around here always rallied when the going got tough—tornados, floods, the odd blizzard. We always pulled together, which made me wonder: What would the town do if they found out about vampires? What would the world do?

Would we humans finally set aside our differences and see that we had way more in common than we thought?

It wasn't that differences didn't exist, but somehow we'd all been convinced to believe they outweighed our actual, and very real, similarities as human beings. We all wanted to thrive, to reach our God-given potential, to pursue our dreams, and to live safely from crime and violence. We wanted to raise our children in a world where they could love themselves exactly how they were, instead of feeling they had to change themselves to find happiness.

Would these divides fade away if everyone found out that we, humans, were not at the top of the food chain?

Made me wonder if vampires might be a blessing in disguise.

I burst out laughing. "Masie Kicklighter, your wagon wheels are loose. Vampires. A blessing. *Pfft.*"

The car pulled up, and a driver with cropped dark hair got out.

"You-you're Ronnie's friend." I'd never forget the face.

"Was." He opened the passenger door and waited for me to get in.

I didn't budge. Mostly because I worried about this being a trap.

Probably noticing my horrified expression, he said, "Hey, I'm sorry for what Ronnie did to your friend. Okay?"

My friend and me. "Okay." I stayed glued to my porch, thinking through options. Run inside and grab Betsy or get in.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, "but I'm not a bad person."

"Then why were you hangin' out with that piece of trash?"

"Because Ronnie'd never done anything like that before. Something got into him. But he was a good friend. A good person."

Good person? The Ronnie I'd met was a disgusting human being who had no problem accosting me in public and then committing murder.

"Please?" He jerked his head toward the open car door, urging me to get inside. "Stark won't be pleased if we're late."

I had to decide between debating a dead man's goodness or getting what I needed to run Stark out of town. *Or kill him.* In short, I had to stay focused.

Whatever the cost. Right, Masie? I slid into the back. The driver got behind the wheel, and we started our journey to wherever Stark planned to try to seduce me.

"What did you mean, *something got into Ronnie?*" I asked, feeling like it could lead to valuable information.

"We were on our way home from a day of fishing—a boys' day out before Ronnie's wedding. We stopped for gas in Leiper's Fork, and Ronnie went to the bathroom. He came back acting all weird. Aggressive. Said he wanted to go across the street to your bar. He insisted."

They'd been at Al's gas station. Maybe Ronnie had the chili. "So he was a peace-loving hippie before that?" I asked.

"No, but he was active in the community, always volunteering and running fundraisers for the church. His dad was pretty active, too."

I remember reading that Ronnie's dad was a city councilman in Nashville. "Did something happen earlier? A fight with his fiancée? Did he eat anything strange that numbed his tongue?"

"Nope. We just went to the Rooster, and the moment he saw you, a switch flipped. I thought it was just nerves or something until he touched you. Then I knew something was up."

That was suspicious. "What happened after you left? Where did you guys go?"

He watched the road for a long moment before answering. "I...don't really remember. I just woke up a few nights later, and now I work for Stark."

This was interesting. "And now you're a vampire."

"No."

"So why are you workin' for him?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Just feels like what I'm supposed to do."

My mind spun, trying to figure out what all this meant. Especially when I tied it back to my uncle's behavior this morning. "What's your name?"

"Charlie."

"Charlie, did you drink Stark's blood?"

"Not that I recall." He kept his eyes on the road.

It was possible he just didn't remember. "So where are the rest of your friends from that night?"

"We all work for Stark."

"And they're all still human," I guessed.

"Far as I know."

Stark lied. He'd told me that he'd turned them, that he needed thugs.

I wondered if I could milk Charlie for more information. "What can you tell me about Mr. Stark? Has he ever mentioned being afraid of wood or silver? How about holy water?"

"Stark is a good man. You should give him a chance."

I shook my head. He was using the same words as my uncle.

He added robotically, "He will make you happy. He is your fate."

Yep. This was a dead end. Charlie had been brainwashed, too.

I sat silently, trying to keep my nerves at level-one calmness.

We turned down a long driveway and stopped at a security gate. “The country club?”

“Yes,” replied Charlie.

It wasn’t what I expected, but this was good. It meant I wouldn’t be alone with Stark.

Once we passed the gate, Charlie drove us up the hill to the restaurant and club. I’d never been here before. It was members only, and no one in my social circle golfed.

The car stopped by the club’s entrance, which had a long walkway that cut through a well-manicured garden filled with dramatic lighting and flowering bushes. The tall beech trees had white Christmas lights wrapped around the trunks and branches. They almost looked alive.

I spotted Stark coming toward the car, and my breath stalled. He wore a tux, making him look less like a vampire and more like a dark prince of seduction. His masculine features—angular jaw, high cheekbones, and sensual lips—stood out under the lighting, giving him a dreamlike quality. Like I’d said before, few men were this beautiful.

I glanced down at my bad-girl outfit and arched a brow. *Another test?* I was going to stick out here for sure.

He opened my door, and I stepped out, holding my chin up high.

“You look even better than I imagined.” Stark took my hand and kissed the top with his warm lips. The heat of his skin still threw me off. The vampires in stories were ice cold all the time.

“It’s your night, so if this is what you want me to wear, fine by me.” I smiled stiffly, not letting on how uncomfortable

I felt. “So, what’s the game plan? But before you answer, I don’t golf.”

“I thought you might enjoy a nice meal while I explain the events for the evening.”

“Sounds great.” I took my hand back, and the car drove off, leaving the two of us facing each other alone.

He stared for a long moment, almost as if he wanted to say something, but couldn’t. Very unsettling.

“Ready?” he finally asked.

Nope. “Sure.”

He opened the door and ushered me inside the club. We turned down a dimly lit corridor and were greeted by a tall, skinny maître d’. He gave me one look and frowned.

Yep. This is a test. Stark probably wanted to see how I’d handle myself. Public ridicule versus disobeying him.

“Mr. Stark, very pleased to see you. Your usual table is waiting,” said the man.

“You come here a lot?” I asked Stark.

“All the time.”

We were led through the restaurant, which wasn’t packed but had a decent crowd. Everyone was dressed elegantly, sitting around tables with white linens and soft candlelight. I’d never felt so out of place, not even when I went to senior prom by myself. I’d already bought the dress, and I wasn’t about to let my best friend and cheating, no-good ex keep me home because they were going together.

Stark helped me take my seat at a small square table beside a window overlooking the green.

“Thank you.” I set my purse next to the decorative plate with the club’s logo—a tulip with crisscrossed golf clubs—and folded my shaking hands on my lap to keep them from view. “So, did I pass?”

Stark sat across from me, the candlelight flickering in his pale eyes. I just couldn't get over how different he looked tonight. So handsome. *So...human.*

"Pass what?" he asked.

"You wanted to see if I'd obey you and actually wear this in public." I glanced down at my half-exposed girls.

"Wrong. I may only get one night with you, and if that is the case, I wanted to see you in something I can pleasure myself to for many years to come. No pun intended."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. I hadn't expected him to say something so...sexual.

He leaned in and whispered, "Also, I do not care what anyone here thinks, and neither should you."

The waiter showed up, and Stark ordered a bottle of expensive-sounding wine, a steak for me, and some fancy French dish, with the words *coco* and *truck*, for himself. Or had he said "van"? I was too nervous to remember.

"Thought you didn't eat," I said.

"I do not, but it would be rude to make you sit and dine alone." He paused. "Also, I admit, I do enjoy the aroma of certain foods sometimes. Once in a while, I bake cookies just to fill the house."

Vampires were nostalgic. Very surprising. "So, I'm just itchin' to hear your plan for tonight. What do you have planned?"

"Let's discuss it after we get some food into you. You must be hungry."

"I'm fine."

He tilted his head. "Did you eat after you consumed the pill?"

Oh no. My stomach wobbled. I'd forgotten about the pill, not that I'd planned to take it. Wearing this outfit was one thing, but I did not do drugs.

“I’m too nervous to be hungry,” I replied, sidestepping his question.

He leaned in. “Please tell me you took the pill, Masie.”

I didn’t want to lie and risk losing his trust. Not when we’d come so far, and I needed him to open up about vampire kryptonite.

I personally had my fingers crossed for holy water. I mean, how hard could it be to get the local priest to bless our reservoir? Before we knew it, we’d have purified lawns, holy veggie gardens, and be pumped full of Godly goodness from the tap. Leiper’s Fork and everyone in it would be vampire repellent.

“Fine. I didn’t take it,” I admitted. “I don’t put pills in my body unless it’s doctor’s orders.”

A snarl formed on his perfect lips. “I told you, Masie, not to disobey me.”

“And *I* told *you* that I’m not the trusting type.”

“I saved your life. I saved your uncle, too. What more do you want?” he said sternly.

“How about the truth?” I spat back with sass. “Why was my uncle eating raw meat this morning and goin’ on about how I should date you?” I folded my arms over my chest. Then I unfolded them. The girls were already camped out on a cliff. They didn’t need encouragement to jump.

“As I said, it will take time for your uncle to fully heal. And while my blood remains in his body, it is only natural that he craves what my blood craves.”

“Nasty, but okay. And how about the Montgomery Stark pompoms? Jimmie was cheering for you pretty hard this morning,” I said.

“My blood is inside him, and he is very open to my suggestions. Can you blame me for trying to increase my odds?”

I could. I could blame him for a whole lotta things, but now was the time to make Stark think I was warming up to him. “What about Ronnie’s friends? You said you turned them, but I know you didn’t.”

He leaned back in his chair, a proud look on his face—a hint of a smile and warmth in his pale eyes. “You surprise me with your questions, Masie. Though, I should’ve known you would discover the truth. My Anna had the same gift. Nothing got past her.”

“Thank you.” I stared expectantly.

“I gave Ronnie’s friends my blood and intended to snap their necks, but then I changed my mind.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Is a person not allowed to change their mind?”

“Of course, but now they’re all under your blood spell or whatever.”

“It is temporary,” he said. “Soon they’ll be back to normal and return to their pathetic, meaningless lives. Satisfied now?”

I shrugged, wanting him to think he’d inched me closer to trusting. “I guess.”

“Good. Because now we have another issue to deal with, and it will require your full attention.” His eyes shot across the room to a blonde in a tight yellow dress, being seated by the maître d’. She was giving us the death stare.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“My ex-lover, and she is displeased that I left her to pursue you.”

He’d dumped his girlfriend for me? That didn’t sound very rational.

I stared at Stark, waiting for him to elaborate.

“She is not known for giving up so easily,” he added.

Well, she could have him, not that I could say what I was thinking. “Tell her it’s over.”

“I tried that already. It did not work. She will want to fight you.”

“Fight?” I laughed. What, were we in high school? *Or at a banjo concert?*

He flashed an annoyed look at the blonde.

“Well, I never agreed to the rules, so I’m not gonna fight her,” I said firmly.

The blonde got up and started walking over. The entire room of patrons stopped talking and stared.

“She is a vampire, Masie. All of the people here are,” Stark said calmly.

My head whipped around, my eyes taking in the intense, feral gazes. I suddenly noticed that no one was eating. They just had red wine in front of them.

Not red wine. My heart began to gallop.

Stark continued like this was just another day in Vampire Land, “They won’t allow you to leave until you’ve answered her challenge. It is why I told you to take my blood and not to eat. I wanted to ensure you had fully absorbed it. Just in case she showed up.”

I lost my cool. “You set me up. You knew this would happen.”

Stark remained calm, almost indifferent. “I understood it was a possibility. Public confrontations are par for the course among my kind.”

“Oh. You think you’re being funny right now with your golf lingo, buddy?”

“No, but it is time to put my cards on the table, Masie. I want you, and she will not accept it until she’s had her fun.”

So he just thought, *Let's rip off the Band-Aid and pit Masie against an irate vampire?* Side note: how the hell were there so many vampires in Leiper's Fork?

I have to get out of here. I stood and started heading for the French doors leading outside to a patio.

"You! Kicklighter!" the woman yelled. "Where the *fuck* do you think you're going?"

I ignored her, rushing toward the exit. But before I took five steps, Stark was there, gripping me by the arms. "You should've taken the pill," he scolded. "I trusted you."

Why would he do that? "Next time, try tellin' the truth. Now let me go. I'm leaving."

"You cannot. I already explained this," he growled.

"I'm not gonna tussle with your ex. She'll whip my butt."

"I am aware of that. Thus the reason I wanted you to take my blood as insurance." His eyes scanned the room and then focused on the approaching blonde. "Tell me right now, Masie, and do not lie. If I can prove we are mates, are you prepared to be with me?"

"I don't under—"

"Yes or no." He gave my bare shoulders a firm squeeze.

Telling him no didn't sound like the right answer. Not if I wanted to live. "Sure. Fine. Yes."

"You'd better not be lying to me, woman, or so help me, I will end everything and everyone you love. That is, if we make it through the night." He pushed me behind him and faced the blonde. "Fiona." He dipped his head of beautiful silky black hair. "You are looking lovely, as usual. Very fierce and deadly, too. Unfortunately, your challenge cannot move forward."

"Why?" she snarled.

"Because I have confirmed she is my mate."

“Mate? A second one?” She laughed, throwing back her head of wavy blonde hair. “We all know that’s impossible.”

The roomful of creepy, rich vampires laughed, too.

“Not a second mate. My first. Reborn in a new body,” Stark declared, all cocky and proud.

The woman, Fiona, frowned.

“Do not be so shocked,” Stark said. “The prime minister himself claims to be the reincarnation of Lord Bleyer, and I have proof that she, Masie Kicklighter, is my Anna.”

The room gasped in unison.

Oh Lord. What was happening? My head whipped from side to side between Stark and Fiona.

“That can’t be,” Fiona said. “You’re mad for even suggesting it.”

“To the contrary. I am thrilled to have her back.” Stark reached behind him and took my hand, dragging me to his side.

My heart was beating so loudly, I was sure my left melon was going to jiggle out of its holder.

Fiona scowled at me. “If he is proven wrong, then I will be back for you. Do you hear me, Kicklighter?”

I didn’t respond.

She turned and marched back to her table. The rest of the room returned to their business as if it was all a big nothing.

Stark urged me to retake my seat.

“I’d li-like to go home now,” I stuttered.

“You do not wish to eat?” he asked.

“No.”

“But it is perfectly safe. For now.”

“You need to tell me what just happened,” I hissed, “or this night is over.” I pointed my finger in his face. As if that would

scare him.

He bowed his head and gestured toward the patio.

We stepped outside and followed the path leading around the green. *Why the hell do vampires have a golf course? Did they night golf?* The thought annoyed me. They had no business doing human things.

I stopped and turned to face him, waiting for his explanation. “Well?”

“I believe you are my Anna.”

“Yes, I know.”

“What I failed to tell you is that she was our queen, our ruler for over two hundred years.”

I took a wide step back. *What the fuck? Sorry, Mamma. The swearing seal is permanently broken.*

He went on, “If I am right, then it means you are our rightful ruler, Masie.”

I took another big step back, shaking my head. “Uhhh... no.”

“Yes.”

“How did we go from spending one sexless night together to me being your reborn vampire queen?” He was crazy. Crazy, dead, and dangerous.

“I intended to work up to that information, Masie. In time. And do not complain; I told you to take the pill. That was all you had to do. My blood is a thousand times stronger than Fiona’s, and you would’ve beaten her with one slap.”

“So your blood was in that pill,” I declared.

“Just a few drops.”

“Enough to brainwash me, right? Then seduce me, have sex with me, do whatever you want.”

His expression soured, animosity in his eyes. “I told you, I am a gentleman. And cheating in games of seduction is not my

thing.”

I didn’t believe him for a minute, but whatever. “Why did you really bring me here tonight, Stark? What was the plan? Have me fight your ex in my hot leather pants so you could beat off to it later? Then what?”

“I was not certain she would be here. I only knew it was a possibility. After dinner, I planned to show you my home, introduce you—little by little—to my world.”

“And then what?” I scowled, knowing that wasn’t everything.

“There were certain things my Anna enjoyed. I had planned to try them on you and gather proof that you are her reincarnation.”

“What things?” I barked furiously. Mostly out of frustration and terror. This night was supposed to move me closer to a Stark-free life. Now I was knee-deep in vampire muck.

“If I tell you, then it will ruin the test.”

“Fine. Let’s go,” I said.

“Go?” He raised a brow, looking surprised.

“Yeah. To your house. Show me all the things you planned. I want to know if I’m this person you say.” Really, though, I saw this as an opportunity to end this insanity. I was not his Anna.

“Are you certain?” he asked.

“Just promise me one thing: If I’m not her, I want to be left alone. No fighting your exes. No more seduction. I want you outta my town, outta my life.”

He narrowed his eyes. I could tell I’d set him off.

“Montgomery,” I said calmly, preparing to lie, “let me be completely transparent. I’m not gonna be with a man whose heart is taken and always will be. I deserve to be loved, to have my soul mate, to live life knowing that the person I’m

with only has eyes for me.” Okay, maybe that first part wasn’t a lie. “So if I’m not your Anna, then it’s only fair you let me go and that you leave Leiper’s Fork. Because it’s clear to me you’ll never love anyone like you loved her.” That last part was also true.

Stark stared, his eyes softening. “That is exactly what my Anna would say. She demanded all or nothing.”

“Then she was a smart woman.”

“*You* are a smart woman.” He took my hand. “Masie?”

“Yes?”

“Whatever happens, I want you to know I have no regrets meeting you. You are truly a special woman. Full of fight, passion, and love, but mostly, I like your darkness masked in light. Perhaps, someday, you will share that darkness and tell me the origin.”

Something unexpectedly shifted. Maybe it was the way he looked at me—like I could do no wrong. Maybe it was because I’d spent most of my teen years and adult life hiding my sadness, and that maybe, just maybe, Stark wasn’t put off by it.

Of course, he called my sadness by another name, but he knew I carried the past and sudden death of my father with me—something I never revealed to anyone.

Or maybe it was that when I looked at Stark just now, I realized something about him that gave me a sick kind of comfort: *He can’t die.*

He would never grow old or get sick. He would always be there.

A dark shudder rolled through me. Suddenly, the thought of having this vampire in my life didn’t seem so crazy.

“Can we go now?” I asked.

He smiled wickedly.

“Stop that,” I snapped.

“What?”

“Please try to be less evil tonight. It’ll go a long way.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It didn't take much effort to realize that the country club was really a community of blood-drinking, wealthy vampires, and Stark appeared to be the richest of them all. He lived two minutes from the restaurant, overlooking the ninth hole in a massive three-story mansion.

Maybe he was some sort of prince? Because if his mate had been the ruler once, it probably meant he was high up on the social ladder.

“So this entire community is filled with vampires?” I asked as we got out of the golf cart, which he'd driven. Yes, vampires drove golf carts, and no one was more shocked than me.

“Yes, though there are some who prefer to live outside the club. They must pay for their own staff, including security.”

“Security for what?” I asked.

“I do not wish to scare you. You need time to ease into this.”

“I appreciate you wanting to protect me, but don't hold back, Stark. I want to know everything.”

“Why so curious all of a sudden?” He gestured toward the front door, which was a massive wooden rectangle with intricate carvings—vines with symbols where the leaves might be. Just like his tattoos.

“Did you just ask why I'm curious about a big group of vampires living in my town?”

He chuckled.

“How long have you all lived here?” I asked.

“Not long. A few years. And before you ask what brought us to Leiper's Fork, I will say that it was the same thing that

brings people to any community: the lifestyle. Most of us here are retired from political life and prefer a quieter atmosphere.”

“So you’re a bunch of old retirees.” I laughed.

He gave me a look. “Old is a subjective term, but yes. There comes a time in every vampire’s life when they wish to simply enjoy the fruits of their labor. We served our people and no longer wish to work.”

I didn’t believe he was retired. He’d just told the entire restaurant that I was Anna and the rightful ruler. There had to be a power play at the heart of all this.

We stopped in front of the door.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Probably not, but I agreed to your tests, so let’s do it.”

He opened the front door. “After you.”

I stepped inside the foyer and gasped. It was beyond beautiful, with a massive crystal chandelier hanging from the three-story ceiling. The polished black marble floor reflected the overhead light, making the tiles look like glass. On one side, pushed against the wall, was sleek, modern white furniture—two upholstered armchairs and a bench.

“Not what you expected?” he asked.

“To be honest, I didn’t expect anything, but now that I see this, I guess I’m surprised you like modern décor.” It almost felt like the entrance to some glamorous Vegas hotel—not that I’d ever been.

“Would you care for a tour?”

I would, but honestly, I felt more anxious about these tests. “Rain check? I’d like to get down to business, if it’s all the same to you.”

“All right.” He took my shoulders and gazed deeply into my eyes.

I froze, immediately transfixed by the pale blue and green swirls. “Why do your eyes do that?” I muttered. “It’s like the colors are dancing.”

“They have changed over time, but I do not know why. All of the older vampires have similar eyes.” He kept a firm grip on me. “Perhaps it is nature’s way of warning others not to cross us.”

So Stark was older than the rest. I had to assume more powerful too, after his comment about his blood earlier. He’d said two drops would give me the strength to beat Fiona.

“Are you going to bite me now?” I asked, still in a quasi-trance. Funny, I felt perfectly aware of everything, but my mind was all warm and gooey.

“Do you want me to?” He licked his supple lips.

“No.” I shook my head.

“Perhaps later, then.” He flashed a sly smile and then slowly lowered his head, pressing his mouth to mine. His lips were warm and velvety soft, like I remembered.

A pulse of heat surged through me, nudging me to step closer and press my body against his. I wanted more, for him to deepen the kiss.

He broke away and slowly swiped his thumb over my lower lip. “First test passed.”

I blinked up at him, breathless.

He added, “Anna’s pulse always raced when I kissed her. It did not matter the number of years we shared. Her heart always acted like it was the first time.”

“Maybe you’re just a really good kisser.”

“Perhaps. Are you ready for the next test?” he asked.

“Sure,” I lied, my mind sparking back from his hypnotic gaze.

“Brave.” His eyes flickered with admiration. “Come.” He took my hand and led me through the massive living room, which I didn’t see because I was too busy staring at the elaborate murals on the ceiling. They reminded me of something you might see in ancient Rome, with clouds and angels and ripped men in cloth diapers.

Next, we walked past a study with floor-to-ceiling leather-bound books. Thousands and thousands of them. It made the tiny collection in my bedroom look pathetic. *Shelf envy.*

We then proceeded down a hallway made of glass on all sides, including the ceiling. It reminded me of those aquariums with underwater tunnels. Only, instead of water we were surrounded by racks of wine, reaching three stories high.

“For someone who doesn’t enjoy wine, you have a lot.”

“I have time on my side. It is a very good investment,” he said.

“What’s the oldest bottle you have?”

“I auctioned off my prior collection fifty years ago to a sheik, so I’m afraid not very old, but give it a few more decades.” He winked. “This collection will be nearly priceless.”

A few decades. I laughed uncomfortably, wondering how old he was, but too afraid to ask. If I knew the truth, then I wouldn’t be able to look at him and pretend he was in his thirties—a much less intimidating age.

We made a right at the end of the glass wine-cellar tunnel, landing us at a split staircase with a wrought-iron banister that had elegant swirls between the bars. One set of stairs went up, the other down.

“Choose,” he said.

“What?”

“Which way to proceed for the next test.”

Normally, I avoided basements unless there was a tornado warning. I didn't like the damp, musty smell of them. But the sick part of me thought I should do what Anna would. He thought I was her. Maybe I should let him keep believing it.

Wait. No. What am I doing? I needed to be free of this dangerous man, even if I kept wondering what it could be like to have him in my life. *A man who won't die, who accepts the parts of me that are damaged.*

But this wasn't about just me. It was about the town, too. *Our safety.*

Then it hit me: That wasn't exactly true anymore.

Everything had gotten so crazy tonight that I hadn't digested what I'd learned. There were way more vampires than I'd thought, and they'd been living in Leiper's Fork for years, keeping to themselves. The more I quickly mulled it over, the more I realized my initial reaction might have been wrong. Maybe Stark wasn't my enemy. Maybe he wasn't so dangerous.

"Did you kill old Merrill that night?" I asked.

"Merril?"

"The old guy who smells like whiskey and mothballs. He went missing the night you brought Ronnie to my house." Stark had said he would kill someone because I'd disobeyed him.

"What if I told you that I did?" Stark asked.

My stomach lurched. "Did you?"

"I did. I drank him."

I winced.

"Do not look so repulsed, Masie. He did not have much longer to live and felt his wife would be better off not watching his demise." Stark raised his brows, to punctuate his sincerity. "I am a vampire. Even I cannot resist a free meal." He drew a breath. "Also, I wanted you to realize how

important it is to obey me, but clearly I failed. Tonight being proof. Just know that I rarely give commands for the sake of controlling others. That breed of sadistic behavior is shallow—something I am not.”

I had no clue if he was telling the truth, but time would tell. Either way, poor Merrill.

“Up or down, Masie?” Stark asked again.

My eyes toggled between the options as I thought about what to do next. My original goal to get rid of Stark was in limbo now that I knew we had an entire community of vampires. The problem was too big for one person to handle. I could inadvertently trigger a massacre of the entire town if I acted without understanding the situation.

Kill one wasp, you rile up the whole nest. Not that I was even sure I wanted to kill Stark. I mean, the man lived on a golf course. How big a threat was he really?

Regardless, I’d made a deal with Stark to give him this night in exchange for saving Jimmie’s life. I supposed I had to see it through.

“Up,” I replied.

“After you.”

I started up the stairs and noticed an odd scent that reminded me of cinnamon. “What’s that smell?”

“My new plug-in. Holiday spice. Do you like it?”

What the...? Vampires liked air freshener. “Sure. I guess.”

“I have many antiques, and sometimes the odor is too much like a thrift store.”

This night just kept getting weirder.

“Stop in front of the second door,” Stark said.

“Okay.”

It took a while to get there because the hallway at the top of the stairs went on forever.

I got to the door, stopped, and faced what looked like an ordinary bedroom door with dark-stained wood. “What next?”

He stayed back a few feet. “In that room you will find every device known to man, each one capable of evoking extraordinary pleasure—or pain, depending on your preference. You will pick five that you wish me to use on you.”

I stepped away from the door. “Scuse me?”

Yes, I was feeling curious about Stark and what a relationship with him might be like, but it would take a lot more than that to give myself to him.

I was raised a certain way and unashamed of it. I liked the idea of my first time being with a man I felt connected to in every possible way. I wanted to be married to him and know he had my back, just like I had his. I planned to give myself to someone who wanted the same things out of life.

In short, my sexual curiosity with Stark didn’t warrant betraying myself, my hopes, and my upbringing. I liked being good. It was the only thing that kept me from falling down the dark hole inside myself.

“What’s option two?” I asked.

Stark grinned. “Basement.”

“And what will I find down there?”

“You will choose five objects and use them on me.”

This was a “me fuck you five ways” or “you get fucked five ways” test?

“I choose neither,” I said.

His eyes narrowed with annoyance. “That is not a choice.”

“As long as I have my own mind, I say it is.”

His supple lips flattened. “I cannot verify you are Anna if you do not enter one of the rooms and choose five objects. Her

tastes in the bedroom are well documented. She practically wrote the handbook on human-vampire intercourse.”

“Anna was human?” Shocking.

“Until I turned her, yes.”

So they had been together as human and vampire first. “How did she end up the queen?”

“Because she wanted to be and inspired the masses. Now choose a room,” he commanded.

I walked toward him and looked up, defiance in my eyes. “No.”

Irritation flickered across his face. “Why not?”

“Because the only man who gets to have me will be my husband. No one else.”

He tilted his head to one side. “You are a...virgin?”

I lifted my chin. “So?”

He took three steps back. “But how?”

I frowned, disliking his reaction. “Kind of feels self-explanatory, Stark. I keep my legs closed.”

“That is not what I meant.” He exhaled sharply. “Masie, I’d planned to bed you. Tonight.”

“Well, too bad. I said no, and I mean it.”

“I can give you anything you want, but this must happen.”

Sweet Lord. Is this man serious? My morals and virginity couldn’t be bought. “Then I want my own dang country,” I said sarcastically.

“Done.”

“And a billion dollars,” I added.

“Done. But the currency will be in gold coin. Anything else?” he asked.

I was actually getting angry. He honestly thought he could buy me. “Since you’re playing God and granting wishes, I want my father brought back to life.”

His demeanor completely changed to stone-cold serious. “Yes.”

I shook my head. “I can’t believe I agreed to come here.” I tried to walk around him and leave.

He blocked me with his large frame. “I am being serious, Masie.”

“Well, I wasn’t. I can’t be purchased like one of your antiques or...or stupid plug-ins. And for the record, I would never—and I mean *never*—*Pet Sematary* my dad. I loved him, and he’s resting peacefully.”

Stark stared with a strange, almost uneasy look in his eyes. “When Miles had the heart attack, your uncle Jimmie was there.” He paused. “So was I.”

My knees went soft, and my body felt like it was about to shut down. What was he saying?

Stark went on, “Your uncle asked me to save him, just like you asked me to save your uncle. But for your father, it was too late. Miles’s heart barely had a beat.”

I covered my gasp with my hand. Stark turned my dad? “You’re lying. He would never ask you to do that. Uncle Jimmie didn’t even know for sure vampires existed until yesterday.”

As I spoke, I remembered my uncle’s odd reaction after Stark saved him. He didn’t seem shocked or rattled by it.

“Of course he knew. We’ve been friends ever since.”

I frowned, my mind spinning. “My dad died when I was fifteen. You said you only moved to town a few years ago.”

“A play on words.” He shrugged. “Few. Ten. Fifteen years. Not much difference when you are me.”

I tried to process, but nothing made sense. It was like I'd wandered into some new vampire reality where up was down and down was picnic. Or shoe. Or some other illogical bullcrap.

"Why didn't Jimmie tell me?" I muttered. "And how come I've never seen you 'round before?"

"I very rarely came by the bar. If I wanted to see your uncle, I went to his home. And I highly doubt your uncle felt you would believe him if he had told you."

I scratched my head. Stark had an answer for everything. On the other hand, I usually worked day shifts up until recently.

"Who do you think told him it was time to retire and give you the Rooster?" Stark said. "I wanted you to have a reason to stay, Masie. I had to see how this would play out. And if you understood why—how special Anna was—you'd understand."

My world was crumbling around me. Uncle Jimmie hadn't given me the bar because he believed in me. He'd been told to do it. By a vampire!

I should've known. Uncle Jimmie didn't believe in handouts. I mean, community charity was one thing, but handouts no. He believed everyone had to work hard for what they wanted in life. I hadn't even questioned his sudden change of heart.

"I want to go home now," I said, knowing I'd finally hit a wall. There was no space left to hide my emotions.

"But—"

"Take me home, Stark. Now!" I yelled.

His expression softened to neutral.

I stepped around him, marching down the staircase toward the front door.

Stark was there before I reached it. “Don’t you wish to say hi, Masie? Your father is just in the other room, and I know he misses you.”

I stilled, but my heart thumped wildly. “He’s here?”

“It was going to be a surprise after the tests. Of course, that is all unnecessary now. Anna refused me, too, before marriage. Just as you have tonight. She demanded to remain pure, though her heart was anything but. Her loss, her sorrow, her darkness lived deep within her soul, and she struggled every day of her existence to overcome them. Her desire to do her best for those around her defined her. And you are like her in every way.”

Stark looked over his shoulder. “You may come out now.”

Several *people* from the restaurant came around the corner, staring with reserved expressions. They’d been here the entire time, watching us.

My eyes gravitated to a face in the back of the group.

“Daddy?” My lower lip quivered, and my eyes filled with tears.

“Masie.”

I rushed toward him, shoving the “people” out of the way. My dad wrapped his arms around me, cocooning me in a hug. He was cold to the touch, but I didn’t care. I’d spent the last decade missing him.

He pulled back. “Let me get a good look at you.”

He studied my face, and I studied him back.

His beard was short, and his hair was unkempt like always. His arms and shoulders were those of a man who worked hard physically.

“You look exactly like I remember,” I said.

His light brown eyes glowed with affection. “Being a vampire’ll do that to ya.”

“But how? And why didn’t you come see me?”

“It’s against the rules, and I wouldn’t dare break them. Not when you would be the one to pay the price.”

I went in for another hug. “I missed you so much,” I sobbed. “Every minute of every day.”

He stroked the back of my hair. “I know, baby. But I was always there watchin’ over you.”

“How are you here in Stark’s place, Daddy?”

He released me again and looked at Stark. “Montgomery is my maker. I serve him until I’m released.”

My head whipped toward Stark. “You’ve been holdin’ my daddy hostage all these years?”

“No,” Daddy interjected. “It’s not like that. He protects me.”

“From what?” I asked.

“I think that’s enough enlightenment for one evening,” Stark said.

There was no way in Sam Hill that my daddy would let anyone keep us all apart. I refused to believe it. Stark was forcing him to stay here somehow.

“No.” I walked over and shook a finger in Stark’s face. “You let him go. Right now.”

“He is free to leave, Masie. All he must do is ask,” Stark insisted.

My gaze whipped toward my daddy, who nodded. “He’s telling the truth. I serve him, and I don’t want to leave.”

I couldn’t accept that. My daddy loved us. He worshipped the ground Mamma walked on. He would never hurt us by pretending to be dead all these years. Not when he would’ve known the pain we were in.

“How stupid do you think I am?” I looked at Stark. “I’m not lettin’ him stay here.”

“After you pass the final test in front of the leaders to prove you are Anna, you may do anything you like, Masie Kicklighter, including working this out with your father.”

The anger and pain were too much. Did Stark have any clue what I’d been through? What my sister and mother had been through? And all along my daddy had been here in town, right under our noses. I didn’t give one flying weasel fuck about his Anna or their stupid tests. I was done with all these lies, secrets, and bullcrap. *I’m so done with these vampires!*

“I’m *not* Anna,” I seethed at Stark. “And this thing between us is over. I want my dad back. I want you gone, Stark. Or I swear, I’ll take you out myself.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

After I left Stark's house on foot, Charlie magically appeared and offered to drive me the rest of the way home. I accepted, of course. It was a good fifteen miles, and even if I was livid, I wasn't stupid. It was almost midnight in a town infested with vampires! I just hadn't been able to get a signal yet to call for a ride.

I hopped in the car but didn't speak because I was too busy chompin' on my rage. The world I knew didn't really exist. Vampires were real and *everywhere*. Some of the people in town, like my uncle, were in on it, and now there was a bunch of vampires who thought I was the reincarnation of Anna.

My mind flashed to that night in the ER. The doctor had said he was rooting for me. *He knew*. He knew about vampires and Stark wanting to claim me. How many others were in on it?

Not surprisingly, all that stuff didn't bother me as much as finding out that my uncle knew my daddy was "alive," and that they'd both let me, my mom, and Maybell suffer. How could they do that to us?

Yes, Daddy said there were rules about telling, but obviously those rules had loopholes. Proof being... *Every. Fuckin'. Person in town knows!*

Okay. Okay. Maybe not everyone, but old Merrill knew, and so did my uncle and the doctor. I had to assume there were more. Why leave me, my sister, and Mamma hanging like that?

And don't get me started on Stark. The big hairy balls on that vampire! From day one, he'd divulged the truth about what he was and had every opportunity to tell me about Daddy. *But no...*

Why don't you trust me, Masie? I mocked his voice in my head. I saved you, Masie. Let's have dinner, Masie. Here's my cool plug-in, Masie. Oh, and your father is in the kitchen.

“Asshole!” I barked.

“It’s a lot, isn’t it?” asked Charlie, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Which part?”

“The whole vampire thing.”

“Yeah,” I replied bitterly, “it’s...*a lot.*”

He glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “If you want my advice, don’t fight them head-on.”

Was it that obvious I was on the warpath?

I frowned. “Is this you speaking or Stark’s mind voodoo?”

“Me. They don’t see the world like we do. For them, it’s all about egos and power. They’ll cut you down if you lift a finger against them in defiance or publicly humiliate them. But if you ask for a favor, for them to *bless* you with their wondrous powers, they can’t resist.”

Sounded just like Stark. *Asshole!*

“What about me?” I asked. “I’ve shown plenty of defiance toward Stark.” And I intended to show a whole lot more.

“That’s because he believes you’re his late wife. He’s fascinated with you. But trust me, if he wasn’t, he’d slit your throat.”

“Why?”

“I overheard one of the butlers in his house saying that Stark murdered Anna.”

“Murdered his mate?” But I thought he loved her.

“Supposedly she disagreed with him about something, and they had a big fight, so he killed her. He’s regretted it ever since, and you’re his second chance. That’s what everyone’s saying, anyway.”

If that was true, then Stark had been leading me down one messed-up path. *Whatayya expect, Masie? He's a stinkin' vampire! Daddy-hoggin', silky-tongued, pompous, manipulative, selfish dirtbag! And he can't even cook!*

Charles added, "But don't worry, Masie. I think if you were really her, you wouldn't have wanted anything to do with him. People don't go on dates with their killer."

I knew nothing about reincarnation other than I didn't believe in it. If it were real, I doubted you woke up one day with the memories of another person's life. In any case, I had to keep learning as much as possible about their world. Sitting here, knowing the last ten years of my life could've been completely different—way less dark and painful—really pissed me off. We'd been robbed of the truth and Daddy. I wanted to take back control.

"Who were the vampires at Stark's house tonight?" I asked.

"I didn't see them."

"Stuffy. Rich-looking. They were at the restaurant."

"Then they were the Party."

I doubted he meant they were fun people. "Are they really ex-politicians?" That was what Stark said.

"Ex? I don't think so. In their world, there are two hierarchies. The Party are the vampires with all the money. They're really in charge. They own companies, own powerful people, and some even own entire countries. They control everything and everyone, but it's all behind the scenes."

"And the second hierarchy?"

"That's the superficial structure used to placate the vampire masses—small bloodlines, covens, and co-ops who pool their resources. Everything is supposed to be run in a democratic manner, but really, the Party's in control. They decide who gets what territories, how many resources, and

what the tax rates are. Then there are the smart vampires, who've always known the truth. They want things to change."

Sounded oddly familiar. "How do you know all this?"

"I used to consult on human political strategies for NEVC, the New England Vampire Co-op. A cousin of mine who was turned got me the job. Let's just say in that part of the country, they're not fans of the Party. Actually, no one is."

"You *voluntarily* worked for vampires before you became Stark's slave?" Charlie was nuttier than a squirrel turd.

"I'm not his slave. I'm his...prisoner. At least for another few months. Publicly, they don't believe in letting people or vampires die if they've committed minor acts of disrespect. Their justice system demands penance in the form of work. Privately, it's another matter."

"Why are you tellin' me all this?" I asked when what I wanted to ask was why I should believe him.

He pulled up to the gate at the Carlins' property and turned around to face me. "Masie, I don't get to meet many people with your level of influence."

"Influence?"

"Stark doesn't know that I worked for NEVC, and I'd appreciate it if you kept it to yourself. But if the vampire world believes you're Anna, then you'd be untouchable. With that power, you can help a lot of people."

"Help them do what?"

"Vampires are on the brink of civil war, Masie. The movement to live more freely grows every day, but the Party is doing everything it can to keep control behind the scenes, and Stark is their leader. He doesn't want to share power or come out of the shadows. That was Anna's vision, to live openly with humans. Some people say that's why Stark killed her."

Hello, major bombshell. "If everything you're saying is true, then why's Stark tryin' so hard to prove I'm Anna?"

Wouldn't he just want her to stay dead?" Because it sounded like she'd gotten in his way.

"Aside from the rumors that he sees you as his second chance at love? I'm not sure."

"Guess."

"Anna was like a god to them. There are books, scriptures, paintings, and songs. They even have holidays to honor her birth, her rebirth, and her death. If Stark can control you, then he could easily manipulate the masses."

A political puppet to keep his power. "Thank you, Charlie."

"Just remember me if you end up on the throne. I know a lot of influential vampires who'll support you taking down the Party. Peacefully."

Yep. He's nuts. Hell no would I be getting involved in vampire politics.

I gave Charlie the code for the gate, and it slid open. We pulled forward.

Suddenly, I heard a loud crash, and glass flew everywhere.

A hand reached inside the broken window to my side and opened the door. In my periphery, I noticed Charlie was no longer behind the wheel, but the car was still moving.

"Charlie!" I yelled.

The hand grabbed me by the hair and yanked me out. I tumbled to the ground, rolling away from the car. Tiny sharp rocks dug into my arms and shoulders, but my leather pants kept my hips and knees protected.

My body came to a stop, and I tried to get up, but someone took hold of my neck and was pinning me down.

"You think you're going to take my man and our power, little human?" the woman growled.

It was Fiona. I recognized her slithery, bitchy tone.

“You can have him,” I whimpered.

“And I will. After he gives up his little obsession.” She growled. “Why couldn’t that useless gas station redneck finish you off?”

Redneck? Gas station? She had to mean Ronnie. It was all Fiona’s doing. She must’ve gotten to Ronnie and given him her blood somehow. She’d told him to kill me.

If I weren’t so busy dying, I’d feel sorry for the man. Charlie said Ronnie had been a good person.

Off in the distance, I heard Charlie yelp, followed by the sound of bones crushing.

Oh no. Charlie...

“Stark’s gonna wring your neck like a wet rag for this, Fiona.”

She cackled. “Who’s going to tell him?”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After being vampire-napped, Fiona and her henchmen put a cloth bag over my head. I really wished they hadn't because their natural mode of travel—running lightning fast—left me dizzy and my stomach in quivering knots.

I threw up a little, and then I had to smell it, which made me puke more. Thankfully, I'd skipped dinner.

"Please," I begged, "take the bag off."

Whoever was carrying me just laughed.

I guessed that was why Stark had ordered a car for me before. The human body, at least mine, wasn't used to traveling at the speed of sound like some supersonic jet pilot.

When we finally stopped moving, I had me a splitting headache, but I could live with that. What worried me was how far we'd traveled. Was I hours from home? Days? On another planet? It was anyone's guess.

They marched me inside a building—house, shack, warehouse, I didn't know—and threw me in a room, locking the door behind me. I slid off my bag and looked at my sad prison with a boarded-up window. There was a bed with a rotten mattress. No blanket. Off to the side was a bathroom, but everything was covered in an inch of mold and grime.

"Dear Lord, ain't they heard of bleach?" I muttered. For heaven's sake, they were vampires. Surely they had to remove a bloodstain every now and again.

I went to the sink, thankful that the water came out clear from the faucet. I rinsed my face, mouth, and hair to remove as much of the vomit as I could. There wasn't anything to be done about my leather bustier.

I walked over to the door, noting the peeling paint and scratch marks. I wasn't their first guest.

I pressed my ear to the wood, listening to the muted sounds of voices, maybe four or five individuals carrying on like they were having a smoke out.

Son of a weed whacker. I went over and sat on the bed, my head throbbing from the journey.

After several minutes of knocking around my thoughts, I realized there was only one reason for snatching me up instead of flicking off my lights: They wanted to prove I *wasn't* Anna.

Stark had already thrown down the gauntlet earlier tonight, claiming I was the resurrected love of his life. And if he planned to use me to maintain power behind the scenes, then his rivals would want the opposite. *Overthrow the Party. Prove I am not Anna.* Which would make me Stark's useless weapon.

The door flew open, and in strolled a tall man in a black suit, with silver hair to his shoulders and cold gray eyes. His skin looked so pale it could've been made of stone.

"Hello, Masie Kicklighter. I am Lazlo."

I continued staring, waiting for this to play out.

"You do not remember me?" he asked.

I said nothing.

He laughed. "Didn't think so."

"I don't want nothin' to do with vampire politics, so whatever you're after, or think I'm doing for Stark, you're wastin' your sweet time, Lazlo."

He leaned his tall frame against the doorway. "I understand you are the reincarnation of our beloved Anna."

Since I didn't know the best answer to get me out of here, I kept my mouth shut.

"All right." He walked over and leaned in front of my face. Apparently my smell didn't bother him. "I know you are not her, but news travels fast, and the night air is abuzz with your name, Masie. They are proclaiming you are our long-lost queen, returned to finish her work."

So was I right? Did he want to blow up the reincarnation theory? “Can we just get on with whatever it is you want? These pants are chappin’ my lady pumpkins.”

“Anna was my lover.” He smiled wickedly, flashing a set of razor-sharp fangs. “Therefore, for public appearances’ sake, it seems logical that we pick up where things left off, only this time I am going to marry you.”

Boy, had I been way, waaay off. This guy was all in on the Anna-revival story. And if Stark’s mate had been Lazlo’s lover, then it was safe to assume Lazlo and Stark were more than just political rivals. Two men in love with the same woman equaled a pissing match.

“Sounds like you and Stark have some old scores to settle.” I stared him right in the creepy dead-fish-colored eyes. “But you two gents have to fight it out alone because you and I are not tying the knot.” I wouldn’t even let him tie my shoe.

“Oh, but you will.” Lazlo snapped his fingers, and another vampire male appeared behind him in the hallway, holding Maybell. She had a gag in her mouth, her hands were tied, and her face was covered in snot and tears.

My heart snapped like an old rubber band, and the fight drained out of me.

“Let her go,” I said.

“Uh, uh, uh...” Lazlo wagged a pale finger. “Not until I’ve been given what I want.”

“Fine. You win. I’ll marry you. Just let Maybell go.”

“I haven’t told you the terms yet, Masie.” He drew a triumphant breath. “After we are married, you will stand in the great hall and tell everyone that you *are* Anna, that Montgomery Stark ended your life, and you’ve come for your revenge.”

Sweet Lord.

He added, “And then, as he looks on, feeling the sting of public humiliation, you will tell him how I was and still am the

love of your existence, which is why you chose to marry me.”

“Anything else?” I snarled. “Would you like me to tell everyone what a big dick you have and that you’re the world’s greatest lover, too?”

He shrugged. “Couldn’t hurt.”

I wanted to stomp him in the fangs. “Just give me your word you won’t hurt my sister, and you’ll let her go.”

He bowed his head. “Do as I say, and all will be set right in the world.” He turned to leave. “Someone will be by shortly to prepare you for tonight’s wedding ceremony. I expect you to serve me lovingly tonight, Masie. As a new bride should with her adoring new husband.”

He left, and the door closed, shutting off my view of Maybell. But I could hear her muted screams as they dragged her away.

The pressure valve released, and I began to cry. It was the only thing I could do. They had me by the heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Two days later...

Lazlo had allowed me to see Maybell only once since the other night, and I hoped with all my heart he'd keep his word and let her go tonight after the wedding reception, where I would give my speech.

"Are you ready, wife?" Lazlo appeared in the doorway, wearing a beautiful black suit with sleek lines. It looked wrong on him. A black hooded robe, like the Grim Reaper wore, was more his speed.

Lazlo's ghostly pallid eyes washed over me in my satin red gown. The hem reached the floor, and the plunging neckline left little to the imagination. I hated it. I hated looking sexy for this monster.

"You look breathtaking." He walked over and bent his head to kiss my lips.

I remained still and didn't kiss him back. How could I? Not after everything he'd done to me on our wedding night. Vile. Horrible things.

My skin broke out in a cold shiver as I pushed away the memories of the last forty-eight hours. If I let them in, even for a second, I'd crumble.

He brushed his thumb over my bottom lip, licking his own. "Do not worry, wife, with time, you will learn to enjoy it. Now come. We don't want to be late, and you must travel by car to get there. Wouldn't want you to ruin your pretty dress."

He let me out of the room and led me through the corridors of the old run-down house. I still didn't know where we were, but at this point, it didn't really matter. I just cared about Maybell getting free, and tonight was the final part of our deal.

We stepped outside into the muggy night air where twenty more vampires waited, eyeing me with suspicion. They each

bowed their heads as I passed by with Lazlo, my new husband.

We got in the back of the waiting car and headed out, down a long dirt driveway lined with thick trees and brush. If I didn't know any better, I'd say we were in swampland.

Seemed appropriate for this gang of bloodsucking assholes.

"Are you clear on what you're to say tonight, Masie?" Lazlo asked after a few minutes.

"Yes."

"Good girl."

Was I? Was I really good?

Because I sure the hell didn't feel like it. I hadn't put up a fight or even attempted to escape. I'd just capitulated and betrayed everything I believed in, everything that I was. Yes, I'd done it to save Maybell, but that didn't mean I felt proud.

"After tonight, I want you to set me free," I muttered.

"Free?" He chuckled. "But we are married."

"I'm not living the rest of my life with you. I'm not sacrificing one more Goddamned thing. After tonight, I'm going home with Maybell."

His gray eyes twitched with the light of a passing car. "You know I cannot allow that. You are far too important to be left unprotected. You wouldn't last a week."

Maybe not, but I wouldn't last a week with him either. He was the most evil, sadistic prick to ever walk the earth. After two days, I'd rather die than spend another minute in his presence.

I inhaled slowly and rallied what little fight I had left in me. "Who's going to stop me, Lazlo? You? Because if you do, if you defy me, then no one will believe I'm really Anna—the all-powerful human leader, returned to finish her vision of bringing about the great vampire outing." That was what he wanted, for vampires to come out of the shadows and to

dethrone the Party. He wanted to kneecap Stark. “The way I see it, after tonight, you’re stuck with this charade.”

“You little bitch. You are not in charge here.”

“Then decide,” I snapped. “Decide right now. Kill Maybell and me, and you won’t get to take down the Party. Or you can let us go. Which do you want more?”

I could tell by his flat lips and flaring nostrils that he didn’t appreciate me blackmailing him like this.

“Don’t worry, *husband*,” I spat, “I’ll tell everyone that we had a squabble—that you wanted to turn me so our love would be eternal and I said no, that this time around, I wanted to stay human and enjoy my life.”

He rubbed his chin. “I do see how that might work. Anna would not want to keep power forever. She always said that it belonged in the hands of the people.”

“There. You see. It’s a win-win.” I leaned back in the seat, lacing my fingers together. Anna sounded like she’d been a very complicated person, far too interesting to ever love this jackass.

“Except that you are my wife, and you belong by my side.”

“That wasn’t a real marriage.” There had been no church. No friends and family to witness the ceremony. The entire event consisted of two other vampires watching Lazlo and I sign a piece of paper stating we were married. We all signed in blood. Afterwards, they each took turns licking my bleeding palm. I’d been sure they were going to kill me, and part of me wished they had. The night had only gone downhill from there. I still wasn’t able to fully process it.

In short, Stark had been telling the truth when he’d said that vampires considered rape to be beneath them. What he hadn’t told me was they were capable of doing things that were just as low and demeaning.

Lazlo shrugged. “Perfectly legal under vampire law.”

I stared ahead. “I’m not a vampire.”

He grabbed my chin, forcing me to look at him. “I can change that, Masie. I can change that for your sister, too. Always remember that.”

How could I forget?

“How much longer until we arrive?” I wanted to get this over with and get far, far away from this monster.

“Just another hour. In the meantime, let us go over what you must say.”



The great hall wasn't what I expected. When we pulled up, the building looked like your average office complex with square windows, ten stories, and concrete-gray exterior. Lazlo's entourage was already waiting, minus Fiona. I hadn't seen her since my kidnapping, and I could only assume she was trying to get Stark back now that I was out of the picture.

We entered through the lobby and were greeted by armed security guards, who directed us to the elevator bank.

“When we enter the room, Masie, you are to stay by my side. Do you understand? Our enemies will be everywhere,” Lazlo said.

“You mean Stark will be here.”

A wicked smile twitched across Lazlo's lips. “Of course.”

“Why do you hate him so much? What did he do besides marry his own mate?”

Lazlo laughed uncomfortably, eyeing the vampires around us. “Oh, my love, your memory of the past is still foggy. Montgomery Stark forced you to marry him, but you loved *me*.”

Doubtful. No one could love this man.

We got inside the elevator and took it down to the basement. When the doors slid open, we proceeded to a long hallway until we reached a set of doors where another security guard stood waiting. He nodded and opened the door for us.

Music poured out into the hallway, and I could smell smoke and something charred—like hair and meat mixed with chemicals.

“What’s burning?” I asked.

“Do not worry, *Anna*. Once you see inside, I’m sure you will remember.” He offered me his arm, and I took it begrudgingly.

We entered the big smokey basement room, which was lit by giant candles perched on tall silver pillars in the corners.

I waved my hand in front of my face, coughing. “I can’t breathe in here.”

Through the haze, I could barely make out the faces of the few hundred guests, but one stood out like a sore thumb.

Stark. My heart raced.

He stood toward the front of the room near a platform lined with smaller candles around the edges. He wore a dark suit and had his hair pulled back. He looked beautiful and poised, utterly at home among all these bloodsucking degenerates. Except for his eyes, which were laser focused on Lazlo. If hate had a color, his eyes were it.

My stomach knotted, knowing what I was about to do to him. But what choice did I have? Until I was officially recognized as *Anna*, I had no cards to play here. Even then, any leverage I gained out of this would be used to keep me and my family safe.

The crowd made way for Lazlo and me as we strolled toward the front of the room. All eyes were on us, and inaudible whispers filled the air.

Suddenly, I didn’t feel so good. If I wanted to save myself and Maybell, I would have to address these vampires and make ’em believe I was their beloved queen.

One big side note about me: I wasn’t the world’s best liar. Sure, I was okay with polite lies like, “No, Joe, your hair ain’t thinning. Just as thick as ever!” or “Yes, Maybell, eating

vegetarian animals is just like being a vegetarian.” Sometimes it was best to let folks think what they wanted and figure out things on their own. It wasn’t my place to go around bursting bubbles unless they genuinely needed my help. But delivering a big, fat, hairy lie right to someone’s face? Sure, I could do it, especially to save my own butt, but would I be good at it? No.

“I have to use the ladies’ room,” I whispered to Lazlo.

He glanced at me. “It will have to wait.”

“I’m gonna be sick. Y’all want to see that?” Puking didn’t sound like something a brave Anna would do.

Funny. I’d spent the last ten years holding in my emotions, and now I couldn’t keep them inside.

I could see Lazlo mulling. He’d already witnessed my weak stomach.

“Fine,” he growled and turned to one of the men in his entourage following behind us. “Anna needs to powder her nose. Take her.”

The man dipped his head, and I followed him through the crowd to the corner of the large room. He opened a door that led to a small dark hallway with two more doors.

“Pick one.”

“Thanks.” I rushed into the first room, flipping on the lights. The stench of rotting something hit me immediately. There was dried blood on the tile floor, and the sink looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in a decade. I covered my mouth and pinched my nose. *Bleach, vampires! Get some dang bleach!*

This smell wasn’t going to make my nausea go away.

I turned to go back outside, thinking I might try the other bathroom.

I opened the door and slammed right into Stark. The man who’d escorted me lay facedown on the floor, either dead or unconscious.

“Ohmygod. Stark.” I pressed my hand over my heart.

“Masie, are you all right?”

Hell no. Not even a little. “Alive and kickin’.”

He took me by the shoulders. “We only have a minute, Masie, but whatever Lazlo has asked you to do, I beg you not to.”

I let out a long breath. “He’s my husband now. And I have a role to play.” *Or else.*

“Masie, no. He is using you.”

Yeah, no kidding. “And you weren’t?” I leaned in closer to whisper, “I know everything, Stark. I know you just want to avoid a vampire civil war to keep your power. I know everyone’s sayin’ you killed Anna because you disagreed with her politics.”

“They may say what they like, but it is not true. I loved Anna. You must trust me.”

“Trust *you*? You turned my daddy.”

“I saved him, just like I saved your uncle and *you* the night Ronnie attacked. Think about it, Masie. I have never betrayed or hurt you, whereas Lazlo is a snake who’ll do anything to get his revenge because he believes I stole Anna from him.”

“Did you?” I watched his expression carefully, searching for signs of dishonesty.

“She was his first. Yes. But after she and I met, it was obvious we had the mate connection. He killed her for it, though he’ll never confess. But he was the only one who could’ve done it.” Stark stared deeply into my eyes, his expression pleading. “Masie, I know you are not Anna. As painful as the realization is, I have come to accept that I merely hoped and wished it. But after speaking at length with your father, whom I’ve come to trust and depend on like a true friend, I see now I was wrong. Anna isn’t coming back.”

The subtle pain in his eyes was genuine, and I found myself feeling sorry for the man, but that wasn't going to excuse Stark's other lies and omissions, nor would it help my predicament.

"I have to go; Lazlo's waiting. But why don't you find Fiona? I'm sure you'll be happy together."

"No, we won't, and I will tell you the same thing I told her last night: I love *you*, Masie. Not because I believed you were Anna, but because you are not. She could never rise above her darkness like you have. She suffered endlessly because of it. You are happy despite every turn life has given you."

My heart skipped a beat. He loved me? We hardly knew each other.

He pressed his lips to mine. They were warm and soft, and like the last time, I felt myself drawn in. Then I remembered I had to think of Maybell.

I pushed him off. "No."

"Masie!" Lazlo appeared at the end of the hallway, spotting his guard on the floor. His gray eyes moved to Stark. "Let her go, Montgomery. She is mine now."

Stark ignored him. "Masie, I can protect you. Just trust me. Please."

I didn't know what to do. Part of me believed him because he spoke the truth about saving my life, and he hadn't ever hurt me. Not physically, anyway. I couldn't say the same for Lazlo. Of course, none of that mattered if I lost my sister.

My eyes teared. "Sorry, Stark, but I have a speech to give."

I walked toward my husband and out into the smokey room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I stood on the platform in front of a few hundred vampires who looked like they wanted to break my neck. Well, not all of them. Lazlo was by my side, chin held high like a doting, proud husband wanting to show off his new wife.

And then there was Stark, who stood at the front of the crowd a few feet away. His pale blue-green eyes were locked on my face with a sorrow that drilled through my heart. I knew he was silently praying for me to change my mind and trust him over obeying Lazlo.

A man with ankle-length black hair, wearing a white suit, came up on the platform. “Esteemed guests, thank you for coming on such short notice to attend this emergency session of the Party’s council. As you know, I, Lord Bleyer the Second, have been issued a challenge for my seat.” He turned to face Lazlo. “I have received sworn statements from the Tennessee Vampire Co-op, stating that they have personally witnessed your wife pass several tests while in the home of Montgomery Stark.”

“Yes. This is correct,” Lazlo said.

Lord Bleyer II turned to face Stark, raising his voice. “Do you concur, Montgomery Stark?”

“I do,” Stark replied.

“Then we will proceed with the final test to prove if Masie Kicklighter—”

“Excuse me, sir,” Lazlo chimed in. “She is my wife.”

“Yes. My apologies,” said Lord Bleyer II. “Masie *Stark*.”

I looked at Stark and then at Lazlo. “Stark?”

“Montgomery is my brother,” Lazlo replied.

Like a deer in headlights, my eyes went wide, and my gaze whipped to Montgomery Stark. Why hadn’t he told me?

Instantly, their animosity made perfect sense. Rivalry between jealous men was one thing, but between brothers? *Vampire* brothers?

A cockfight for the history books.

I continued looking at Montgomery, whose expression offered nothing in the way of apologies for yet another grand omission. *Rackin' up them points, Stark.*

Lord Bleyer II continued, "Masie Stark, you are claiming to be the reincarnation of Queen Anna Trehueger Stark."

Did he say Treehugger? That was her maiden name? If yes, how could anyone believe I was Anna's reincarnation? Don't get me wrong. I loved trees. We Kicklighters believed in taking care of nature so it would take care of us. But we didn't believe in snuggling with our firewood.

"I guess so," I replied.

"Very good," said the lord. "Then let us begin the final test."

Test? Lazlo said I'd be giving a speech. He never told me that the final test was still happening.

Panicked, I started panting. "What am I supposed to do?"

The lord waved a woman up onto the platform. She carried a glass bowl filled with tiny clay tiles.

"Choose one and complete the test," Lord Bleyer II commanded.

I hoped one of the tiles had something on it like making biodiesel or drawing a picture of the Tennessee flag.

I reached in and shuffled my hand around, grabbing hold of one. I handed the tile over.

He read it aloud. "Masie Stark, you are to choose five people in this room. Five vampires, I should say, who wronged you in your past life. And if you choose correctly, you will execute them."

Kill five vampires. Holy Christ. But maybe I was getting ahead of myself. I had to guess correctly first.

“How’ll you know if I choose correctly?” I asked.

“Queen Anna kept meticulous notes for posterity, including a list of her enemies.”

I hated to point out the flaw in this system, but it seemed like something I should mention. “Someone coulda just given me the list.”

“Have they?” he asked.

“No.”

“Good. Because the list of names has never been made public—for the sake of peace among our kind. I am the only one who has ever viewed it. Shall we proceed?”

Unexpectedly, I felt a gust of cold air pressing against my head. I looked at Montgomery Stark. His expression was indifferent, but I knew it was him. Was he still pressuring me to change my mind?

I swallowed hard, my hands trembling.

The other faces in the dark room—at least the ones nearest to me—suddenly looked uneasy, like nobody wanted to be here. Maybe this wouldn’t be so difficult after all. I just had to scope out vampires who were sweatin’ bullets.

I stepped off the stage and wandered down the center of the room, trying to make out the faces and expressions. “Can someone turn on the lights? I can’t see in here.” The air was thicker than swamp fog.

The lord snapped his fingers, and the ceiling lights came on.

“That’s better.” I scanned the multitude of guests, observing which vampires made eye contact and which ones avoided me.

There was a group in leather giving me the death stare. One man, with a deep scar on his forehead, stood in front of

them. Their leader?

I walked up to him. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Gerald Acero. *Honey*,” he added dryly.

“Aren’t you a funny boy.” I turned toward the lord. “Am I allowed to ask questions?”

“Yes, though, ultimately you must choose your five.”

I turned back to Gerald. “Did you wrong me in my past life?”

Gerald stared fearlessly. “No. But I did hate you. It is foolish to believe that we vampires can live peacefully among humans. They would hunt us into extinction.”

I happened to agree, and humans would be right to do it. “I believe you.” Mostly because he seemed like the type who wasn’t afraid to die for his beliefs. No reason to lie.

I took a step toward the next group, but a gust of cold hit me. Was Stark trying to tell me something?

I stopped and turned toward one of the leather-clad vampires next to Gerald. He had greasy brown hair and a thick, shabby beard.

Another gust hit me. It was Stark trying to help. At least, I hoped so.

I’m about to find out. “Your face looks familiar,” I lied.

“Don’t know you, lady.” He laughed and looked away.

I scoffed. “I ain’t no lady.” It was the truth. I was a hardworking Southern girl trying to save her sister. And, apparently, I was willing to kill to do it. “Did you wrong me in my past life?”

“You tell me,” he growled and looked away again.

“Him.” I pointed and looked at Lord Bleyer II, who nodded. Two huge vampires appeared out of nowhere and dragged the man away. “So I’m right?”

Lord Bleyer II nodded again. A man of few words. “Continue.”

“Okay. Let’s see here...” I wove around the room, waiting for another cold knock on my head. It happened three more times. Three more vampires were dragged off.

I still needed one more.

I strolled through the room again, trying to ignore how some of the vampires were dressed—Vikings, frilly gowns, poofy sleeves. They came in every shape, height, color, and flavor of lip snarl. It was almost impossible not to get distracted. After almost an hour, no one raised a red flag, and I got nothing from Stark.

Lazlo finally came down off the platform. “My love, you must choose soon. The sun will rise within the hour, and everyone must have time to reach a safe sleeping place.”

“How many more minutes do I have?” I asked.

Lord Bleyer II glanced at his wristwatch. “Five. We must save time for the executions.”

Great. I suddenly felt a push of cold air again. I glanced at Stark, whose expression hadn’t changed. When I looked back at Lazlo, I felt the cold again.

That’s it. Stark was trying to give me the answer, but I had to trust him again. Did I?

My mind played back the first night we met. Ronnie had his hands around my neck, and I was fighting for my life. Stark stopped him, cleaned up the mess, including sucking nacho-fied blood from my shirt, and made sure I wouldn’t have to deal with the fallout by erasing the evidence. Afterwards, he tried to apologize for not saving Deedee by gifting me her killer, whose life I ended. Then he cooked for me. It was the worst food I’d ever tasted, but he’d taken the time to show something of his past self. He saved my daddy and uncle, too, which meant a lot.

Each act had been an offering made by a dark creature who probably didn't know how to show his loyalty any other way. *Kind of like a cat that leaves a dead mouse on the porch.* Only, Montgomery Stark was a beautiful man. Beautiful as he was dangerous.

Lazlo, on the other hand, had kidnapped me and Maybell. He forced me to marry him and wanted to break me until I gave him my complete submission.

The answer was clear.

I looked at Lazlo. "I know this won't be in Anna's book, but it's only because you made that impossible." I drew a breath. "You. You wronged me in my past life. You murdered me. You're my fifth choice."

"What?" Lazlo stepped back. "This is a lie, wife. My brother has been feeding you lies again!" He turned to address the room. "Everyone knows it is Montgomery who killed her."

"No. It was *you*. I remember it like it was yesterday." Strange how this lie came so easily. It almost felt like I was channeling the real Anna.

"Then how did I do it?" he growled.

He was calling my bluff. My mind raced. What reason could I say that would make sense no matter what had gone down?

"You used my love of your brother against me. Just like you're usin' my sister Maybell now." I spit in his face. "Just like you used her to make me marry you and keep me from fightin' you off on our weddin' night."

The crowd of vampires muttered in shock.

"Is this your final choice, Masie?" the lord asked.

I had no idea if I'd chosen correctly according to Anna's list, but I knew Lazlo had wronged me in *this* life. "Yes."

The lord nodded, and two guards appeared.

“Wait! She’s lying. She’s a fraud,” Lazlo yelled as they dragged him off.

I let out a long breath.

“Are you all right?” Montgomery Stark came up to me.

“No.” And as grateful as I was for his help, I couldn’t ignore how I’d gotten here. If he’d just stayed away from me and out of my life, none of this would’ve happened. “I want Maybell freed.”

“Yes, of course.” Stark turned toward a group of vampires standing near us. “Find out where her sister is and ensure she is taken home.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Masie, it is time.” Lord Bleyer II came up to us. “You must execute the five.”

I suddenly noticed the vampires I’d chosen being wheeled up in a steel cage.

“You must light them on fire,” the lord added.

“Here? Is that even safe?”

“This room was constructed for such events.” He pointed toward the black ceiling.

So that was why this room smelled like a BBQ competition gone wrong.

I shook my head. “I’m not doing it.”

“But you must,” Stark pushed. “It is the only way to complete the final test. Otherwise, you will forfeit, and they will all go free. *Lazlo* will go free.”

I rubbed my forehead. I just wanted to be left alone and for Maybell to be released.

“You must do this, Masie.” Stark grabbed my wrist and gently squeezed.

“For you, right?” I threw back. “You need me to keep power.”

His mouth flapped with indignation. “No. For *you*. And if you do not trust me by now, you are a fool.”

“Then I guess I’m a fool.”

The swirls in his blue-and-green eyes stopped moving. Suddenly, his eyes turned dark. “Just light the fucking cage, Masie.” He turned and left.

The lord held out a can of accelerant.

“Do not do this,” Lazlo pleaded, gripping the bars of the cage. “You will regret it forever.”

Would I? Because this would prove I was Anna, and with that power, I could do whatever I wanted—including telling everyone to stay the hell away from me, my family, and Leiper’s Fork.

I took the can and squirted the contents on the vampires in the cage. Lazlo cursed at me, using every bad word in the book, including the c-word.

“I’m a person, Lazlo, and you treated me like an animal. So now I’m returning the favor.”

The lord handed me a match. I lit it, tossed it into the cage, and walked away.

As I heard the five vampires screaming for mercy, I instantly felt relieved. I could protect the people I loved now. Also, I finally knew how to kill vampires. I would definitely be stocking up on matches and lighter fluid.

But after a few seconds, a heavy blanket of guilt wrapped around my heart. I’d done nothing but betrayed myself these past few days. I’d willingly become a killer, a monster just like them, and to me, there was no greater sin than being untrue to oneself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Masie! Oh my God!” Maybell yelled and ran to me from across the dimly lit parking lot just outside the office building.

Her long black hair, just like mine, was a matted mess, and her dark brown eyes were framed by bloodshot whites. She’d been crying.

We hugged tightly, as if holding on for dear life. Then panic set in. What had they done to her? After my experience, I assumed the worst.

I let her go. “Are you okay?” I brushed back her hair, inspecting her neck for bite marks.

She pushed my hands away. “I’m fine. You okay?”

No. I wasn’t. But that was a problem for another day, so I did what Masie Kicklighter had always done; I buried my pain and smiled. “I’ll be perfect after we get the hell outta here.”

Lord Bleyer II came up in a hurry, looking at his watch. That was when I noticed the rest of the vampires had already zipped away. It was just the three of us.

“Mrs. Stark, I am afraid there isn’t time for one of us to run you home, but you may take my service car.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Where exactly are we?”

“Devil’s Swamp, Mississippi.”

“And I am not surprised.” I couldn’t pick the place out on a map, but the name fit. “I’ll need a credit card or gas money.”

“Of course.” He handed me a wad of Benjamins from his white jacket pocket. There had to be a few thousand dollars there.

“That should do it.” It was way more than we needed, but I wasn’t about to give some back. Not after this night. I was going to need some serious comfort food.

“I really must go now,” he said. “Please let me know how I can be of assistance after you’ve had time to rest.”

“Tell me how to get you to keep runnin’ things.” I wanted nothing to do with these bloodsucking clowns.

“Sorry, ma’am?”

“I’ll be an advisor or whatnot—anything to help keep vampires in the shadows—but there’s a lot of work to be done before y’all come out of hiding. You’re not ready. We need a plan that pushes education. You know, the dos and don’ts of going public and not scaring the ever-livin’ daylights outta humans. Otherwise, we’re doomed to fail.” That was a lie. I didn’t think they should ever come out.

The lord looked relieved. “Of course, my queen. I will draw up a proclamation to begin work immediately.”

“No, no. Take your time. Except, I would like to order all vampires to vacate Leiper’s Fork immediately, except for my father. I need absolute peace, and my family isn’t to be bothered.”

“Yes.” His voice sounded perky. “I will be in touch.” He zipped away in a blur.

Maybell stared for a long moment. “Insane.”

“I know.” I squeezed her arm. “Vampires are real. It takes a minute to choke down.”

“No. I meant his hair—all the way down to his ankles. How does he keep it from getting all tangled up when he runs around like the Flash?”

I frowned and shook my head. That was Maybell. She never took anything seriously.

“You ready to go home?” It wasn’t going to be a short drive if we were all the way down in Mississippi.

“Hell yeah. Hey, you think they got any Waffle Houses ’round here? I could go for some grits.”



Maybell and I took turns driving. I wanted to make it home before sunset. Five hundred miles. I refused to stop along the way except to buy gas, food, and less revealing clothes from a drugstore—an Ole Miss tee and matching red sweatpants.

Now that I knew vampires were literally everywhere, I didn't feel safe being out on the highway at night in unknown places. Leiper's Fork was the only sure bet.

The one silver lining was that Maybell and I had plenty of time to talk. She told me how Lazlo had pretty much ignored her the entire time. So much so that they'd forgotten to feed her. She'd drunk water from her sink in an equally disgusting bathroom, which she complained about for over two hours. I don't think she had a clue that her life had been in peril the entire time or what I went through to keep her alive.

Halfway through the drive, I finally broke the news that our daddy was still "alive," and that shut her right up.

For a hundred miles.

The rest of the trip was dedicated to Maybell's exhausting lists of all the things she wanted to do with Daddy when we got home. Camping, fishing, amusement parks—all the things she missed doing with him.

"Oh! And just wait 'til Mamma hears, Masie! She's gonna flip her fritters!" Maybell clapped in the passenger seat. "I'm gonna do a big surprise—invite her to visit and then...ta-da!"

"Maybell, no. You'll probably kill her if you do that."

She shrugged. "Then Daddy can make her a vampire. I bet she'd love that—having all the time in the world together." She sighed contentedly.

"Maybell, did those vampires drop you on your head or somethin'?"

Over my dead body would I let anyone turn my mamma, Maybell, or me.

No more vampires.



After we got to Leiper's Fork, I left Maybell at her apartment and went home. After texting Jimmie to let him know we were okay, I slept for twenty hours straight.

Unfortunately, I spent those twenty hours reliving the death of five vampires in my dreams. I know they didn't deserve my pity, but I still felt awful. Maybe the guilt I harbored was because I didn't believe I was much better than those miserable creatures. I'd lied, I'd played their game, and I'd killed five beings to save my own skin and my sister. Worse, I'd betrayed myself by not fighting back when Lazlo made me his wife.

All my life, I'd dreamed of marrying my soul mate, of giving myself to him, and of him giving himself to me. We would build a life together. In my mind, our union would be a magical moment where the real world melded with the fairy tale in my head. My invisible destiny would manifest into something tangible.

I knew why I'd given all that up, and I couldn't change the past, but there was no getting around the loss I felt deep in my heart. A piece of my soul died that night.

My only saving grace was that I'd been through worse and survived. I'd survive this too.

The following day, I showed up to the Flaming Rooster for work, and Uncle Jimmie greeted me at the bar.

"Maybell told me everythin'. You okay?"

No, and until I was, I'd have to keep busy—anything to avoid the dark stuff in my head.

I shrugged. "As okay as I'll ever be."

"If you want to talk, I'm here, darlin'."

What was the point in sharing my pain? So everyone could pity me? No thanks.

I smiled weakly. "I'm good."

“At least the cat’s out of the bag. Your mother’s the only one in the family who doesn’t know about your dad.”

“Maybell hasn’t told her yet?”

“I warned her about the rules. But you could change that, *Anna*.”

I flashed a sour look. “I’m not her.”

“*Shhh*... I know,” he whispered, “but you have a lot of power now.”

“What’s that got to do with tellin’ Mamma?”

“Their rules are clear; only the humans who are about to be turned can know. Otherwise, the person’s gotta be critical to their survival.”

“How come you knew about them?” I asked.

“I help them launder money.”

My jaw dropped. “And you planned to tell me this when?”

“When the time was right.”

I sneered.

“I’m sorry, Masie. I really am. But I’ve been itchin’ to retire, and when I told Stark I wanted to sell so you wouldn’t have to deal with the vampire situation, he wasn’t happy. Then he promised he’d look after you if I turned my businesses over to you.”

So that was why Uncle Jimmie gave me the Rooster out of the blue. “Welp, he was going to look after me, all right. As his bride.”

“I didn’t know that at the time.” Jimmie rubbed the back of his neck. “I never imagined things would play out like this.”

My heart sank. “How could you know?” I drew a slow breath. “Let’s just forget about it. The less I think about all this stuff, the better.”

“I’m here for you, Masie. Anything you need.”

“Thank you, Uncle Jimmie.”

“For the record, I wanted to leave you the Flaming Rooster and the distillery no matter what. I don’t want you to think for one second I was forced into the idea.”

If I weren’t so drained, I would’ve cried. “Thank you. It’s good to know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I finished the night feeling a thousand times better than when I arrived. The Rooster's familiarity helped push aside the horrors of the past week so I could focus on something normal, easy.

Not that I was naïve and thought my vampire problem had gone away. There was an entire vampire community displaced by my ban, so I'd gotten what I'd wanted, but sooner or later, they'd be back.

My continuing challenge was that I still didn't know the rules, which put me at a severe disadvantage. That was why I ordered Lord Bleyer II to send me copies of Anna's writings, including the sex book Stark mentioned once. I figured those were a good place to start my true education.

I finished locking up the bar and set the security alarm. I stepped outside, spotting Sheriff Idiot waiting by my truck.

"Masie, girl. Where you been?"

"Not in the mood tonight, Thomas."

"What's goin' on? Every time I asked about you, your uncle brushed me off. You all right?"

"Yes, Thomas. I am. Now please go home to Lizzy."

He lowered his voice. "Just be on your guard, m'kay? People are actin' real strange. It's like the rich folks know somethin' we don't. Rats jumping ship."

"You mean they've left town." That was great.

"Yeah. And property values are falling through the floor. Doris Emery, at Real Estate Ten, said she had one hundred new listings just today."

So we'd had over one hundred vampires living in town. "Wow. That's a lot."

He pulled off his cowboy hat and combed a hand through his short, messy hair. “Don’t know how I’ll ever retire now. My house ain’t gonna be worth a lick of shit.”

“I’m sure things’ll turn around.” More importantly, he might actually live to see retirement.

“Let’s hope.” He put his hat back on. “You have a good night, Masie. Keep your eyes open. If something big’s happening, the folks at the Rooster will hear it first.”

“Keep you posted.” I got in my truck and started the engine. Tomorrow night, I’d go see Daddy at Stark’s place. Hopefully, he’d still be there, and we could talk about telling Mamma the truth. My fear was that if Stark had left town, Daddy had gone with him. *His loyal servant.*

The thought still boiled my blood. Even when Daddy had worked for Jimmie, he was never anyone’s servant. He pulled his weight in the world and commanded respect like a true Kicklighter.

I drove home, feeling oddly alone, and when I arrived at the Carlins’, there was no one waiting in the shadows outside, the horses were quiet, and my front door was locked. Just like I’d left it this morning.

Was everything back to normal? I prayed it was, even if it wouldn’t last forever.

I grabbed Betsy and headed inside.

“Hello, Masie.” Stark sat on the sofa, watching *Antiques Roadshow*.

“Ah hell. What are you doin’ here, Stark?”

Stark flicked a finger at the TV. “This man found a clock in his attic. Can you believe it’s four hundred years old? How does such a treasure arrive unknowingly to a person’s attic? I smell fraud.”

“What *the fuck* are you doing here?” I repeated.

“I thought you did not cuss.”

He must've heard me say something about that once, though I couldn't remember the last time I mentioned it to anyone. My good-girl days were over.

"Yeah, well, I thought vampires only lived in books. How fucking wrong was I?"

Stark glanced over his shoulder in my direction. "Come. Sit. We have much to discuss."

"I'm just fine right here." I flicked off the safety on my shotgun.

"Tsk, tsk, woman. By now you should know that won't stop me."

"But it could slow you down. What do you want, Stark?"

"To talk, *Mrs. Stark*. I believe I just said that."

I hated how he'd called me that. I would never accept my marriage to his brother as valid. "Then talk."

He sighed with exasperation and stood. He went to the fridge, poured a glass of white wine, and set it on the counter. "I brought you this. It's from my collection. A 2019 Vouvray with notes of figs."

"I don't want your fancy fig wine."

"It's from grapes. It only tastes like—you know what? Never mind. Just drink it," he commanded.

"No."

"You're going to need it," he said.

Oh no. What now? I took the wine, gulped it down, and set the empty glass on the counter. Tasted nothin' like figs. *Figment of his imagination maybe.*

"How the *fuck* could you marry him?" Stark roared, shedding his calm façade.

That was why he was here? To berate me over that bastard Lazlo?

He went on, “You had to know I’d find you after they took you. Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“How the hell could I’ve known that?” I barked back.

“Because you are mine!” he yelled, pounding a fist on my counter. The tile shattered beneath his fist.

“No. I’m not. And for your information, that asshole had my sister. I had no choice.” I looked away, refusing to cry.

“Did he fuck you? Did you enjoy it?”

Rage filled every corner of my mind. How dare he ask that? His brother had done horrible things to me, things that would haunt me for the rest of my life, and all he could ask was if I’d enjoyed it? “Get. Out.”

“Not until you answer me!”

I lifted my chin. “Leave or I will have you executed for defying my orders.” He wasn’t allowed inside Leiper’s Fork.

His eyes twitched with loathing. And for what? Because I’d fallen into the hands of an evil vampire who’d wanted revenge against him?

I added, “None of this would’ve happened if you hadn’t stolen the love of his life all those years ago. This is your fault!”

Stark charged at me with an open hand, stopping shy of putting it around my neck.

“Go ahead. Kill me. Just like Lazlo killed Anna. What does any of it matter now? She’s gone, and I’m done. Done with you, your kind, and everything else. Just leave me alone. I never want to see you again.”

“*You* say this to *me*?” he boiled, his chest rapidly rising and falling. “I saved you twice. I proved my feelings, and you just...” He threw his hands in the air. “You banned me from my own home.”

“Oh, boohoo. The almighty Montgomery Stark’s plan to rule the vampire world forever has come to a bitter end.

Maybe next time, try winning like the gentleman you claim to be, instead of behaving like Lazlo. Oh, wait. Not so easy, right? Because you're just like him—a vile, bloodsucking parasite.”

I never saw anyone as angry as Montgomery Stark in that moment. Bottomless fury wrapped in all-consuming bitterness.

“You will pay, Masie. I will destroy you and dance on your grave.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Only, you won't be dead, and no one will hear your cries for mercy ten feet under.”

Before I could respond, he was gone.

I whooshed out a breath. *Now* it was time to cry.

I knew he'd protected me the other night. I knew there was a part of me that felt a connection between us. The truth was, maybe I loved him back. At the very least, I wanted him.

But my heart just couldn't go there. Not ever. Not after these monsters had caused so much pain. I'd watched my family and life fall apart after Daddy's heart attack, but he hadn't really died. Their stupid rules kept him from us. Then I'd been terrorized after finding out vampires were real and one of them was stalking me.

Finally, there was Lazlo.

He hadn't raped me, but what he'd taken was more valuable than my virginity. On our wedding night, instead of making love and being held in the arms of the man I loved, like I'd always dreamed, Lazlo made me beg like a dog for my life as he drank from my thighs. And arms. And neck.

I'd blacked out, only to regain consciousness and find him jerking off while drinking from my breast. In that moment, I could feel my heart slowing, my mind fading, and the light in my soul evaporating. He'd reduced me to nothing more than an empty bag of skin.

But that wasn't the end of the degradation.

Just when I was blacking out, fearing the worst—that my heart was on death’s doorstep and I’d turn—Lazlo offered me his cock. He’d made sure to nick the tip, where his blood had beaded. “If you want to live and see your sister alive, you will suck it.”

“What am I supposed to do with that? Floss my teeth?” I’d meant it too. The thing was tiny.

Still, what sort of man—vampire or not—did that? It might not be rape, but it was just as ugly. Sex should never be a currency for survival.

After that, I passed out, and when I woke, I went into a rage, demanding Lazlo tell me what happened. With a big, wicked smile, he refused and then gloated over my grief.

Obviously, he’d given me his blood to prevent me from dying, and I hadn’t turned, but only God knew what he’d done to my body. The not-knowing part allowed my mind to come up with all sorts of horrors even if I was medically still a virgin.

Psychologically, Lazlo wanted to break me. He deserved to die.

Evil bastard.

I double-checked all the doors and windows. I showered, got into my silky black PJs, and then passed out.

When I woke early the next morning, it was to three squad cars outside, my front door busted wide open, and a mutilated body on the living room floor.

Fucking Stark. He’d kept his word. He was going to destroy me.



Present Day

“Well, that is one whopper of a story, Masie.” Sheriff Idiot stared across the small table in the interrogation room of the Leiper’s Fork Police Station.

“What?” I snapped. “Every word of what I said is true, Thomas.”

“Montgomery Stark is a vampire? And half the town are vampires?” he said, his voice filled with skepticism. “And they think you’re their queen.”

“I know it sounds crazy. Trust me, I do. But it’s the truth. I mean, think about it, Thomas. All those rich people movin’ out. Ronnie Foreman and his friends just disappearin’. How I survived the attack that night when Deedee didn’t? If you don’t believe me, just ask Jimmie. Ask Maybell.”

Thomas leaned back in his chair and combed a hand through his messy hair. “Look, Masie, I’m gonna shoot straight with you here; it don’t matter if I believe you or if your entire family swears on a Bible that they seen vampires. Ain’t nobody—especially a judge and jury—gonna believe you or them. If anything, they’ll just lock you and your whole family up.”

Oh Lord. For once, Thomas was right.

He added, “And if you keep tellin’ people that the man in the morgue, whose guts are all over the place, is a vampire who did that to himself just to frame you, you’ll be locked up in a psych prison.” Thomas stood. “As your friend, I advise you to get your story straight, Masie.”

I nodded, feeling the weight of doom pressing down on me. “What am I going to do?”

“When your lawyer gets here, you tell ’em it was self-defense. Say the man broke in, attacked you, and you defended yourself. And then you lost your marbles for a minute and went a little overboard with the knife—it happens. Heat of the moment and all that.”

“You think that’ll keep me outta prison?” Because I couldn’t be locked up. I had to stop Stark. With me out of the way, he was just going to take power again and then let all those vampires back into Leiper’s Fork. I mean, that was

really why I was here, right? Stark couldn't control me, so best to get me out of the way.

My rage began to percolate with the thought of Stark running around free with all his bloodsucking monster-buddies—night golfing, collecting wine, seducing young innocent women with his incredible good looks. *Only to stomp them right in the heart and frame them for murder!*

If I had anything to do with it, Stark would be exiled to Siberia and never ruin another woman's life again. He had to be stopped.

Thomas swiped a hand through the air. "You tell your lawyer just what I said, Masie. That defense works all the time. Trust me. You'll be out in no time."

Thomas left the room, and I whooshed out a long breath. He'd better be right because I had a big ol' helping of revenge to serve up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Seven Months Later.

Dear Maybell,

Thank you for your last letter. No, prison is nothing like Club Med, and the free food isn't delicious, so please stop asking if I'm enjoying myself. I'm still in the high-security wing of the prison where, yes, I get a "room" all to myself, but trust me, this is no party.

I'd just put in my fifth request to be moved to gen-pop so I could at least get a work assignment and move around during the day. Yes, I would have to socialize with gangs, murderers, thieves, and every other flavor of criminal, but I preferred that over being locked up by myself where the only thing I had was my thoughts of revenge.

Stark...

According to Uncle Jimmie, things went right back to "normal" after my conviction. He wouldn't say any more than that, other than assuring me he was safe and looking after my family. I knew there was more going on, but he didn't want to worry me.

After all, what could I do to help from here? *Nothing.*

So I just wrote letters to every rag, blogger, and sci-fi conspiracy group, warning them about Stark and vampires in general. Maybell was helping me.

The door to my cell swung open. "Kicklighter, your lawyer's here." One of the prison guards stood in the doorway.

"Don't have a lawyer. You've got the wrong inmate." I went back to writing on my toilet paper.

"Suit yourself, but he told me to give you a message."

I looked up.

"He said you must return to the throne."

I blinked. “Sorry?”

“You must return to the throne,” he said robotically.

Something felt very off about this conversation. “Does this lawyer have a name?”

“No.”

A correctional officer wasn’t about to play messenger for some random lawyer who wandered into the prison without ID. They had very strict protocols. Plus, it was seven at night, way past visiting hours.

“I’ll come.” I set down my crayon and followed the guard out of my cell. He didn’t even bother to cuff me. Weird.

When I entered the private visitation room, I found my “murder victim” sitting there, looking more alive and beautiful than ever in a dark gray suit and blood-red tie. His silky hair was pulled back, exposing the pulsing muscles in his angular jaw.

My hackles rose, and the rage pooled in my chest. He was lucky I wasn’t allowed to have pencils because he’d be out an eye.

“Here to gloat, Stark?”

“Maybe a little. But mostly I am here to talk.” His eyes glided to the chair across from him. “You look lovely in orange, by the way.”

I glanced down at my hideous prison shirt. Did he think this was funny?

“Sit,” he commanded.

I remained standing.

“Please?” he added.

I drew a breath and took a seat.

“Masie, I know you probably do not wish to see me.”

“Probably?” I raised a brow.

“Fine. You *absolutely* do not wish to see me. And though I’d planned to watch you rot in here forever,” his gaze settled on the table, “the truth is, I cannot. I miss you. I ache every night, knowing you are in here suffering.”

Right. Sure. After enduring the most humiliating murder trial of my life, I’d been locked up for six months now—seven if you counted my arrest and jail time when I was denied bail. The entire world thought I was some psycho who’d chopped up a random John Doe whom I’d invited into my house. There had been no sign of forced entry and no weapons on my victim. My self-defense story flopped.

Why did I listen to Thomas? Such an idiot! I meant me, of course.

Now they were about to make a Netflix special about me. Did Stark have any idea how that felt? I’d be put alongside Dahmer or the freaking Zodiac in the docucrime section.

I glared, biting my tongue, hateful words flooding my mind. “Cut the crap, vampire. You don’t miss me. Just say what you want.”

“I do miss you, and that is the truth. But if admitting it means nothing to you, then I will stick to business. We are closer than ever to civil war. A million vampires are rallying, ready to defy our laws and come out of the shadows.”

So, basically, Stark and his minions were about to lose power. The Party was about to be overthrown.

I folded my hands on the cold stainless-steel table. “What would you like me to do about it?” Because, if he hadn’t noticed, I was locked up. For killing *him!*

“What if I could get you out of here?”

“Sure. Sounds great. But let me repeat myself—what do you want me to do about it?”

“Everyone still believes you are my Anna and,” he looked down, unable to meet my angry gaze, “they believe I had you locked up because I wish to maintain power.”

And they'd be right.

He continued, "Our people are not happy. But if I were to free you, and you told them to stand down—that this is not the right time to go public—I think we could stop the uprising. Your words will carry much weight."

I laughed and leaned back in my chair. "So they see you for who you really are: a power-hungry, vindictive vampire who'd do anything to stay in charge, even putting an innocent woman in prison."

"No." His pale eyes whipped to my face. "I did this to you because you..." he swallowed, "broke my heart."

"Bullshit." I slapped my hand on the table. "You put me in here because you think I betrayed you by marrying Lazlo. And you couldn't stand the thought of losing to him when all you had to do was pull your head from your ass and listen to me for five seconds. He *stole* me. He *forced* me to marry him. He *drank* me to the brink of death over and over again. Then he wanted me to suck his...his baby gherkin. It was sheer terror. But did you care? No. Did you see the pain I was in afterwards? No. The worst part is that I literally blamed myself for everything because I was too weak to fight him off. A freaking vampire!"

I laughed bitterly and shook my head at my ridiculous guilt. "And now, after six months of very deep reflection, I realize that I won. I beat him. I never gave anything to that monster. Not my love. Not my submission. All he got from me was justice and a fiery death. But you? You're more of a monster than he ever was. You robbed me of the life I'd fought so hard to keep that night. I survived, only to have you turn me from victor and survivor into a victim of your ego.

"And *that* is why I don't believe you love me. Because when I needed *you* to be there, you failed." I stood, pressing my finger on the table. "*You* broke *my* heart. Not the other way around. And to prove it, I have a life sentence, a family living in shame, and no hope of *ever* finding happiness. I'm an

infamous convicted murderer and always will be in the eyes of the entire world.

“So, no. I don’t want you to get me out of here. What would be the point? So I can live in the shadows, hiding from the world like you? Like a bloodthirsty, cold-hearted vampire? No thanks.”

Stark stared for a long moment and then swallowed. “I-I am sorry, Masie. I did not know...what...Lazlo did to you.”

My eyes teared. “How could you think for one second that I enjoyed being with that animal?”

Stark’s eyes turned dark like I’d seen on the night of the final test. “I am sorry, Masie. Truly.”

“It’s too late for apologies, Stark. You won. You destroyed me. And now there’s nothin’ left to say other than *leave me alone*. I don’t care about your dang civil war or your thirst for power. Ain’t my problem.”

He slowly stood, taking a second to right his tie and running his hand over his silky black hair. “You are mistaken. I have destroyed myself.” His eyes met mine. “It is unfortunate to learn so late in life that one can have a connection deeper than a mate. I never loved Anna more than I loved power. But for you, I would burn.”

He walked out the door and disappeared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Masie! Have you heard the news?” One of the inmates named Darla stood outside the bars of my open cell. I’d finally been moved to gen-pop over three weeks ago and was given a job mopping floors with Darla—a new low in life, but a highlight of my day. Now I shared a bunk with a very large woman named Chainsaw who was in prison for killing her boyfriend. With a chainsaw.

Birds of a feather nest together. I was a famous killer, too.

“No.” I looked up from my book.

“You have to come. You won’t believe it!”

“Can’t you see I’m busy expanding my mind?” I held up my old, worn-out Harlequin novel from the 1980s, complete with Fabio lookalike. Half the pages were missing, and the swoony parts had mystery stains. Honestly, though, I just didn’t care. Nothing in this place was clean or nice.

“Masie,” she said, all giddy, like she was about to burst open, “there’s some man on the TV, claiming to represent over two million vampires.”

Now she had my attention. “Sorry?”

“I know, right? Vampires! It’s on every channel. The White House issued a statement before he came on, warning people to stay calm.” She started jumping up and down. “They’re real! Vampires are real.”

I got up from my bunk and followed her to the rec room, which was packed. Everyone was silent, staring at the TV mounted in the corner. Even the guards were frozen in shock.

I blinked, spotting a tall man on the screen with silky black hair, who looked extremely familiar. The text read, *Mr. Montgomery Stark, 500 yr. old vampire from Leiper’s Fork, TN.*

Five hundred? I gasped and covered my mouth, listening carefully to the unfolding press conference.

“...it is true that my kind consumes human blood, but it is a myth that we must kill humans in the process. It is also a myth that we must drink nightly to survive. I, myself, have not had a drop in several months. With cooperation and patience, I am confident that we can learn to live in harmony with humans. Next question.” He pointed to a reporter in the enormous conference room. I had no clue where it was. Maybe DC?

“Mr. Stark,” asked a male reporter in a light blue shirt, “aren’t you afraid you’ll all be hunted now that you’ve revealed yourself? And if you are, will your kind retaliate?”

Stark was quick to reply, his tone firm, “Like any living being, we have a right to defend ourselves, but we have passed several new laws in anticipation of the Great Outing. Killing humans is strictly prohibited, though we are allowed to incapacitate anyone who threatens the life of a vampire.” He paused, staring right into the camera. “My late wife, Anna, believed that with time, once humans understood the benefits of coexistence, violence could be avoided.”

The reporter retorted, “But you’re physically stronger than us, right? You can turn into bats. You—”

Stark held out his hands to stop the man from speaking. “Because there is much mythology surrounding vampires, I will be releasing a comprehensive guide later today that discloses exactly what we can and cannot do.”

“*Pfft!* Oh, nowww he’s spilling the beans,” I snarled. Where was this dang guide when I’d needed it?

Stark continued, “I hope everyone will take special note of the healing section. While it is now prohibited for us to create more vampires under vampire law, except for extreme situations, it is perfectly legal to assist the terminally ill, the injured, and those suffering from chronic disease.”

Oh shit. Big pharma won’t be happy, I thought.

“You can cure cancer?” one of the female reporters asked.

Stark nodded. “Among other things. Which is why we hope, in time, people will come to see us for what we are: humans who have transformed and been given extraordinary gifts. And with that, I will close with one last item.” Again he looked into the camera. “There is a woman in prison for murder. Masie Kicklighter. But she is innocent. I framed her out of spite, because I was a fool, and fools do not deserve to be with a woman like her—smart, beautiful, and good. I hope the courts will immediately free her since, as you can all see, I am alive and well.”

He removed his tie, unbuttoned his white dress shirt, and slid it off, revealing a ripped set of abs and muscled arms covered in those vine tattoos.

Some of the inmates swooned with “*mm-mm-mms...*” or “*hello, honeys!*” or “*sweet evil thang, come to Mamma.*”

I flashed nasty looks their way as a flicker of jealousy spiked through me.

Stark continued, “Here is my proof. The tattoos on my arms will match the photos of her victim.”

The room of reporters started buzzing with noise.

He continued, “Soon, a new vampire leader will be elected to represent my people and work with the proper human leaders to address any concerns. I wish you all a good night.” He left the stage in a blur.

The prison rec room exploded in expletives of every kind.

“Masie, he was talking about you! You’re going to be free, woman!” said Darla.

I blinked, trying to soak in what just happened. Stark gave it all up—the power, his political party, and probably every ally he’d ever had, all just to clear my name.

The world would know I wasn’t a killer. Not of humans, anyway.

Tears pooled in my eyes. Not because I would hopefully leave this place soon, but because my mamma, Maybell, and even Uncle Jimmie could hold their heads high again.

Suck on that, Netflix.



“Kicklighter, get your things. You’re going home today,” said a guard outside my cell at the crack of dawn.

I rubbed my eyes. “Sorry?”

“Chop Chop, the governor’s given you a pardon.”

For the record, she wasn’t telling me to hurry. Chop Chop was one of my prison nicknames.

“Did he say why?” Not that I was complaining, but it hadn’t even been twenty-four hours since Stark went public. This was fast.

The guard shrugged. “You can’t kill something that’s already dead, I guess.”

He guessed right!

He added, “Also, I hear the governor’s wife is ill. Maybe he swapped a favor or something.”

Stark. I bet he’s behind this.

I grabbed my things, which wasn’t much—just a few rolls of toilet paper (aka letters to my family) and a postcard from all the people at the Rooster, with a picture of Barney on the front.

“See ya, Chainsaw,” I said to my cellmate, who was rolled up in a blanket on the top bunk.

“See ya, Ginsu,” she grumbled and went back to sleep.

I followed the guard to a section of the prison I’d only seen once before when I’d checked in. Only now, I was checking out.

I kept pinching myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. I’d finally be going home, not that I had one anymore. The Carlins

had ended up selling their place after I went to prison. Couldn't say I blamed them after a gruesome "murder" had been committed in their guesthouse.

Still, I'd get to return to Leiper's Fork and the Rooster. I could help Uncle Jimmie save the place, which had been struggling ever since my conviction. Some of the people in town wanted nothing to do with us Kicklighters.

"Is this really happenin'?" I asked the female officer waiting to walk me out as my belongings were handed over. Apparently, they couldn't get me out of there fast enough.

"Yep. It's your lucky day, vampire president."

I frowned. *What in the Sam Hill?*

In the course of twenty minutes, I was given a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, and tennis shoes and shown the door. I stepped outside, inhaling the cool, fresh morning air.

This was better than unwrapping gifts on Christmas morning, eating hot dogs and potato salad on the Fourth of July, or turning on the radio and hearing my favorite song. It was even better than a long hot shower in a private bathroom at home.

"Mrs. Stark?" I looked beyond the chain-link fence a few yards away.

Charlie stood there waiting next to a black sedan.

"Ohmygod. You're alive." I almost tripped.

"Spent a few days in the hospital with a broken back, but I'm better than new. Your *friend* saw to it."

I walked over with a zip in my step. I wanted to leave before someone changed their mind and threw me back in a cell.

The gate slid open, and I sailed on past the guard post. "Stark healed you?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes."

“What did it cost you?” Because clearly Charlie was still working for Stark. He should’ve been free months ago.

“Get in. We have a long drive.”

I hugged him and then dove into the front passenger seat.

During the two-hour drive, Charlie filled me in on everything that had been happening since yesterday’s bombshell.

Side note: Apparently, he’d been keeping tabs on me through my uncle. Now that he was almost a free agent again, he planned to open a business—one of a kind—to help human slaves, servants, or anyone under vampire control against their will. Vampire laws were strict, and with the right knowledge, it was possible to free them. Charlie and I talked about how to void my marriage to Lazlo after this whole election business was sorted out.

As for the Great Outing, apparently some humans weren’t taking the news very well. People were already rallying, vowing to hunt and kill all vampires. Others were hunting vampires for totally different reasons. Some people wanted to become them and enjoy the gift of immortality. Others wanted to get a hold of their blood for medicinal purposes.

“Do you think things’ll ever go back to normal?” I asked Charlie.

“That’ll depend on you.”

“Me?”

“You’re on the ballot to be the first democratically elected vampire ruler.”

I laughed. “I’m not even a vampire.”

“But you are the reincarnation of Anna. I think it carries more weight.”

I was about to correct Charlie but bit my tongue. Like before, I didn’t know the lay of the land. Except that maybe I’d left one prison, only to walk into another.

I'm not ruling them. I refuse. All I wanted was my life back and to return home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Mamma, Maybell, Joe, Ashley, and Uncle Jimmie were all waiting outside the Flaming Rooster when Charlie and I pulled up. A few of the regulars were waiting, too, which was nice. A banner that read *Welcome Home, Masie* was displayed on the front porch over the rocking chairs.

I sat still for a moment, drinking in the heavenly sight of home—something I never thought I'd see again with my own two eyes. The old rocking chairs, the funky metal roof, the weathered barn wood, and the bed of flowers around the edges of the porch were better than heaven.

“Well? You just gonna sit here all day?” Charlie urged, gripping the wheel.

“I think I'm in shock. It looks so much prettier than I remember.” I couldn't help but cry.

I drew a breath and opened the car door. My family rushed over and hugged me.

The first person I noticed was Mamma. “You're all tan now.” Like her skin had been kissed by the Florida sun and then baked right in. She'd even added highlights to her dark hair.

But even I could tell my prison sentence had taken a toll. Something about the frown lines on her face. Deeper maybe. Longer? They'd never been that prominent.

“It's so good to see you, baby.” She wrapped her arms around me again and squeezed tightly. I'd told her never to visit me after my conviction. Seeing your child in prison was something no parent should have to endure.

“You have no idea how happy I am to be home,” I said.

I hugged Maybell, Ashley, and Joe individually, probably clinging to them a little too long.

“Let’s get some real food in ya,” Uncle Jimmie said. “I’ve got a fresh batch of gator tots going.”

“Hmmm... I never imagined I’d miss your greasy food so much.” I looked at Charlie, who still sat in the car with his window down. “You coming?”

“Thank you, Masie, but I’ve got some business to take care of for the boss. Good luck.”

Poor guy was still Stark’s indentured servant, but at least it would be over soon.

I smiled at him. “You too.”



Inside the bar, some of the regulars shook my hand and clapped me on the back—completely unexpected, considering the town hated me. These people treated me like a hero coming home from war.

Strange.

I’d just gotten out of prison. For murder. Even if I was pardoned, that kind of stink didn’t wear off so fast. Kind of like stepping in skunk roadkill.

Still, we all put on music and ate. They filled me in on everything I’d missed out on. Maybell was helping out full-time at the Rooster, including learning some of Jimmie’s secrets at the distillery. Dangerous, but okay. If Uncle Jimmie wanted to see the place go up in flames, that was his choice.

Mamma hadn’t moved back to town just yet, but she hadn’t left either. Not since she’d found out that Daddy was still alive.

He couldn’t be here for my homecoming, due to the daylight hour, but she promised he’d be along as soon as the sun set.

Interestingly, when she talked about him, she didn’t seem at all bothered by his altered state. Could there be a happy ever after for the two? I kinda hoped so, though I really didn’t want Mamma to be turned.

After hours of talking, and a steady stream of customers coming in to welcome me back, we all sat at one of the large round tables, and I finally had to ask my family, “Hey, y’all, why’s everyone so happy to see me?”

“Everyone’s relieved,” said Uncle Jimmie. “We might finally have a human in charge after years of vampire rule.”

“You mean Leiper’s Fork?”

“Half the town has been forced to work for them, except the police—some kind of rule they had about keeping law enforcement and the military in the dark since they’re more likely to fight back.”

How had I not known this? “I don’t care if they vote for me. The only thing I want is to go back to my quiet life, slingin’ whiskey, serving fries, and listening to Big Barney crow on Friday nights.”

“Masie, I know you’ve been through a lot,” said Maybell. “But so have we.” She patted the side of her now very short black hair. She’d accidentally caught her hair in the kitchen’s blender last week.

“Y’all,” I said, “I know you’re excited about this, but it’s not happening. Let them work out their shit—”

“Masie. Language,” Mamma corrected.

“Mamma,” I warned, “I’ve been incarcerated for almost eight months. All I know are cuss words, and you judgin’ ain’t gonna help.” I inhaled slowly and breathed out. “Let the vampires and our human leaders work out their stuff. I don’t want to be a part of it. I don’t want power. I don’t ever want to look at another vampire again.”

“You sure about that?” Maybell’s eyes flashed toward the front door. The rest of the patrons went silent. “Stark is here.” She smiled teasingly.

Through the window, I saw that the sun had just set. It was barely past six, but it was autumn now. I should’ve expected this.

I turned my head to find Montgomery Stark standing there in cowboy boots and jeans that showed off his long, muscular legs. His white T-shirt stretched across his muscled chest, accentuating his large biceps.

Dear Lord, why does he have to be so tasty? I swallowed hard. I'd been so lonely in prison that even Chainsaw had started looking good.

My heart began to accelerate, but my brain slammed on the brakes. "Just give me a sec, y'all." I got up and walked over to him. "What are you doing here?"

"The vampire ban was lifted months ago."

"That's not what I mean."

He jerked his head. "Care to take a walk outside? The sky is exceptionally beautiful this time of year, filled with reds, oranges, and yellows. My favorite."

"Mmm...okay." I followed him out, but I had no intention of walking. More like, telling him to take a hike.

I stopped just past the porch. "Thank you very much for getting me released from prison, Stark. I appreciate not rottin' away for a crime I didn't commit, but that doesn't change how I feel about you."

He turned to face me and bobbed his head. "I know."

"I also appreciate that you cleared my name so that people will stop callin' me Murder Masie, the Organ Picasso." And Ginsu, like the knives. There were also Chop Chop and Gutter Trash. Because I'd gutted someone.

"Those were very unjust names." He tsked. "Social media is a cesspool."

"And while I appreciate the vote of confidence from the vampires who supported Anna, I'm not her, and they need to know the truth. I won't lie and make people think I'm someone else."

He nodded. "I hear you. Every word. However, you are mistaken. They already know the truth."

"How? When?"

"Humankind may have only found out about vampires yesterday, but I told my people the truth—all of it—weeks ago, after I visited you in prison. It was the only way to make things right."

"You...told them I'm not Anna?" I folded my arms over my chest.

He nodded. "And it was wrong to ask you to pretend to be her in order to keep power."

"You did all this just to make things right between us?" I found it hard to believe.

"I did it because I realized there is no darkness inside you. There is only good. It is why your sadness never overtook you or defeated you. It is why I fell in love with you, and how you were able to defy Lazlo after having his blood."

I'd never even considered that. The night Lazlo died, he'd ordered me not to kill him. I had no problem doing it anyway.

Stark continued, "I want to turn over a new leaf and be strong, like you, Masie Kicklighter. Only a weak man gains power through lies, fear, and manipulation. I can do better."

Wow. Just...wow. "I'm proud of you, Stark. All grown up." I smiled.

"Amusing," he said and then cracked a smile. "And now, I must finish packing up my estate. The Vampire Coexistence Party does not plan on making life easy for the old regime."

"Where are you going?" I suddenly didn't want him to leave.

He shrugged. "I do not wish to cause you any more trouble, Masie. You deserve to live without reminders of the past and what I did to you. But do not worry for me; I have other homes."

Of course he did. “So you’re leaving? For me? And never coming back?”

“Yes. I think it is best. For you.”

It probably was. Lord knew my life hadn’t been right since Stark came into it. It all started when he dumped Fiona to pursue me.

“Regardless,” he added, “you may want to take a few days to truly think about representing the VCP. It is an honor for a human to be given such power. You’ll be able to shape the future of this world.”

I wiggled my lips side to side. “I’ll think about it, but I kinda have my heart set on just managin’ the Flaming Rooster. Uncle Jimmie needs help with the place.”

Stark lowered his head. “I wish you all the luck in the world, Masie Kicklighter.” He turned to leave.

“Stark!”

“Yes, Masie?”

“Thank you. You really are a good man.”

“No. I am not. But perhaps someday, I will be a good vampire.” He bowed and then disappeared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

One year later

“Two Flaming Rooster-itas and a Vampire Slinger, Daddy,” I said.

“Coming right up, sweetheart.” My dad went to work with superhuman efficiency as usual. It almost felt normal to me now, seeing him here at the bar. Joe had moved over to the distillery and worked nine-to-five hours so he could spend more time with his girlfriend. Good for him.

I was now managing the Flaming Rooster full-time, but still had to fill in and wait tables when we were shorthanded like tonight.

I placed my tray on the bar and started grabbing garnishes for my drinks: plastic vampire teeth, lollipops in the shape of Barney, and a marshmallow soaked in Bacardi 151 to be lit on fire tableside. It was our most popular drink here at the Flaming Rooster, located in Leiper’s Fork, now known as the “Vampire Smithsonian” town.

Humans from all over the world came to stay at our five-star golf resort, to mix and mingle with the undead who once rubbed elbows with the likes of Shakespeare, Michelangelo, or Caesar. Some came to visit our vampire health spa, one of two thousand locations around the world. If you were sick, all a person had to do was donate a pint of blood in order to enjoy the incredible healing properties. For an extra fee, you could make a week of it, drinking champagne, getting full-body massages, and a full medical workup to ensure you were cured after drinking vampire blood. And there was vampire night golf, of course.

It was a new world, more divided than ever between the people who would never trust vampires and the people who embraced them as another one of God’s incredible creations.

As for the vampires, some were loud and proud advocates of their belief in coexistence, but the vast majority, some one and a half million vampires, chose to remain in the shadows. I figured over time, they might join the half million who live openly. God knew they had time on their sides to get comfortable with this.

I ultimately turned down the nomination for president but took on an advisory role, but only because Charlie asked, and I wanted him to succeed.

Honestly, there was no one more suited to the position. He was human but had worked for vampires for years and understood their rules, history, and customs better than anyone. He knew what was at stake (no pun intended) for humankind if the laws weren't set up correctly.

First things first, though.

His administration was focused on helping change the public's perception of vampires and to ensure lawbreakers on both sides were made an example of. It was a tumultuous time in history where things could go south quickly if one side felt under attack.

Me? I guessed I got my wish. The town was safe, especially given our new vampire deputies, and the community was prospering. Things almost felt normal. I even helped the city council put together the business plan to make Leiper's Fork the hot destination it was today. Everyone was happy.

Except that I missed him.

More than I should.

But not enough to go chasing after the man. I guessed I feared rocking the boat because everything was so perfect. Mamma and Daddy were living together again, trying to navigate extremely difficult waters as different species. Maybell was still as clueless as ever but dating. Uncle Jimmie finally got to have his retirement party but still came by every

night to check on things. Mostly, he liked playing the jukebox and mingling with the customers while showing off Barney.

Everyone was happy in this strange new world. Everyone except me, who worried about the risks of involving myself with an ancient, deadly vampire.

The irony was that I finally believed he truly loved me.

Why else would Stark stay away this long? He'd put me first and left Leiper's Fork, just like he'd promised.

I just wished...I wished we could start over. Things were so different now. I was different now. I no longer feared vampires.

Honestly, it was the humans I worried about most now. Some people were simply born with hate in their hearts. They'd never accept the fact that they weren't in control or rulers of the galaxy. It literally pained them to see people living happily, free, and making their own choices about vampires. Every other day, there were protests where these so-called "liberation" groups demanded our government crack down on vampires or on humans who chose to mingle with them.

The way I saw it, there was risk in everything in life, even stepping out your door. It wasn't up to me to tell anyone how to live, and I certainly wouldn't tell others what to do. As long as they let me do me, I was good. They could scream all they liked.

I went into the kitchen to grab an order of vampire fingers for table ten. They were really just extra-long chicken nuggets rolled in chopped pistachios with catsup. People loved them.

"Masie, there's someone out back to see you," called out our line cook, Bobby.

"Thanks. Be right there."

Thomas had finally left Lizzy and kept coming around to see me. I felt sorry for the man, but he'd always be Sheriff

Idiot to me. Something about blaming my big breasts for his cheating ways stuck with me. Also, he gave bad legal advice.

I walked outside, pushing past the screen door. “Thomas, I told you to stop...”

My voice faded as my eyes drank in a face I’d never dreamed of seeing again. My stomach flipped, and I felt like I was about to be sick. “Lazlo?”

He strolled up, a smug smile on his pale face. “Hello, wife.”

I took two steps back. “No.”

He stopped inches in front of me. “Word to the wise, never dump a charred vampire in the swamp. It’s got far too many snacks.”

Oh Lord. Just like in the movies. This was one myth they’d left out of the guide.

I turned to run, but he caught me by the neck, jerking me to the ground with a hard thump.

He straddled my body and lowered his face to mine, displaying a set of sharp incisors. “I told you, Masie. Never forget what I’m capable of.” He lunged his head, pushing his fangs into my neck.

“Lazlo, save some for me, and don’t forget you promised to let me turn her.” Fiona’s wicked face peeked out from behind Lazlo.

No, dear Lord. Fiona wanted to be my maker.

I tried to scream, but it was no use. I could hardly breathe.

Within seconds, the memories of our wedding night returned. My vision got fuzzy, my limbs felt numb, and my mind was fading.

Fiona’s mouth clamped down on my wrist, and she began sucking, too.

No, no, no... My heart began beating erratically.

My limbs flailed, and I struck him hard, but each punch sent pain through my fist. He was rock solid.

Tears streamed from the corners of my eyes. I didn't want this.

"You are almost there, my love," said Lazlo. "Just a few more seconds."

Fiona shoved her finger into my mouth. The taste of sour copper washed over my tongue. Her blood.

"This is taking too long." She pinched my nose and covered my mouth. She was trying to suffocate me.

Oh God. I had to be between death and life in order to transform.

"No..." I mumbled against her palm.

The view around them faded to a one-inch ball of light.

Suddenly, Lazlo was off me, and I could breathe again. I heard the faint noise of a struggle, followed by the crunching of bones.

"Masie!" Stark hovered over me, his eyes dark. He scooped me into his arms as I drew a shallow breath.

He began rocking me against him. "Fucking hell. I'm so sorry, Masie."

I began to sob. "Am I going to turn? Please tell me I'm not going to turn."

He held my head to his chest and stroked my hair. "I do not know, Masie. I do not know."

I turned my body toward him and curled into a ball as I felt myself falling to sleep.

"I will see you in one hour," he said quietly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I lay in bed in the dark, listening to my frantic family outside in the hallway as they spoke to Stark. I assumed we were at his place because I could smell cinnamon. *Holiday spice.*

“Well? Is Masie a vampire?” Mamma asked.

“Is she healing?” Daddy said at the same time. “She’d better, dammit. My baby can’t turn.”

“Who cares?” said my older sister, Maybell. “Just as long as she doesn’t die. Right?”

Finally, Stark spoke up. “Everyone, stop talking,” he demanded. “I do not know what is happening. It has been over two hours. Generally the person dies, heals, or is born again within the first hour.”

There was a long pause.

“Well, what the flippin’ heck is wrong with my daughter?” Mamma barked.

“Darlin’,” said Daddy, “I think what Mr. Stark is trying to say is that he doesn’t know.”

Stark probably didn’t appreciate Daddy calling that out. Vampires were notoriously prideful. *More arrogant than an Alabama beauty queen at an apple festival.*

“What are we going to do?” Mamma began sobbing. “I need to know what’s happenin’ to my baby.”

“I am sorry, Mrs. Kicklighter,” Stark said in his usual deep, authoritative voice, “but all we can do is wait. Masie’s body will determine the outcome when it is ready.”

But I’m here! I’m awake and better than ever. Totally healed. I tried to open my mouth and call to them, but nothing happened. Then I attempted to move my arms and legs. Nothing.

Holy hotcakes. What-what's wrong with me?

Stark! Stark! Can you hear me? My mouth remained immobile, and that was when I realized the heap-o-turds I was in. Stark once told me that this transformation business wasn't a science. He said it was a matter of the heart, and my heart didn't feel right.

Lord no. I was apparently stuck between life and death, my heart unable to decide how to move forward.

My parents came into the room, and Mamma took my hand. "Masie, sweetheart, if you can hear me, your daddy and I want you to know how much we love you. And, yes, living with him has been a challenge. Darn man sleeps all day. But you know what hasn't changed? How much we love our children. We are so proud of the kind, responsible person you've become, Masie." She lowered her face into view. "That being said," she snarled, "I'm your damned mamma, and you will do as you are told. Now getchur ass back here this second. You hear me?"

I couldn't believe it; Mamma was swearing!

Mamma went on, "I don't give a hollering hoot if you become a vampire. I got your daddy back after ten damned years, and I'm not going to go through this heartache again." She took a long moment and inhaled deeply. "You come back to us, Masie. And if it's as a human, I'll cook your favorite meal—buttermilk fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and gravy. If it's vampire, well, Daddy can help you find something tasty, I'm sure. He's real good at that. Don't hurt people while he sucks on them neither. I would know."

Ew. My daddy was drinking from Mamma? I did not need to know that.

She kissed my forehead. "I love you, Masie."

"What your mother said." Daddy kissed my cheek, and I heard them step out of the room.

"Masie? It's Maybell. If you can hear me, I want you to know you are a pain-in-the-ass, bossy little sister—and I mean

that literally because you're my boss—but I don't know what I would do without you." She began sobbing. "So you figure your shit out, okay? And you come back. Just don't die. Anything but that. I love you." She left the room too.

Well, shit. I didn't know what was wrong with me, but one thing was certain, I didn't want to do this to my family.

The question was, did it matter what I wanted? Maybe this was just my time to go. Because I sure as hell didn't want to be a vampire.



"They are gone now, Masie. Your mother and sister need rest, and your father, well, the sun will be up soon." Stark sat next to me on the edge of the large bed.

I couldn't move my head to take in the room, but he'd lit a fire, that much I knew. I could smell the light scent of smoke mixing with Stark's plug-in.

I wanted to ask why he was here next to me. If the sunrise was just around the corner, then he needed to go to...

Actually, I still wasn't sure where vampires slept. In a hidey-hole in a wall? Maybe Stark slept in a coffin in the basement where he had his little sex room.

Stark leaned over me, brushing my hair from my face. "Worry not, Masie. I will stay by your side until you've decided what you want."

I stared straight up, of course. Wasn't much else to do. But did he know I was listening? He had to.

"Do not concern yourself for the sunlight," he added. "This is my bedroom. It has sunproof shutters, and my home remains well protected."

Protected from what? I guessed his political enemies. The man didn't have a lot of friends lately, which was kind of on account of me. He really had given up everything—except his money, good looks, and vampire abilities—to make things right between us.

But where had he been this last year? I didn't know, but he sure showed up in the nick of time. Or had he?

“By the way,” he said, “you should also know that I killed Lazlo.” Stark looked away, gazing toward the glow of the fire. “Fiona, too. If I could, I would've tortured them for eternity. They had no right to touch you.”

I was just glad the two were gone.

Stark continued, “Masie, I don't know if you can hear me, but I have come across vampires who claim they were awake during their transformations.” He brushed my hair with his fingers, playing with the long black strands. “They say they were awake but unable to respond.”

Yes. Yes. That's me!

“I think you are in that place—wherever it is—where your soul cannot decide.” He took a deep breath. “At least, I pray that is what is happening.”

The man looked genuinely distraught, which was no small thing. Montgomery Stark wasn't known for being weak or easily rattled.

I don't know what's wrong, Stark. I just want to wake up and see my family again. But maybe that was the problem. Waking up as human probably wasn't an option. I would've healed by now. And waking up as a vampire went against everything I believed in.

I'd been raised to be a polite, kind, and selfless person. The vampires I'd met were none of those things.

Sure, my boundaries—even cussing—had been pushed to the limit ever since Stark walked into my life and confessed he wanted me from first sniff. And, sure, I'd been slowly shedding my protective armor and letting my emotions out. But those changes were nothing compared to becoming a vampire.

Still, I didn't want to die. I couldn't do that to my family. I also felt a strange connection with this vampire, even if I hated

to admit it. I had every reason to go back, but my soul was resisting.

“Masie, if you can hear me, if you are indeed fighting to stay with us—with me—then please give me the chance to tell you what sort of man I was, and who I will be to you, if you choose to live.”

Not live, Stark. I'd be like you. Forever between life and death.

He stood, walked across the room—I could hear his heavy steps—and then returned with a chair. He sat beside me and took my hand.

“I cannot tell you everything, because I have been alive for a very, very long time, and I fear there isn't time. What you need to know is that my past is dark and unpleasant, but if the journey has led to you, then none of it was truly a mistake.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

STARK

1590. Northern Italy

“No, Father. Please don’t make me go.” I looked up at the man who claimed to love me, but like every other moment in my life, he’d chosen himself. Food, wine, or paying off his gambling debts.

“Do you wish your mother and sister to be out on the streets?” my father said sternly. “Do you wish them to starve?”

“Then seek employment. Earn a wage. Do not sell me, Father!” I cried.

My words were met with a hard slap. He then dragged me off, kicking and screaming, to meet my fate.

It was the last time I would ever look at my father. I would never see my mother or sister again either. My father had sold me to a man he claimed was wealthy beyond my wildest dreams.

“If you’re a good boy, Monty, he’ll pay you in sweets, and you’ll never want for anything.”

A lie, of course. The gentleman turned out to be a ruthless vampire who would force me into his servitude for nearly two decades.

I always wondered if my father knew what Charles was, or if it would have made a difference, but I would never find out.

Posing as a wealthy merchant, Charles took me and his other human slaves (mostly swordmen for protection) to the farthest reaches of Europe, Asia, and Africa in search of his maker—a vampire who had turned him and abandoned him three centuries prior.

Charles never told me why he refused to give up looking, but I suspected he wanted answers. Why had he been left alone to fend for himself? Or, perhaps, he simply wanted to find others of his kind and learn what he could.

I do not know how I survived during those eighteen years, but I saw the most amazing places—pyramids, mountains, oceans the color of jewels. I met people who, at the time, seemed like they were from another world. Some primitive and some so advanced I could hardly believe my eyes. They wrote on paper, carved enormous statues, farmed more food than they could eat, and had indoor plumbing—a marvel in those days. The world was wild and savage, and humans were determined to tame it.

And then, one day, Charles finally gave up. After three hundred years, his maker's trail had dried up, and Charles concluded his maker was dead. Any vampires we came across wanted nothing to do with Charles. They were also very suspicious and untrusting in those days.

So we returned to Charles's home, just south of what was now London. The irony was that less than a month after arriving, it finally happened.

Charles would often have me walk alone on the roads at night, wearing fine clothing to lure thieves into a wooded area where he would take them. On this night, I lured a vampire looking for an easy meal.

Charles ripped the creature off me and then froze. I'd never seen him so happy. "Bartoli? I have been looking for you everywhere."

The vampire, who was tall with blond hair, seemed stunned at first. And then without warning, he killed Charles. Just like that. Bartoli had not wished to be found.

As for me, I quickly learned that Bartoli had not abandoned Charles for any rational reason. He merely enjoyed taking lives and toying with people. Sometimes he would torment his victims for days on end, appearing in their rooms,

telling them he was the devil coming to take their souls. He enjoyed driving them mad first.

And sometimes, he turned his victims for the pleasure of watching from afar as they woke up, completely horrified and confused. Many died the next day, completely unaware they were vampires and could not go into the sun.

As for me, Bartoli took my life that night and turned me, but what he had not anticipated was my fury and knowledge. I had spent nearly two decades as Charles's whipping boy. I lured his meals, I washed his clothes and dressed him, I listened to his stories, and I watched quietly. I learned his tricks. I knew everything there was to know about vampires, so when Bartoli turned me, I was not afraid or lost. I did not fumble into the daylight.

I was angry.

He could have simply left me alone to live my life as a free man after Charles's death. But no.

So I tracked Bartoli for months, patiently waiting. And then one night, I killed him while he fed.



MASIE

Dear baby Jesus. What a grim story. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear any more. It sounded like Stark had been through hell.

“Masie,” said Stark, “I only tell you all this because it proves a point. I thrived as a vampire because I had someone to teach me. You will have the same. You will have me.”

What difference would that make? You just don't get it, Stark. I wanted to get married, have children, and grow old with my soul mate. I wanted to leave out cookies on Christmas Eve and see my kids' faces the next morning as they opened presents. I wanted to teach them to ride a bike and fish and read and dance the two-step. Now, all that's gone.

I got to choose between living forever—and watching everyone else make families and memories—or dying.

Stark continued, “You do not have to be with me if you do not wish it, Masie. Your maker is dead, and you have your father to lean on as you adjust—he is a very, very capable man, by the way. I have missed him since he moved in with your mother.”

And I bet Daddy missed Stark a little, too. Mamma could be a lot to handle, even if Daddy loved her more than anything.

Stark added, “I only ask that you consider the benefits of learning from someone who cares for you deeply and knows more than most vampires. I would protect you. I would love you.” He paused. “I *do* love you.”

His pitch tugged at my heartstrings. The truth was, though, that he and I hadn’t started out on the best of terms. He’d put me through hell during those first few weeks. Being stalked by a vampire wasn’t the sort of thing any girl enjoyed. Then I was taken, tortured by his brother, freed, and then framed for murder. I went to prison for almost one year!

I knew he was sorry and had given up power to get me back my freedom, but was it enough? Did I love him?

Sure, I was drawn to Stark. I wanted him and missed him when he wasn’t around, but every time I thought of letting myself fall, something stopped me. Probably the fact that Montgomery Stark was a ruthless vampire.

That was the crux of it. Our natures were on opposite ends of the spectrum, and I didn’t want to change. *Can you sense what I’m feeling, Stark? If yes, I don’t know how you and I could work.*

It was like I’d said before, there was no bigger sin than betraying yourself. If you believed in something, you had to stand up for it. If you loved someone, you had to stand up for them. It wasn’t easy to fight for what was right, especially in this day and age where everyone ran around trying not to

offend the fragile masses, but it was our obligation. Otherwise, what kind of world would we be leaving behind? But to do that, a person had to be honest and true to who they were. Our hearts were where our true strength came from. Betray that, and it was like betraying your very soul.

He sighed and took my hand, placing a soft kiss on top. “I cannot wait to see what you do with all of your goodness, Masie. Because if I have learned one thing over the years, it is that becoming a vampire does not change who you are on the inside. Only love can do that. And you have changed me.”

Wow. Maybe he didn’t realize it, but he *was* listening to me on some level. It *had* to be our connection. There was no other explanation.

He leaned over and kissed my lips. His were warm and soft just like I dreamed of every other night. It was a memory I couldn’t let go of. The first time he kissed me was the night he cooked that awful chicken dinner. It was a great kiss that left me breathless. The second time he kissed me was the night he took me to his house to test if I was his Anna. The kiss made my blood rush.

But the third kiss, outside the bathroom at the great hall on the night of my final test, that was the kiss I remembered most. He’d poured his heart into that kiss and told me he loved me. Not because he thought I was Anna, but because I wasn’t. I was Masie, the woman he wanted.

But this kiss? It jolted me deep inside my core. This kiss was pure love, no expectations or demands. He just wanted me to know how he felt.

Suddenly, my heart started to twitch. Then I felt a beat. Then another. *Oh Lord. What’s that?*

Thump, thump! Thump, thump! Thump, thump! Heat surged through my chest. My veins began buzzing and tingling with life. *Oh, Lord. Thank you! Thank you!* I was coming back as a human. I was healing.

I gasped, sucking in a deep, glorious breath. I didn't care how it had happened, but I'd never take being human for granted again.

"Masie!" Stark jumped to his feet.

I sat up, drinking in the delicious air.

He jumped forward and scooped me up in his arms before kissing me. I kissed him back, savoring the sensation of his touch.

I slid my hand to the back of his neck and deepened the kiss, our tongues mingling. The tip of my tongue slid over the sharp tip of his fang, getting an unexpected prick.

"Ow." I covered my mouth and giggled.

"I cannot believe you came back to me." His eyes glowed with joy.

Should I tell him it was his kiss that kick-started my heart? I stared at his beautiful face and sensual lips. *Nah. Another time.* I pressed my mouth to his and threaded my fingers through the back of his silky long hair.

"I am never letting you go," he said between passionate kisses.

"Not even if I run you out of town?"

He smiled. "I was never far from you, Masie. You had to know I would not abandon you again."

That was sweet. And, thankfully, I was back. Heartbeat, breathing, alive! I didn't know why it took so long, but I didn't care.

Stark laid me back on the bed and began removing his shirt.

Oh. We're doing this. Honestly, I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate. He said a lot of things tonight, but it was that kiss that changed everything. *A kiss that brought me back to life.*

I pulled off my shirt, and he stared at the swells of my breasts as if hypnotized.

“You can touch them, you know,” I said.

Excitedly, he kicked off his boots and slid off his pants, leaving himself completely nude.

I drank in his naked body illuminated by the firelight.

I could eat him with a spoon. His powerful neck flowed down into wide shoulders and strong arms with bulging biceps. His chest muscles were perfectly formed, and his abs rippled across his stomach in deep grooves.

My eyes followed the hair from his navel down to a thick —

Wow. Okay. I swallowed hard.

“You can touch it, you know,” he said.

My eyes whipped up to his face, and I felt my cheeks heat. “Sorry. It’s just that I’ve never seen one so...nice.” His was thick and long and hard as a rock.

He came over and lay down next to me, unlatching my bra. He massaged my breasts and kissed the nipples, taking time to gently nip and suck. Each touch sent tingles and shivers down my spine and deep into my core.

I’d messed around a little over the years with my boyfriends—not that I’d had many or been with anyone worth mentioning—but being touched by Stark was nothing like those guys. Stark knew what he was doing, and to me, confidence was the ultimate aphrodisiac.

His hand moved down and unbuttoned my jeans. He lowered my waistband a little and then glided his fingers under my panties, between my legs.

I gasped from the intense sensation of his fingers gently pressing against my clit.

Hungrily, I covered his mouth with mine, my tongue massaging to the strokes of his finger.

The heat between my legs grew intense, and within seconds he had me burning for release.

I pulled his hand away and stopped kissing him. “You are so sexy and so, so good with your hand, but I really want you.”

He smiled, gazing into my eyes, and then brushed back my hair. “You are so beautiful, Masie. Your body, your smile... you.”

Dear Lord this man was good. Right down to his words.

We started kissing again, the pace more frantic. After another minute, he made quick work of my pants and underwear. He moved his large frame between my legs, and I felt his erection prodding my entrance.

His mouth returned to mine, and I slid my hands around him, gripping his beautifully round, hard ass. Who knew vampires could be so warm and sensual and irresistibly sexy? My entire body was vibrating with need, spurred by his every touch. I couldn't wait.

“Do it,” I whispered.

He thrust forward, sliding deep.

I gasped, feeling a sharp pain.

Stark kept kissing me but didn't move inside me. I think he was letting me take a second to get over the sting.

After a few moments, the pressure on my clit and the sensation of his girth began overriding the discomfort. I needed release. I needed him to give it.

I began rocking my hips, urging him to move. He took the cue, pulling out almost completely and gliding back in, each time lingering just a few seconds to make full contact with my clit.

The pressure began building deep inside my pelvis. With my hands and the pace of my kisses, I silently asked him to drive harder.

He truly was a skilled, experienced lover because he knew exactly what I wanted.

He thrust his hips, driving his hard cock deeper. Over and over again, he repeated the pistoning action.

Suddenly, the erotic tingles rose to the surface and exploded in hard waves of euphoric contractions. My inner muscles locked down around his thick member. I let out a cry, feeling like I was leaving my body and floating in some kind of bubble filled with heat and pleasure and everything good.

He made tiny thrusts, milking my orgasm to a point where the bliss was almost too much for my mind to take. Could a person die from feeling this good? If yes, I'd be a goner for the second time today.

Just as my body started to relax and come down, Stark began pumping his cock into me with measured strokes. Then faster. Harder. The bed shook and creaked beneath me.

The sinful excitement of knowing he was coming lit me back up. I started coming again, the waves more intense than the first time.

I screamed out, and he raised his head toward the ceiling, groaning deeply. His entire body froze except for his flexing arms planted on either side of my head. His powerful biceps trembled as he came.

I watched in awe as this beautiful, dangerous creature took his pleasure from my body, lost in ecstasy. His masculine face, with its strong pulsing jaw and elegant cheekbones, was everything fierce, and his seductive mouth was all intense hard lines.

After a few moments, his entire body relaxed. He pulled out slowly from my now sensitive flesh. He rolled next to me and stretched his frame down the length of mine. I could feel the movements of his chest and heavy breathing against my breast.

"I love you, Montgomery Stark," I said with a breathy voice.

“I know.” He kissed my cheek with a chuckle. “I love you, too, Masie. Now and forever.”

My heart swooned. The moment was everything sweet and perfect. I’d never, ever forget it. Also, that sex had been *hot! Wayyy better than I imagined.*

“And to think, I almost died a virgin. That was amazing.”

“Technically, you did die a virgin.”

“But I’m back, baby. Alive, kicking, and incredibly happy.” I kissed his lips, and he pulled away, staring with a strange look on his face.

“What?” I said. “Is my after-sex glow too much for you? Was the I-love-you thing too fast? I know it seems like I changed my mind all of a sudden, but when you kissed me before, I swear it was like lightning, and I—”

“Masie, you do know that...that you did not come back human, right?”

I froze and blinked. “Sorry?”

“You are a vampire. I thought you knew.”

My jaw dropped. But I didn’t feel any different. I was still me. One hundred percent. My mind shuffled, doing a sanity check.

I still loved my family, loved running the Rooster and slinging whiskey. I loved living in Leiper’s Fork and watching the customers sing with Big Barney every Friday night. I still thought Thomas was an idiot and Maybell was a brat, whom I’d never stop loving. I still admired Uncle Jimmie, who was probably freaking the heck out right now after hearing about tonight. I still missed Deedee but felt incredibly lucky because I had my daddy back, which made Mamma so very, very happy.

I was happy, and nothing had changed.

I stared back at Stark, watching the magnificent blue and green swirls in his pale eyes. I loved him. That was new, but a

welcome change.

I placed my hand over my beating heart. *So vampires have heartbeats.*

I smiled, gazing into the loving face of my handsome vampire. “I can work with this.”

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello, y'all!

I hope you enjoyed this unscheduled book. For those who've been anxiously waiting for sequels in other series, you're probably wondering why I wrote this.

Maybe not.

Either way, I'm going to tell you. Ha!

Every once in a while, my brain gets tied up in knots, especially when I'm going back to an existing series that's more complex. It helps to write something that comes fresh from the creative juices of the universe.

I am happy to say, I really got into this one, and it unblocked my brain.

The question is, will I be writing more of this series? Yes, I plan to! Though, it's not for certain.

First, I'm going to wrap up the RevoLUVtion and the Suite #45 series with their book threes. That will leave the OHellNo series and Immortal Tailor series still going. Draco (a continuation of the King series) is still TBD in terms of there being more books after I finish the first one.

Once I'm through those exciting books, I'll have to sit down with Masie and see how much more torture she's game for. LOL. Personally, I think we all want to see how she copes with her new life. Muahaha...

So it's important to sign up for my NEWSLETTER so you get updates on upcoming releases (don't depend on retailer alerts). Subscribers get dibs on free swag!

SIGN UP AT: www.mimijean.net (click the "Join my newsletter" link) or [CLICK HERE!](#)

MORE importantly, if you really want to see more of Masie because you LOVED this book, let me know by

posting a short and sweet (no spoilers) review on your favorite retailer or Goodreads!

Thank you for continuing to support my writing!

HUGS,

Mimi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my hubby, who showed amazing support during a difficult time this past year. So many tough moments and big changes.

I also want to thank my friends and helpers who keep the wheels on the bus when I need a break from things. You know who you are.

Last but not least, a big thank you to the awesome people who help me make a story into a book! Kelli, Pauline, Paul, Kylie, and Dali! You know you rock at what you do, but I'll tell you anyway. You rock.

With Love,

Mimi

EXCERPT – THE IMMORTAL TAILOR

Looking for more supernatural fun? *The Immortal Tailor* has all the romance and crazy adventures!



From *New York Times* bestselling author Mimi Jean Pamfiloff comes a new immortal series filled with dark humor, angst, and a brooding hero who loves a good tweed: *The Immortal Tailor*.

THE IMMORTAL WORLD IS IN TROUBLE, AND THE GODS DEMAND . . . THEIR TAILOR COME TO THE RESCUE?

Long ago, Damien Greystone hung up his guns, knives, and rope for the quiet life of a tailor. Sure, his clients now include the likes of bloodthirsty vampires, a hair-obsessed Bigfoot, and fourteen insane deities, but at least Damien doesn't have to kill anymore. And, sure, he's been cursed to live alone for all eternity, but nobody's life is perfect. Right?

Unfortunately, his monk-like existence is about to come to a screeching halt. The gods' powers are on the fritz, and they're demanding his help.

But when Damien starts investigating, he meets Sky Morales, a beautiful journalist who's up to her ears in danger (and one very aggressive fairy). He has no choice but to dust off his weapons.

Can he protect her without getting too close? Because his "curse of solitude" doesn't negotiate, and bad things will happen to Sky if he so much as feels a flutter of affection.

And as if that pressure weren't enough, his precious store is being looked after by a love-sucking demon and a punk chick who has a knack for insulting everyone. Bigfoot isn't pleased.

The sooner Damien can get this job done, the faster he can get back to his peaceful life. If only he weren't enjoying getting his hands dirty again. Just like the good old days that got him in trouble.

CHAPTER ONE

“Come on. Hug me. Just one little squeeze?”

Damien Greystone set his fabric shears on the table and glared at the white furball with golden eyes. “No. And stop begging. I fed you last week.”

Damien returned to cutting out what would become the sleeve of a classic gray tweed coat, made by hand. The *correct* way. As his father and his grandfather had done before him. Being a tailor wasn’t merely a family trade, it was an art, and this workshop was his sanctuary.

Along the walls, handmade oak drawers—some shallow, some deep—were filled with reams of fine fabrics and every color thread imaginable. An adjustable mannequin stood in the corner between towering piles of boxes he lacked space for in the overflowing stockroom next door.

In some ways, his store was a reflection of himself. Organized yet chaotic.

“Damien, come on,” whined the tiny beast, twitching his white whiskers. “I’m huungry. Sooo hungry.”

Damien growled with frustration, knowing exactly how this argument would end: Him getting annoyed to death and losing another day’s worth of work. “If I do this, Bonbon, you must promise to leave me alone the rest of the week. I have three suits to finish on top of this coat. And no more wetting the goddamned floor or leaving your ‘little treasures’ in the fitting room.”

The small beast jumped up on its hind legs, dancing in a circle. “Yes! Yes! Deal!”

“Fine.” Damien removed his black apron so as not to cover it with white fluffy fur. He set it on the sewing table and opened his arms. “Come on then, Bonbon.”

Bonbon jumped into Damien's arms and slumped against his chest, groaning with delight. "Hmmm...delicious. Now stroke my ears, you dirty prick."

Damien shook his head. "You have a vile mouth."

"Fuck off. Now rub. A deal's a deal, buddy."

Damien massaged the soft little ears between his fingers, loathing every second of it.

"Adorable Chihuahua," said a female voice.

Damien swiveled toward the doorway leading from his workshop to the storefront. Standing there was none other than Cimil, the Goddess of the Underworld. Today she had her flaming red hair neatly braided back, and she wore an unflattering camo outfit with army boots. Entirely suspicious. Cimil generally dressed in wild, sparkly outfits meant to annoy or distract her enemies.

"Cimil, welcome back to Greystone and Sons. Always a pleasure. I assume you are here to be fitted for your new winter solstice tutu?" A bizarre *summer* tradition for the insane deity.

Damien set down Bonbon, his love-sucking demon, playing it cool. By order of the gods, demons had been banished back to their realm. They were known troublemakers. But Bonbon had saved his life once, and it felt wrong to rat him out. While the demon realm was supposedly a fun and lively place, it lacked a steady food source for Bonbon's particular subspecies, who fed off affection. In fact, to Damien's knowledge, love-sucking demons were practically extinct. Yes, Bonbon was one of the last. And yes, he was a bottomless pit of need, always begging for attention. Not so dissimilar to a real Chihuahua.

Bonbon gave Cimil a growl as he trotted past her to seek refuge in his little bed at the front of the store. Damien had hand sewed it from a tuxedo shirt, even adding a little bowtie on the corner.

“No, I am here for another reason. A serious one,” she said, her voice stern.

Why was Cimil speaking like that? Where was the twang? The sass? The odd little nicknames she infused into her sentences, such as “cupcake,” “man treat,” or “shitfabrains”?

“How may I be of service?” Damien dipped his head, a sign of respect. “*Always treat the customer like a queen or king,*” his father used to say. But Damien didn’t kiss ass because he needed the money. Playing the role of a well-mannered gentleman was the only thing preventing him from going off the rails. Deep down, he was anything but civilized.

“I’m going to shoot straight with you, D-Man. We have a situation, one that requires your expertise.”

“Another naked clown party?” He hoped not. It would mean sewing a bunch of hideous sparkly hats. He was a damned tailor, not a costume designer.

“No. The circus left town last month, but I believe my sister, Ixtab, paid you a visit recently?”

That’s what this is about? Ixtab, Goddess of Suicide, had come into his shop looking very...well, normal. No black lace over her head or Morticia dress. Instead, she had worn flip-flops and a yellow summer dress. “Greystone,” Ixtab had said, “we need you to sort out a situation. You will call my brethren, set up meetings, and get the details. I will be on vacation. Permanently. Good luck.” Ixtab then turned and left, getting into a car with some man who kissed her wildly. The two made out until a cop came by and urged them to take it to a hotel.

“Yes,” Damien replied. “Ixtab came by, but to be honest, I thought she was talking about some sort of wardrobe situation.” Like the time Cimil had proclaimed everyone in her “family” (aka, the gods) was to wear crotchless pants. Damien had done what any good tailor would do: ignored her. Crotchless pants were entirely a personal choice.

“Well, I am sorry to inform you, Greystone, that this situation is *mucho más importante*.” Cimil maintained a stone-cold gaze with her turquoise eyes. Something was definitely wrong with her. “As you may have heard, my unicorn, Minky, fucked a hellhound named Mittens. Apparently, this is a supernatural no-no. Like filling Twinkies with lard or sprinkling pubes on your friends’ cereal. But the result of their union was more than a stomachache. It caused an explosion that removed all immortal energy from the planet. Beings such as fairies and unicorns were sent to the Underworld. Anyone who was once human—vampires and demigods, for example—reverted back.”

Strange. He hadn’t heard anything about this event. So then why was Bonbon perfectly fine? And, from what Damien could tell, his own curse had not gone anywhere either. The darkness inside him was as toxic as ever.

Cimil added, “The only beings spared from the blast were the immortals without physical bodies. Ghosts, for example. And those strange little creatures who steal your car keys and hide them when you’re in a hurry.”

I hate those. “Goddess, may I ask, and please do not take this the wrong way, but if what you say is true, then how are *you* still here?”

“Ah! Well, the initial blast nine months ago sent us gods to the Underworld, too, but we escaped through a secret demon portal in the Underworld’s janitor closet—a long story. Unfortunately, the journey reshuffled my and my thirteen brethren’s powers. Demon portals are very nasty. Sort of like a blender that smells like raw sewage. Now I am the Goddess of Death and War.”

Cimil has Votan’s powers? Not good. Votan, like the other male deities, was seven feet of battle-ready ruthlessness. Damien recalled the first time he’d fitted him for a tux. Even with Damien’s height, six feet and three inches, he’d had to use a stepladder to take Votan’s measurements. His point was

that Votan had been born for the role of leading the gods' army. Cimil was, well, Cimil. Crazy as fuck.

"I am sorry to hear of your predicament, goddess, but how can I possibly be of help?"

"Cut the crap, Greystone. We know who you are—armed forces, bounty hunter, supernatural weapons expert."

That wasn't exactly true. He'd served in *an* army long, long ago. Think muskets and swords. As for being a bounty hunter, that was also a stretch. He'd hunted the occasional creature, but he'd been more of a hunter of information. Supernatural weapons, though? Yes, he knew about those. But why were the gods snooping into his past?

"I also know about your other little secret," Cimil said.

Did she mean Bonbon? He hoped not.

"Which *that* are you referring to?" he said, playing dumb.

"You were once a fixer."

Phew. "Oh, *that that*." Damien reached for his apron and grabbed his shears, getting back to the tweed coat. He did not want to anger Cimil—always a bad idea—but he'd hung up the weapons long ago. And for good reason.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, goddess, but I am no longer that man. I tailor suits, shirts, and the occasional pair of extra-large underpants for the God of Wine, but my killing days are over."

"I'm not asking you to kill. I'm asking you to *fix*. We need you to do some digging and figure out how to reverse the effects of the blast, you being a supernatural weapons expert and all."

He shook his head. His fixer days were over, too. Roughing people up, finding their vulnerabilities to silence them, extortion, and making people (or creatures) disappear. Yes, he had been good at it. Playing the thug came naturally to a man like himself. But going back to that dark place in his life? Never.

“I have no one to look after the shop,” he said coldly. “And I have orders to fill.” At one point, he’d had several employees working in the shop, but one bad apple had put an end to that. Now he worked alone.

“Ah, I figured you’d say that. Which is why I have the perfect person to help you out.” Cimil snapped her fingers.

In strolled a five-foot-three woman—auburn hair, mid-twenties, size eight—wearing torn jeans, biker boots, and a beat-up leather jacket. It was ninety degrees outside here in downtown LA. Judging by her clothes, she was attempting to make a statement: *“Stay away. I am afraid on the inside and do not want you to get too close.”*

Interesting.

“Hey,” said the woman, smacking on a wad of gum. “MF. Niceta meetcha.” She extended her hand.

MF is her name? As in motherfucker? He hoped not. *Terrible name.*

Damien shook her hand. “A pleasure.”

“What’s with the butler getup, dude?” MF asked.

Damien glanced in the mirror mounted on the wall to his side. Clean shaven, neatly combed light brown hair, immaculately pressed white shirt, and black slacks. Today he had on a vintage olive-green tie with golden paisleys to match his hazel eyes. Hardly a butler. *More inconspicuous cursed tailor with a dark past and a proclivity for violence. But who’s judging?*

Apparently, MF was. *Rude.*

“What is with the bitch getup?” he replied bluntly.

The sound of snorting exploded from the other room. Demons loved conflict.

MF snarled and looked at Cimil. “I’m not working for this sad bag of dicks.”

Butler or bag of dicks? Make up your mind, woman. “I see you attended etiquette school in a public bathroom, which is why you and I are in agreement, MF. You cannot look after my shop.”

He turned his attention back to Cimil. Had he persuaded her to bark up someone else’s tree? Because there wasn’t a chance in hell he would be taking this job.

“Give us a sec, MF,” said Cimil, waving her out of his workshop.

“I’ll go pet that cute little dog.” MF headed to the front of the store.

Yes, you do that. She’d soon find herself with a splitting headache and a craving for chocolate—the result of having one’s endorphins leached from their body.

Damien stared at Cimil expectantly, aware that he had to hold his ground but tread carefully. Cimil was not known for being a kind goddess, and she got downright nasty when she didn’t get her way.

“I didn’t come here just because of your background, Greystone. I know about your curse.”

How had Cimil found out? He thought no one knew except for himself and the woman who’d cast it. “All right. And?”

“*And* it wasn’t your fault, you know. *She* made her choices. Which is why if you do this one favor for me, I’ll help you end the curse.”

Damien did not want to discuss “her” or what had led to his curse. It wasn’t anyone’s business but his own.

Besides, he knew Cimil was full of shit. He’d spent years researching his curse. There was no cure, and even if there were, he deserved his fate: immortality. But not the fun kind. Watching the world move on while he remained alone, frozen for all eternity, was maddening.

“Well,” he said, “I thank you for the offer, but I am not interested, so I will politely decline. May I interest you in a

new pair of lederhosen while you are here?” He hoped this would distract her.

“No. I have fifty pairs already, and my hubby, Roberto, banned me from adding more to my collection. Closet’s getting full. You know, with all the shoes, dresses, and people-pets I have shoved in there.”

People-pets? He cocked a brow. “A shame.”

“Well, marriage is like life: it’s all about compromise. Which is why you’ll do as I say.”

“That is not a compromise.”

“Isn’t it?” Cimil folded her camo-covered arms. “I agree not to send you to the Underworld, where Minky my unicorn will use you like a blow-up sex doll in the pokey-pokey room, and in exchange, you will find out how to bring back all the immortals who were banished from Earth in the blast.”

Pokey-pokey room? That sounded unpleasant. Especially because he suspected he would not be doing the poking.

She added, “And before you give me another one of your excuses, Greystone, I know about the demon.” She flashed a cold smile. “Take the job, or I’ll tell my brethren you’ve been breaking our no-demon rule.”

Fuck. He dropped his head, forcing himself to maintain his gentlemanly façade. There was no use fighting her now. She had him by the cufflinks.

“I will do this favor, Cimil; however, I want something in return. I want you to find a mate for Bonbon.” Cimil and her brother Zac, the God of Temptation, used to run a dating agency for immortals. They weren’t particularly good at it, but Cimil had a way of making things happen.

“You don’t want your curse broken?” Cimil asked. “I think even *she* would have forgiven you by now. Maybe you should try the same.”

Maybe you should butt the hell out of my life. “Bonbon is getting quite old, and I would hate to see him live out his final

years in my shop. Also, he pisses on the floor. And wants to be held all the time.” Not really Damien’s cup of tea.

“You are one complicated *hombre*, D-Man, but okay. It’s a deal.”

They shook hands.

“Where would you like me to start?” he asked.

“I would say start with you, but I already know why you were unaffected by the blast. So start with the demon. Nothing happened to him. Why?”

Damien wanted to ask why his curse hadn’t been affected, but Cimil never did anything for free, including giving information. *Always strings. Always.*

“Bonbon won’t be of much use,” Damien pointed out. “His faculties aren’t what they used to be.” In fact, some days, Bonbon actually believed he was a Chihuahua. Other days? A race car driver. Damien always had to keep his car keys out of reach.

“If you say so,” replied Cimil skeptically. “Then your first stop will be visiting a woman who claims she was assaulted by a tiny, winged creature. Apparently, it tried to crawl up her privates while she was trying on swimwear at a mall.”

A sex fairy?

Cimil continued, “Go find the woman, and see if she was telling the truth. If yes, maybe you can track down this naughty little winged perv. It could be the key to getting our immortals back.”

He highly doubted that was possible. If what Cimil said was true, that a unicorn and hellhound getting frisky caused a blast that spanned the globe, the energy had to have been immense. A supernatural nuclear bomb. There was no coming back from such a powerful force, in his opinion.

“And Damien?” Cimil added. “You cannot fail. I need my husband back the way he was. He’s far too squishy and human now. It’s all wrong for my spirited lovemaking.”

Her husband was a vampire. Or used to be. “I will do my best.”

“We will be expecting an update in three days. I’ll text you the location along with the details on the fairy sighting. Oh, and if I were you, I’d be nice to MF. She cuts off people’s ears if they twist her panties the wrong way.”

“Excellent,” he said drably. “I’ll go remove the customer comment box now.”

Cimil saluted him, threw an invisible rifle over her shoulder, and marched out.

Moments later, MF entered the workshop, blowing a bubble with her pink gum. “So, you gonna train me or what, Jeeves?”

Damien narrowed his eyes. He could not leave his store in the hands of this poorly dressed savage. Perhaps he could call in a favor from one of his friends to watch the shop for a few days. He knew a few people who at least spoke properly.

“You look like you might have a headache coming on.” He dug a ten out of his billfold and handed MF the money. “Buy some chocolate on the way home. We’ll start in the morning.”

She snatched up the ten. “Naw, I’m good. But I got stuff to do anyway. See ya in the morning.”

She marched out, leaving him perplexed. What could possibly have inspired Cimil to bring this woman of poor breeding to his shop?

“Hey, man. I got nothing from her,” Bonbon said, appearing next to Damien’s perfectly polished wingtips. “She was even rubbing my tummy. Got close to my cock, too. Which, hehe, you know how much I like.”

Damien shook his head. “You are vile.”

But this was very interesting; MF had been unaffected by a love-sucking demon. Perhaps the woman was hiding much more than feelings of insecurity.

CHAPTER TWO

“Are you certain you cannot rearrange your mother’s funeral?” Damien asked the next morning, holding his cell to his ear.

The call went dead.

“Some friend you are.” Damien set his phone next to the register and crossed off the final name on his list.

“Another no?” asked Bonbon.

“I saved that man’s life. Twice. Is it too much to delay his mother’s funeral by a few days? She’s already dead. It will not matter to her.”

“What an asshole. Want a hug?” Bonbon wagged his little white tail.

“No.”

Bonbon rolled his golden eyes. “I’d call you a dick, but we both know you don’t have one.”

“My equipment is just fine. Thank you very much.” Damien opened the register and broke open a roll of quarters to fill the tray.

“But you never use it, which is practically the same as not having a dick. I could give you a few pointers with the ladies if you want.”

How much more of this demon could he take? “You know very well why I cannot have relations.”

“You *could*. You just don’t want to.”

True. Because anyone he got close to died. It was part of his curse. The only reason Bonbon still lived was because Damien felt nothing for the creature. He provided the demon shelter out of principle. “*If someone saves your life, you owe them a debt,*” his father used to say. “*And a man should never*

be beholden to anyone.” In other words, pay your debts so people cannot hold anything over you.

Not quite working out so well, is it? he thought. His debt to Bonbon now had him doing a “favor” for the gods.

“It is called doing the right thing,” Damien grumbled. “Something you know nothing about.”

“*Pfft!* I know right from wrong. I just like wrong better.” Bonbon bent his head, stuck one hind leg straight in the air, and started licking his crotch.

Damien winced. “Must you?”

“Yes. I’m a demon,” Bonbon said, his voice garbled. “We’re all about wrong.”

“Well, now you must be on your best behavior because that MF woman will be here any moment, and I only have a few short hours to show her the ropes.” Apparently, this sex fairy sighting had been near Cleveland, Ohio. His flight departed at noon.

“You’re really leaving me with her?” Bonbon stopped licking.

“You can help keep an eye on the shop.”

“But we don’t know what or who she really is. And who’s gonna feed me?”

Not my problem. “You will have to make do with strangers. I will have her put your bed outside next to the front door on the sidewalk so you can make puppy faces at the tourists.”

“The last time we did that, someone nabbed me and then handed me over to animal control.”

Yes, because while Bonbon looked adorable, he crapped all over the place when he overindulged. “Such a shame you were returned to me.”

Bonbon gasped. “You have no heart. And you’ve hurt my feelings.” Bonbon turned around, showing Damien his buttocks. “As punishment, you will scratch my ass.”

“In your dreams.” Damien went to the back to grab a few supplies from the stockroom and finish off the suit he’d been working on all night. He’d already left messages for the other customers regarding their delayed orders.

I loathe disappointing my customers. He pulled out his iron and tailor’s ham to finish pressing the collar.

“Hiya, Jeeves. You ready to get this over with?”

Damien looked up to find MF dressed in a spiked dog collar, XL baggy jeans cinched at the waist, and a see-through fishnet top. Her auburn hair was braided into pigtails with black ribbons woven through.

“Your nipples are showing.”

She shrugged. “What’s the big deal? We all got ’em.”

“That we do.” He walked into the stockroom and returned with a black blazer. “But in my shop, we do not show nipples. Men’s, women’s, or otherwise.” All right, demon nipples, yes. It wasn’t easy to get Bonbon to cover up. Damien glanced at one of the boxes in the corner filled with tiny unused dog sweaters.

Damien held out the blazer. “It should fit. And you can keep it. The client asked me to alter it and never returned.”

“Fine.” MF took the blazer and slid it on. “Now’re you happy?” She spun around.

Not in the least. “May I ask why you wear pants that could double as a tent? You are not a turtle, woman.”

“Who asked you?” she snapped.

“Your clothes. They are crying for help. Can you not hear them?”

She narrowed her brown eyes. “Aren’t you the funny one, Grandpa.”

Grandpa? Damien didn’t look a day over thirty. When he grew out his beard, he could pass for thirty-five tops. But he found his dark facial hair accentuated his hazel eyes and

caused too much attention from the ladies—something he tried very hard to avoid.

“I am merely pointing out that you can still repel people and look,” he used air quotes, “*scary* without appearing sloppy. For example, I find being well-dressed sends a psychological message all its own.” *I have my shit together.* “You’d be surprised how intimidating confidence can be.”

“So, what are you? Dr. Phil’s loser brother, Dr. Phil-o-shit?”

Damien smiled tightly. “Very amusing.”

He turned toward the mirror on the wall to conduct his final quality check before the shop opened. Straighten tie. Ensure hair was properly groomed. No misses on the shave.

Damien pushed his hand over the top of his thick hair. “You will be silent and watch me deal with customers. You will learn to work the register.”

“What about tailoring?”

Damien laughed. “I highly doubt you can sew to such a level.”

“Try me.”



Two hours later, MF had produced a perfect dart, a perfect pant hem, and had sewn a new silk lining into a coat. No hesitation. No double measuring. The woman didn’t even use chalk or pins!

I’ve never seen such a seamstress. Who is she?

“Well?” MF handed him the shirt with the repaired dart.

“Your stitchwork is...adequate. Where did you study?”

“Study? I’m self-taught. I sewed all my own clothes growing up.”

Liar. “All right, well, I must get to the airport. You have my number. Call if you have any issues.”

“What about the dog? What do I feed him?”

Bonbon appeared in the doorway. “Did someone mention feeding me?” MF didn’t understand him, of course. It took a talent for languages and hours of practice to master love-sucking-demon speak.

“There is a small container of fortune cookies under the register.”

“Fortune cookies?” Her brows bunched together.

“He’s a picky eater. Especially when I’m away. Oh, and please be sure to give him a few hours outside each day to enjoy the fresh air.”

She frowned. “This is LA.”

“He loves the muted sunshine.” *And the leftover fortune cookies from my daily Chinese take-out orders.*

“Hey, um...” MF’s voice suddenly sounded vulnerable and soft.

Damien stopped halfway out the door. “Yes?”

“Thank you for giving me a chance. I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I’m a hard worker. Really.”

He bowed his head, perplexed by her sudden turn. “I only ask that you take good care of my shop, of my customers, and that you air out your nipples on your own time.”

“We’ll see about that, but good luck on your trip. I hope you find what Cimil’s looking for. That woman is scary as hell.”

No shit. “Thank you. I will call tomorrow.”

FOR MORE:

www.mimijean.net/immortaltailor

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MIMI JEAN PAMFILOFF is a *New York Times* bestselling author who writes insane plot twists that will have you burning through the pages. Whether it's Romance, Suspense/Thriller, or Fantasy, there are always big heroes to root for, smart and resourceful heroines, and a ton of heart-pumping excitement in every story.

Mimi lives with her extremely patient husband (“Be right there! Just one more page, honey!”), two pirates-in-training (their boys), and their three spunky dragons (really, just very tiny dogs with big attitudes) Snowy, Mini, and Mack, in the vampire-unfriendly state of Arizona.

[Sign up for Mimi's mailing list for giveaways and new release news!](#)

STALK MIMI:

www.mimijean.net

pinterest.com/mimijeanromance

instagram.com/mimijeanpamfiloff

facebook.com/MimiJeanPamfiloff