

RAVEN KITTS

THE
**ELDERS
TRILOGY**
BOOK ONE

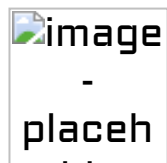


THE
AWAKENING

The Awakening

The Elders book 1

Raven Kitts



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Trigger Warning:

Without giving away spoilers, I need to warn you there are two attempted rape scenes. Please note the key word is “attempted.”

To my Granny:

You may be gone, but you're not forgotten. I was angry, hurt, and confused when you left this earth, which I know was selfish of me—but you were my Granny. My beacon of light in the darkness, my go to person and the one I knew loved me no matter what. Writing this book helped mend my broken heart and allowed me to accept what I struggled most with—the loss of you. Please know not a day goes by that I don't think of you.

I love you, Granny, always.

Your Tam Tam

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Prologue

Jess

As I stand alone in the forest with my eyes closed, the wind elfishly tickles my face as it dances through the trees. I tilt my head back, my face basks in the golden glow of the full harvest moon. Internally I scream in excitement as the elements have their wicked way with me.

The tendrils of my senses strain as they pick up the sweet tinge of tree sap and point me to the freshly broken branches. A haunting scent, one so familiar that reminds me of spring time in Michigan when I was a child.

Blinded by this seductive trance, I lose sight of what drew me to this mythical land in the first place. The reality hits and I realize he's still there, lurking in the shadows. His barely visible silhouette taunts me, his fierce gaze grips my soul.

As I turn to run, I'm unable to move. Forced to stay in place as the gap between us comes to a close. Silence surrounds, neither a bird chirps nor does a cricket creak. Even the wind

has stopped, left with the eerie feeling that life has ceased to exist as time stands still.

We come to an abrupt stop, standing face to face with little more than a foot that separates us. Our eyes lock in a fiery gaze. He extends his hand, and expects me to accept it. When I don't, forces beyond my control take over and do it for me.

His touch is like ice, shivers shoot down my spine. My chest goes tight, frightened by anticipation of what's to come. The broken record in my mind repeats, "He's going to kill me. He's going to kill me."

The words, "I didn't come all this way to hurt you," telepathically echo in my head in his voice.

Tears fill my eyes as I've come to realize he's here with a purpose, our meeting isn't accidental. I steal a glance at our entwined fingers as he squeezes mine, then guides me farther into the darkness of night...

Chapter One

Jess



The blare of my phone alarm is like a shot of epinephrine to the heart. I bolt upright far too quickly and fight back the urge to vomit. Drenched in sweat and panting, I'm desperate to catch my breath. What the hell just happened?

I never saw his face, even though I stared directly into his eyes. How can that be? He wants to show me something, but what? None of this makes any sense.

Ironically, this dream started that fateful night. The memories of the aggressive attack still haunt me. Their faces so clear. Images I'll never be rid of. It is as though it happened only yesterday.

The evening started off as most did in my bland world. Kara, Anna, and I clocked out at work and headed to the movie theater—they drove separately since they carpooled. Just after midnight, the movie ended and as usual I had to use the restroom. I told them to go ahead and assured them I'd be fine walking to my car alone. I remembered thinking to myself as I exited the theater, the parking lot was unusually dark and several light poles were off. Of course, they were the ones near my car. Laughing, I joked that my "Spidey" senses were working overtime, so I shrugged it off.

That was mistake number one.

I reached into my purse to grab the keys and when I looked up, there were several guys standing near my car carrying on animatedly. I glanced toward the theater and saw the lights were off and security was nowhere in sight. Asking for an escort now was out of the question. Figured.

Lacking in common sense, I trudged on, peeking up every couple steps to see if they'd noticed me. I thought I would try to be sly, avoiding eye contact, but wondered if I knew any of them. Maybe if I pushed the red panic button on my car remote they'd freak out and take off. On second thought, if I scared them, they might get pissed and I'd rather take the chance at being ignored. My next thought was even more brilliant—maybe if I play it cool, walk up and flirt, "Excuse me, fellas,"

they might let me through without any problems. Thinking back, I realize I seriously excel at being a dumbass.

The next few moments came and went in a blur, as the events rapidly came to pass. It was as though they knew my every move before I even made it. The second I stepped off the sidewalk their nasty lips curled into sadistic smirks. I tried to play it cool, continuing to push forward, attempting not to let my outward appearance reflect how truly terrified I was. Had I been thinking straight, I would've walked up to the theater and banged on the doors, or better yet—called the cops.

Their shoes scuffing against the rocky asphalt snapped me back as they gravitated toward me. Their foul stench as they neared led me to believe they'd just crawled out of a dumpster. Completely frozen, panic ensued as I frantically scanned the lot hoping to find someone—anyone—but it was empty. There were four of them and only one of me.

The largest miscreant in the group, who I'm guessing was their alpha, bobbed his head in the direction of my car. "Hey, gorgeous, is this little beauty yours?"

All I could do was nod as I was too terror stricken to utter a single word. This alpha was tall, well over six-foot and more than twice my size. Even though I was still a couple feet away, the smell of beer and cigarettes permeated from their filthy bodies.

Without a word the short, stout man grabbed my purse, and yanked it with such force it broke the strap. He rifled through it while the pack leader continued, "We're gonna go for a little ride, honey." He eyed me up and down with a sick-ass grin on his face, like I was about to be their party favor.

They cackled as they closed in, licking their lips and I gagged. The leader grabbed my right arm and threw me against my car and tried to snatch the keys from my hand. He was unsuccessful with my fingers tightly wound through the oval ring.

Their attention momentarily diverted as the parking lot lights flickered, some actually burst, sending shards of glass into the atmosphere while others faded completely out. I was thankful for whatever deity had taken control because it took their focus off of me while they scanned the parking lot, though the reprieve was short lived.

With no one else there, I returned to the forefront. His firm grip still held me in place, unable to escape. His fingers were so tight it cut off the circulation in my arm, and my hand went numb. The grimy fingers of his free hand glided along my cheekbone. My stomach lurched and I swallowed hard, desperate to keep the bile held back.

He hooked his fingertips under my bra strap and slid it down my arm as he ground his erection against my thigh, pushing so hard I thought my jeans might rip. He drew pleasure from my fear as his smile widened. "Hmmm, I don't think we need to go anywhere, guys. Lights are low, no one's around. Let's have our little party right here. Baptize the parking lot and claim this gal as ours."

His disciples whooped and hollered like a pack of brainless hyenas. Trembling uncontrollably, I knew there was no going back from this. They would take what wasn't theirs.

Tears streamed down my face, and their laughter increased as they moved in to claim their prize. The visual of my tragic death and naked body abandoned in the desert left for the wildlife to feast upon runs through my head. What will my father think? How will he feel? There'd be nothing left of my remains for any potential rescuers to find. How I wished I would've waited for security to escort me out as opposed to risking my safety as I had.

All train of thought was lost when he tossed me to the ground. My head hit so hard the thud echoed through the empty lot. But I wasn't about to give up. Kicking and screaming, desperate to break free, I was no match for them. He unbuttoned his jeans while his accomplices tore my top off, one long slice with a blade I hadn't noticed before now. Barely able to see through my tears, but I could have sworn I spotted

a figure moving toward us. Anxiety assaulted me, I don't know what happened next as I succumbed to the blackness as I passed out.

When I woke the next morning, it was in my own bed. I freaked out and kicked off the covers and then slid my hands up and down my torso, ensuring all body parts were still intact and unharmed. When I glanced down I realized I still had on what was left of the material they'd demolished. My jeans were dirty but still intact. I darted across the room and over to the window and peered outside. There sat my car, parked in its usual spot on the driveway. Somehow after all of that, I'd managed to drive myself home. Was this nothing more than a bad dream?

A chill swept through me and I rubbed my arms for warmth. I flinched as my right hand hit a sensitive area of skin. I glanced down and saw a hand-shaped bruise forming.

It wasn't a dream.

I wanted to scream! Punch something! Turning full circle, looking for something to take this frustration out on, my eyes landed on the purse with the broken strap sitting atop my desk. My mind swirled so fast I dizzied, barely able to reach the bed before my legs gave away. On repeat my mind played the words—what in the hell happened?

Chapter Two

Jess



Today's the day, the final stretch of my senior year at Sequoia High School in Surprise, Arizona begins.

Yeah, great, I live in Surprise—whoo hoo. It was a big 'surprise' to me when my parents announced two years ago, at the beginning of my sophomore year, that we were moving from Michigan to the beautiful rock-filled, devoid of all color town of Surprise, strategically located in the Arizona desert. Nothing but cacti, rattlesnakes, and scorpions survive here because it's too damn hot. The cities actually pay you to zeriscape, that's their fancy word for landscaping your yards with rock. What's really crazy is some people paint their rocks green to psyche themselves into believing it's grass.

Livid doesn't even sum up how I felt when my parents told me we were moving and I didn't talk to them for weeks after. Well, it felt like weeks to me, but in essence, it was probably only a few days at most. My mom told my dad, "It's just another phase she's going through, ignore her and she'll come around." No one knew me better than my dad and he was well aware that wasn't how this would go down.

Since moving to Arizona I've made two friends, or so I thought. Kara Brewer and Anna Gomez. I've never felt like I belonged here, or anywhere really for that matter. Not in this school with my so-called peers, not even within my own family.

Never will I stand out in a crowd, nor would I want to. Auburn hair and hazel eyes, both attributes are more common than you know. There's literally nothing special about me. Trendy fashion is my nemesis. I'm happiest when wearing jeans and basic t-shirts. Throw in a pair of Vans or even better, flip flops, and I'm good to go—simplicity at its finest. I love sports, but have two left feet so I can't play a single one without inflicting pain upon myself or others standing nearby.

I grab my backpack from the desk chair and jog downstairs, barely breathing between bites as I consume a bowl of cereal. A quick kiss to the muzzle for my dogs Dash and Violet, I bolt out the front door. In typical Jess fashion, I'm running late. I swear I'll be late to my own funeral. Foot to the pedal, I rev up

the engine of my faded emerald green 1971 VW Bug and take off to endure what is certain to be another fun-filled high school day.

Thank fuck it's nearly over.

It's been several weeks since that night and I still have no recollection of what happened after I blacked out. I haven't run into those guys, which I'm more than thankful for, but I also haven't had the balls to go back to that theater either.

Needless to say, outside of work, I don't do much outside of the house. Occasionally I'll run out and pick up things I need, but I go from point A to point B, back to point A and nowhere else. Fear is a persistent bitch that slaps you in chains and makes you its prisoner. On top of that, it's too damn hot to go outside. The deadly heat only makes me miss Michigan more. While summers there were humid, but never hot like the depths of hell Arizona reigns prince over, they were at least bearable. Trees and lakes everywhere helped curb the high temps. More than earning its nickname of the Great Lakes state. There was always plenty to do, although the winters in Arizona are much easier to contend with than Michigan's were.

I haven't told a soul about that night. I'm not sure if that is out of embarrassment or because I don't truly know what happened. I'm certain things didn't escalate though I don't

know why, but the humiliation alone is more than I can bear. So, I make up excuses whenever I get invited out, which is few and far between, choosing to use the lame-ass excuse that finals are coming up and I need to study.

Which isn't a complete lie.

Always looking over my shoulder. That's the person I've become, the eerie feeling of being watched only to turn my head and find no one there. I know I'm being paranoid and need to get over it, but that's easier said than done. Besides, I have no idea if those guys are still out there moving from victim to victim. God, I hate these thoughts. They literally keep me awake at night.

Shake it off and focus.

That should be my new motto.

I received acceptance letters from three of the colleges I applied to—ASU, MSU and Brown. With the impending deadlines looming, I'm struggling with picking one. Something's holding me back, though I have no clue what it is. Maybe if I spend the free time in class and actually force myself to focus on making a choice, that would help. Then all that remains is picking a major, a decision forming a path into my future.

Where's a crystal ball when you need one?

Luke Watson is my ex-boyfriend, but we broke up the beginning of our senior year. I'm grateful I don't have the demands of dealing with another piled on top of the adult-sized pile of shit I'm currently wading through. He is the captain of our school hockey team—yes, believe it or not, hockey is huge in the desert. Some schools such as ours even have their own teams. I broke up with him shortly after all this crap went down. He wanted more than I was willing to give and after that, I decided it was time to follow my gut and my gut had been telling me to get the hell away from him. He called me a bitch, slammed his locker door shut, and stormed off down the hallway. A true testament to his level of maturity, or lack thereof.

Kara and Anna told me I was “freaking insane” to quote them, for dumping Luke. “What’s wrong with you, Jess, have you lost your mind? He’s the hottest guy in school.” Kara shared that rather loudly during lunch period in the middle of the school cafeteria. I swear, every freaking head turned our way. Why’s it always dead silent when someone starts talking shit?

The entire time Luke and I dated she drooled over him, and acted like a total idiot whenever he was around. I've never trusted her. In all honesty, I've never trusted anyone but my

father and grandmother. I'm pretty sure Kara and Luke had been screwing around since we broke up, probably even while we were dating, but she hasn't fessed up to that. Yet. Maybe she's afraid of hurting my feelings or that I would kick her ass. Whatever, neither of them are worth the problems that would cause, but it sure as hell would be a great way to get rid of some pent-up aggression.

The first bell rings as I get out of my car. I jog my way to get to first period on time. Unfortunately, it's the one class I still have with Luke. He used to wait for me outside the gate at the student parking lot, now he just sits at his desk and glares at me while his smart-ass jock friends make snide comments loud enough for all to hear. Mentally chanting it's almost over has become my go-to. When it is, Luke will go far away to UMD on a hockey scholarship this fall and rumor has it, he won't be there long because the NHL scouts have already met with him and his parents. Unfortunately, that has made him even cockier.

What a fucking tool.

Finally, first hour ends as the bell chimes and the student cattle drive mosey on over to the next stall. What a waste of time the last couple days of school are. The teachers gave the seniors their finals a week ago so it's pretty stupid to make us finish these last couple of half days. Lunch isn't served today

or tomorrow due to the early release schedule so there's really no reason to be here.

The swift change in weather as I walk to my car is something straight out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie. The sky has turned an ugly shade of gray. A loud clap of thunder roars as the heavens unleash a torrential downpour. Considering it's not monsoon season, this was wildly out of place. These angry bad boys are cruising across the sky like they're on the hunt.

The only cool part about living in Arizona is the monsoon storms. Monsoons are wickedly sweet and brew up in a matter of moments, wreaking havoc and causing power outages. All of which is over and done in about twenty to thirty minutes. It's kind of like pumping a two-year-old full of sugar and setting them loose with a wind machine and a water hose. It's awesome to watch unfold but dangerous at the same time.

The rain slows as I round the street corner to my house. There will likely be no trace it even happened shortly. Though when I see my mom's car in the driveway my thoughts immediately turn sour, great, she's home—this should be fun. I hope she has new material in her let me count the ways my daughter has disappointed me arsenal because she's really beaten the old verbal blows to death.

My mom and I have never bonded on any level, and honestly, I still question whether she's my real mother. I don't

look like her, don't act like her and we're in a never ending battle for my dad's attention. Dad and I used to do everything together when I was younger. I literally have no memories of any mother-daughter excursions. No hugs from her when I was upset, no girl time at the mall. No...nothing... She kept busy with her circle of rich friends with no room for me. Just as well, those snotty women whose husbands made a lot of money that they spent weren't favorites of mine. Still to this day, I don't know what my dad sees in her. She's always been down on me. Hates the clothes I wear, feels social acceptance is worth its weight in gold and that her daughter is a social pariah she can't be bothered with.

Granny Ray, my dad's mom, is the only female family member I'm close with. Until we moved to Arizona, I spent every summer with her in Washington, D.C. After that, my mom said I had to get a job because I was sixteen and she wasn't going to spend money to send me to my grandmother's anymore. She's such a bitch. She doesn't like the fact that my grandmother and I get along as well as we do, mostly because we both see through her fake bullshit and she knows my grandmother can't stand her.

My mom's family lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, or as I lovingly call it, 'Snottsdale.' I don't care for any of them or their money-hungry friends and they don't care for me. Unfortunately, my mother's family is the sole reason we moved here.

I didn't so much as open the front door when she started in, "Is that really what you left this house in? Doesn't your school have a dress code?" She clicked her tongue. Translation: the way you dress embarrasses me and I hope none of my friends saw you.

Jesus, I wish she'd get on her broom and fly the fuck away, never again to be seen or better yet—get smashed by a flying house. Oh, how my wicked thoughts carry me through each day.

Choosing to take the upper hand by ignoring her, I continue up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and go straight to my room with Dash and Vi tagging along behind me. I love my dogs, they make all the bad go away whenever they're around. At least temporarily, long enough to catch my breath. No matter what happens, they love me and expect nothing in return other than an occasional pat on the head and a scratch to their pink bellies. I wish life was that simple, a pat on the head, a scratch here and there, and all was right in the world.

If only...

I'll never forget the day I got them. My mom was totally against it, yelling at my dad, "They will make a mess and chew up my shoes." I promised my dad I would take care of

them and enroll them in all the puppy training classes I could find, so he assured my mom it would be okay.

When I saw them in their kennels at Boxer Luv, the local boxer rescue in Phoenix, Dad and I went to one Saturday afternoon, he said my face lit up and it was the first bright light he'd seen in my eyes since we'd moved. I couldn't pick one over the other and they were tightly bonded, so I talked my dad into letting me adopt both. It was beyond adorable how they stared up at me while sitting on my lap, chewing on the bottom of my shirt during the car ride home. Love at first sight was the best way to explain it.

Dash and Violet are all white and deaf. Brother and sister from the same litter which according to the rescue was rare. On average only eighteen percent of white boxers are born deaf and to have two in the same litter was even rarer. Dash has one blue and one brown eye, both of Violet's are brown. My dad was concerned about training them since they couldn't hear, but I met a wonderful lady named Pat who taught my pups and I basic hand signals. She was amazing and had six deaf whites of her own.

My pups and I were instant BFFs, but my snotty mother turned her nose up at them. I'm proud to report they haven't chewed up one thing, well except for a pair of her shoes that I kinda sorta gave them *wink- wink.* To this day, she thinks

they got lost in the move to Arizona. Sometimes being bad feels oh so good.

Ugh, with graduation lurking like a dark cloud, my mind wanders back to colleges. Do you ever feel like you're meant for something more than what's right in front of you? I do, but I can't seem to figure out what that is and nothing in any career field jumps out at me. Why does society force you to choose at such a young age?

I considered nursing, it's only two years of school, but I pass out at the sight of blood. Guess I can cross that one off the list. I would make a great veterinarian, except for the fact that I know I wouldn't be able to put an animal down. I would cry like a baby whenever an injured one came in. I'd like to think I could fix them all, kinda like the Florence Nightingale of the vet world, but that isn't realistic. Cross that one off. Maybe I'll take a year off and backpack around Europe. Oh, I can already hear the screech of my mother's nagging voice, "My daughter is a vagrant. She moves from place to place taking odd jobs." Tempting as it is to tarnish the perfect little reputation she's built for herself, sadly that doesn't feel like the right path for me either.

Chapter Three

Jess



Nine o'clock and time to close up shop. This shift was exceptionally boring tonight. I've worked at the laundromat for just over a year now. It's decent as far as jobs go, they work around my school schedule which allows me time to get home and study before bed. But staying here much longer is a lost cause because it's pretty much a dead-end job.

Cole, my co-worker, locks the front door behind us as we head to our cars. As I near my car I glance toward the trees and spot a lone figure standing there. Based upon the build I believe it to be a man, though with the shadows I can't make out the face.

My first thought is it's one of the guys that attacked me. That's where my head always goes now, only this time the erratic thoughts trigger heart palpitation, making it hard to breathe. I turn toward Leah and Cole, hoping they see him, too, but they have their faces buried in their cells. When I pivot back, he's vanished. Somehow, shaky hands and all, I manage to open my car door, dive inside and immediately lock the doors.

Never in my life have I driven in such a frenzied rush. I don't remember putting my car in park after I pulled into the driveway nor the run to the door until it slams shut behind me. Leaning against it as I try to catch my breath, I scan the room, locating my dad on the couch in his PJs watching the news with my faithful pups resting at his feet. That weird sportscaster guy that barely moves his lips when he talks is on. I think he had plastic surgery at some point and they pulled his face too tight, either way I can't stand to watch him—he creeps me out. Why my brain chooses to hone in on that at this time is beyond me.

I stand there for a few minutes before my dad realizes I'm home. "Hey, Jess, how was your day?"

"Okay, Dad, how about you?" I pant, though my breathing has nearly returned to normal.

“Pretty much the same, sweetie.” He smiles and returns his attention to the TV.

My dad has a way of making me feel like a little girl again, not a care in the world as I sat safely on his lap. He’s a great, down-to-earth guy who for some odd reason worships the ground my mother walks on, or in her case flies her broom over.

I kissed him on the cheek. “Goodnight, Dad.”

“Goodnight, honey.”

With the pups in tow, we head up to the peaceful sanctity of my room. As soon as the door opens they bound into the room and onto the bed, staring at me with a look that says, ‘Let’s play, Mom.’ Their little white nubs beating a mile a minute, how can I say no to those smushy faces? They are such goof balls, but as much as I’d like to play, I’m exhausted. Sleep has been an elusive beast as of late. The roller coaster I’ve been riding the last few weeks has taken its toll. I’m mentally and physically drained and quite honestly, on the verge of a complete meltdown.

My head doesn’t so much as hit the pillow when I’m drawn back into this never-ending dream, only this time it takes an unexpected turn.

We wander deeper into the dark forest when a familiar structure from my childhood comes into view. A small wood playhouse, the very one my father had built for me. The little house itself is white with baby blue shutters, trim, and eaves. He'd painted them in my favorite color.

The mysterious guide leads me to it and opens the door, gesturing for me to step inside. Trembling with a mixture of fear and excitement, I enter.

The memory of my father and I building it together the summer of my seventh birthday fills me. Well, I handed him the tools as he did all the work. Some of the fondest memories from my childhood revolve around this little house, the gift that was built with love.

We constructed it in the woods directly behind our home in Michigan. I wasn't a very outgoing child and didn't have many friends. My dad thought it would be a fun place for me to get out of the house and play in. The only friends I had were David Cordova and Maura Robertson and they both knew about my secret clubhouse. It was a special place from my dad, so adorable with its shingled roof, tiny windows and child-sized front door. I giggled the first time Dad stepped inside all hunched over.

I'll never forget the day that evil monster that gave birth to me re-homed it. I was twelve and her excuse will forever be tattooed in my brain, "You're too old for it and it's falling apart. It's an eyesore on our property and we cannot have that." I cried as the people who took it loaded it up on their trailer and drove away. I'll never forgive her for that. I was heartsick and the worst part was my dad did nothing to stop her.

As I repress yet another angry memory, I peer around noting everything is just as I'd remembered it. The tot-sized furniture my dad got is still there, the baby blue wood table he made and three little plastic chairs we picked up at a yard sale surround it. The Mickey Mouse Club dishes—all still there as is the tiny plastic kitchenette.

We'd each had our own chair, of course the dark blue one was mine, Maura claimed the pink one, and David the green.

Maura lived next door so we were friends before we could walk, best friends until the day I moved. That's another thing to add to the never-ending mother/daughter issue list—making me leave my best friend. Maura and I met David in kindergarten and the three of us became inseparable. The Three Musketeers we used to cheer, though we were more like the Three Stooges, making mud pies in the forest, and then cooking them on the pretend stove. Those were the days, not a care in the world and covered in mud.

Maura and I have fallen out of contact since I left. We shoot each other the occasional email, but both are so wrapped up with finishing school and moving onto life's next lessons that we haven't had much time catch up and that saddens me. Why can't things be as carefree as they were when we were kids?

I remember the day we met David like it was only yesterday. It was the first day of kindergarten. His mom brought him in and he walked right over to our table and took a seat beside me. He looked me in the eye and smiled with his two front teeth missing. It was so cute that I snickered.

I learned he lived nearby, but our parents weren't in the same social clique. David was my first real so-called boyfriend. I never even looked at another the same way I did with him and was devastated when he vanished. It's something that haunts me to this day. I can only hope everything is okay.

We were in the seventh grade at the end of the school year when he got sick. His parents wouldn't let me come see him and my mother didn't want me near anyone who could be contagious. The next thing I knew, they were gone—his entire family. No notice, no goodbyes. I rode my bike to his house after school every day for a week, pressing my little face to the front window hoping to see him, but the furniture and everything inside was gone.

Disappeared without a trace.

I thought maybe he was mad at me or that I did something wrong. No one in town would talk about his family when I asked them. It was as though they never existed, though I knew better.

Remnants of mud pies still stain the dishes, just as we'd last left them and I smile at the happy memory.

Suddenly, I'm yanked from my dream, interrupted once again by the chiming of my alarm clock. How can a dream be so alive? So vivid? The scent of wood and fresh pine. Did I ever actually sleep? Sure doesn't feel like it. With much fussing, I finally manage to get out of bed and into the shower.

Today is the last official day of high school with graduation tomorrow night. It will be wickedly hot, yet they still insist we wear the stupid cap and gown. They're pushing for girls to wear dresses or skirts, but that's not gonna happen. A skort is the closest they'll get from me. Of course, my mother the antichrist is not thrilled with my choice in clothing. "It isn't very classy or ladylike." Ya, well, bite me. How's that for ladylike?

Having classes today for seniors was not well thought out by the school board. Every class is filled with yearbook

signing, posing for pictures and crying like it's the end of the world. It's seriously ridiculous. Kara and Anna both ask me to sign theirs which I reluctantly do but when I flip through the pages of Kara's, I spot Luke's note—'Thanks for last weekend' with a smiley face, 'I'll never forget it or you.' The urge to write #Hurl next to it is hard to pass up.

I can't get to my car quick enough after the last bell rings. Enough is enough and I'm elated to be rid of this place, though I dread practice tomorrow morning and the subsequent ceremony. They're lining us up by size and since I'm only five-foot-two, I know where I'll be standing. Story of my life since kindergarten—the shortest girl in the class was always in the front row.

Kara's tall at five-foot-nine and stupidly beautiful. Light chestnut hair streaked with blonde highlights and emerald eyes. Features worthy of a European beauty queen. Thankfully, due to her height, she'll be farther back so I won't have to deal with her. Anna's slightly taller than me at five-foot-five. She's kind of pudgy with blonde hair and brown eyes. She's nice, but unfortunately, she's so far up Kara's ass she can't see daylight and Kara uses her as a puppet. Poor thing's too blinded by her insecurities to see this. I've never felt the need to fit in. I'm quite the opposite and prefer to be left alone.

I head straight to work and find the dry cleaner packed with orders due to tomorrow night's ceremonies at the area schools. Luckily, we are so busy my shift flies by. As I ring up our last customer, I glance out the front windows and toward my car and see someone standing beside it. I turn to Leah and Cole and point to the area.

"Do you see that guy?" I asked them.

With a great amount of attitude, they quit texting long enough to look up. "We don't see anything. You're losing it, Jess." They roll their eyes and return to their phones. When I turn back around, he's gone. Am I imagining this?

On the drive home, I wonder if what I'm seeing is real or if my mind's playing tricks on me. I know I'm not sleeping worth a shit, but I don't believe my judgment is impaired. But why the hell isn't anyone else seeing him?

When I get home I walk into the usual scene. Dad watching sports news with my dogs and Mom is upstairs doing who knows what.

"You look exhausted, Jess," Dad says as I walk up to him.

"I am," I get the dogs' attention, kiss Dad goodnight then head upstairs to take a quick shower and collapse into bed.

Sure enough, I'm dropped right where the previous night's dream left off.

The significance of my playhouse is lost on me. Desperate to see who my captor is, I find his silhouette bears a remarkable resemblance to the man I've seen in the shadows while awake. I want to speak, to ask who he is, but words escape me.

What in the hell is going on?

The shrill whistle of my alarm blares as I wake to graduation day. I'm so ready for this to be over. Practice is in an hour and I hope everyone conducts themselves appropriately even though I doubt that will happen. The longer they screw around the longer practice will take.

As anticipated, the usual class clowns screw around until everyone yells, "KNOCK IT OFF" in unison at them. That stops them dead in their tracks, as they stare at the sea of angry faces glaring at them. With that nightmare finally behind me, I head to the mall to pick up a couple of last-minute things and grab a bite to eat.

Finding a parking spot proves to be a challenge when I go home. It appears the Mercedes dealership relocated to our neighborhood while I was gone. My stomach balls into knots

when I realize to whom those cars belong—my mother’s family. If this were any other day I would tuck tail and run, but unfortunately that would not be wise given the occasion. The wrath alone would be unbearable.

Just like clockwork the insults are hurled right as I open the front door. First one to rise to the Jess-bashing convention is my grandmother Nora, my mother’s mother. She utters her fake congratulations while she gives me a half-assed hug then proceeds to chastise my wardrobe. Though she directs her complaints to my mother as though I am invisible.

“Why on earth did you let her leave the house in those rags?” she asks my mother.

Hello, I’m standing right here.

Of course, my lovely birth giver adds her two cents, “She always looks that way.”

Much to my chagrin, my grandmother from DC couldn’t be here. It would have been nice to have an ally. Ah, here comes my cousins Dante and Sabrina. It just keeps getting better.

They turn up their noses and stroll right past me, but not without making their disapproval known in the form of a huff. Why are they here? They’ve never welcomed or accepted me.

They don't like me. We look and act nothing alike. They have blonde hair and blue eyes, dress to the nines with enough bling to choke a horse. Looks like an accessory shop threw up and landed on them. I'm an outcast in my own family. I truly do not belong anywhere.

I make a mad dash for my room before enduring any further humiliation. As soon as I open the door I'm met by the adoration of my pups. If only we could stay tucked away in the refuge of my room forever.

I forgo the usual ponytail and straighten my hair, and further shock myself when I decide to apply a little make-up to my pale face. I finish off the skort ensemble with a white short-sleeved dress shirt and black ballerina-style flats since I'm so uncoordinated I can't walk in heels. Grabbing my cap and gown, I head back downstairs and into the evil clutches of the spawns of Satan.

Dad and I leave before the rest of the family since I need to be there a half an hour before the ceremony starts. It's nice when it's just us. He looks handsome tonight dressed in black Dockers, a pinstriped dress shirt and black leather shoes. My dad's a handsome man for sure. Still has a full head of dark brown hair and stunning blue eyes.

He is the first to break the silence during the car ride. "Jess, I'm really proud of you and I know deep down, your mother

is, too.”

I roll my eyes so hard I fear they’ll get stuck. Luckily, he doesn’t notice since I am facing the window. I have no desire to ruin his moment.

“Have you decided which college to go to?” Dad asked.

“Not yet, though I’m leaning toward ASU. My scholarship would cover dorm fees, but I wouldn’t be able to take Dash and Vi so I’m still not sure what to do.” The thought of leaving my two best friends bothers me more than I care to admit.

“They’ll be fine, Jess,” he sighed, clearly struggling with my negativity.

“Yeah but Cruella DeVil will have them made into coats.”

“I’ll see to it that she doesn’t. ASU is close enough that you could come home every weekend and on holidays.” I knew he means well, but still...they’re the glue that’s been holding me together these last couple of years.

I want to ask him why he stays with that selfish witch who calls herself my mother. Guess it’s irrelevant after all these years and I lack the energy and desire to fight with him,

especially when he's trying so hard to say the right things to make me happy.

We arrive at the school and park in a space toward the front, then make our way to the auditorium, entering into a chaotic mass of screaming girls and idiotic teenage boys high-fiving and doing that stupid handshake where they slide the backs of their hands across each other's and into fist bumps.

Mrs. Moss, the school's assistant principal, arrives and blows her whistle a couple of times to get everyone's attention. She reminds me of one of those Oompa Loompas out of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Short and round with an orange-tinted complexion. She even has the same weird bowl haircut they had, only her hair isn't green, it's a variant shade of yellow.

She proceeds to order us into a row for boys and one for girls, lining up by size just as we practiced this morning. As soon as the traditional "Pomp and Circumstance" begins to play, she reminds us it is our cue to march into the auditorium and down to our seats.

We funnel in as ordered amid the occasional whoops and hollers and remain standing while the Pledge of Allegiance is recited. After that, our principal Mrs. Dice takes the stage and welcome's everyone. She was probably an attractive woman when she was younger, but being a principal seems to have

taken its toll on her. She's tall and thin with a pointed nose similar to a raven's beak.

Wow, when did I become Judgy McJudgerson?

After the diplomas are distributed, we toss our caps in the air and exit the auditorium in two single-file lines. Once outside, everyone bolts off in different directions toward friends and family, greeting them with open arms amid the blinding camera flashes.

I pretend to look for my family, hoping to avoid them until the last minute, when Kara and Anna find me. We exchange hugs, theirs accompanied by fake tears and the standard, "We'll really miss you, please keep in touch," nonsense knowing we will probably never see each other again. Should I feel remorseful? Because I don't. I've felt alone for so long that I'm not sure how to be otherwise.

After that is over, I locate my so-called family and slowly gravitate toward them. My father is the first to notice me, and scoops me up and swings me around like I'm five again. For a moment, I allow myself to believe it.

"Jess, I'm so proud of you. Happy birthday, sweetie," he announces.

My mother overhears him which compelled her to plaster on a fake smile and act like a mother while hugging me in front of the crowd.

“Happy birthday,” she mutters as she walks away. “Let’s eat.”

I choose to ride with dad to the restaurant while the others, including my mother, leave in the high-dollar vehicles. On our way to the restaurant, he reaches into the glove compartment and pulls out a beautifully-wrapped gift and card and hands them to me. My eyes immediately fill with tears. Opening the card, I quietly read it to myself:

Happy eighteenth birthday and graduation, Jess!

When I saw this gift, I knew it was meant for you.

I love you, Angel.

Dad

I tear off the paper like a kid on Christmas morning, and open the box. The tears I did my best to hold back come barreling forth. Inside the box is an exquisite pair of princess-cut diamond earrings. Through my sobs I manage to mutter, “Thank you, Daddy, I love you.”

Choking back tears of his own, he whispers, “I love you, too, Angel.”

I’m itching to wear them and immediately put them in my ears, beaming with a pride I haven’t felt in a long time. They’re like a warm hug just for me from my dad. I’ll think of him everytime I wear them.

We arrived at the restaurant my grandmother insisted the family have dinner at instead of a simple party at our house. Likely chosen to do nothing more than flaunt her wealth. Sadly, my grandfather died five years ago and left her a boatload of money. He was the only one on my mother’s side of the family that was nice to me, even though I rarely got to see him. Early on, he made his money in the stock market and invested the returns wisely. The few times I did get to visit, I remember my grandmother was such a total bitch to him. Poor guy, died of a heart attack and likely felt instantly at peace not having to endure her tirades any longer.

As we enter the restaurant I gaze around, grossly underdressed didn’t even cover my attire. Of course, my grandmother had to choose a five-star establishment. Dad checks in with the hostess then we are promptly guided to a private dining room located in the back of the restaurant. As we pass each family member they mumble mediocre

congratulations and nothing more and leave us the two remaining seats in the corner.

Dinner is somewhat painless. A few snide wardrobe comments are made at my expense, but the entire event only lasts less than two hours, though I find it odd that no one spoke to Dad either. He and I pretty much sat tucked away in our secluded corner, social pariahs amongst blood.

My father and I funnel out behind the others when dinner is over and walk toward his SUV while Mom says her goodbyes. An uneasy feeling comes over me as I reach for the door handle and when I turn I find a man standing nearby, staring back at me. I glance toward Dad, hoping he sees him, too, and is coming to my rescue, but he's already on the other side of the vehicle holding the door open for Mom. When I turn back, the man is gone.

On the ride home I nearly vomit, bobbing my head back and forth, checking to see if we are being followed only to find no one there. Should I call the police? No, they'll probably think I'm nuts and my mother wouldn't handle that negative press well. Although, I'm sure she would be all too happy to have me committed and out of her house.

Chapter Four

Jess



Tonight as I lie down, my mind wanders to the forest playhouse before I even close my eyes, which kicks this unending dream into high gear.

The stranger, who has begun to feel more like a friend, and I meet inside. Only this time he closes the door behind us.

As I turn to open it, he says, "Welcome home, Jess."

My heart skips several beats. "Welcome home, Jess? I'm not home. Why are we here? How do you know my name?" His cold touch as he gently holds my face in his hands, tilting it upward to face him chills me. Entranced in his gaze as I am, I close my eyes, silently begging his lips to find mine. The air

surrounding us thickens as he nears. The heightened anticipation has me on edge though for the life of me I can't figure out what is taking so long for our lips to touch.

If I had an old-fashioned alarm clock as opposed to using my phone as one, I would have hurled it across the room. I'm tired, grouchy, tired of this fucking dream going nowhere. Well, no rest for the wicked, or in my case, the sleep-deprived today.

Last night's dream, still fresh on my mind, leads me through this mundane day, though I damn near ironed my hand at one point.

Maybe a trip to the mall will help shake off whatever this is. Wandering aimlessly, window shopping, not my usual go to but anything is worth a try at this point. Locating a parking spot that isn't miles away in the blazing heat should've been my first clue to turn around and go home, yet I push on. There isn't a seat to be had in the food court. The decibal level from the screaming kids is off the chart but I have to admit, all this chaos draws me from my thoughts. At least with it being summer when I leave, it is still light enough out I feel somewhat safe walking to my car when I leave, empty-handed I might add.

The confusion is what I'm struggling with most. Part of me wants to address this man, but the other feels I need to be committed, allowing that thought to enter my head. What in

the hell am I doing daydreaming about a freaking stalker who could be a complete psycho? For all I know, this guy is an ax murderer waiting to strike when I'm alone.

Fucking hell, Jess, give it a rest.

How I miss the smell of freshly cut grass. Dad would put the sprinkler on after he'd finished mowing and I'd run through it for hours. Now we live in a cookie-cutter neighborhood devoid of life due to the unbearable temps. Our back yard sits at the edge of a nature preserve so we have to keep an eye out for rattlesnakes, coyotes, and scorpions. I don't leave my dogs out unattended out of fear they'll be bitten or attacked. There are pros and cons to having deaf dogs. On the pro side, they won't bark at non-existent things, but on the con end they won't hear a rattle or growl from a predator.

I miss climbing the hundred-year-old oaks that shaded our yard in Michigan. I remember watching old Mr. Wicks get drunk and take out the mailboxes along our street with his huge Cadillac. Just like clock work, the cops would knock on his door the next morning and he'd deny it, but if you followed the path of downed mailboxes they led to his house.

"Hi, honey, how was your day?" Dad called out as I shut the front door, never taking his eyes off the TV.

“It was okay, Dad.” My voice sounds as exhausted as I feel.

He turns to face me. “That was a long day, Jess.”

When he moves the dogs bound over to me, I kneel to pet them. “I went to the mall after work.”

That must’ve been the right response as he actually smiles. “Good, you need time with your friends. You haven’t been hanging out with them much lately.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him I was alone. I’m always alone. He’d worry if I told him how invisible and empty I am inside. Some things are better left unsaid.

It doesn’t take long for the conversation to turn to an all too familiar one. “Have you decided on a school?”

“No, but I’m headed upstairs to do some research now.” That pleases him enough to turn his attention back to the TV. I hate lying to him, but my focus and path don’t align with his.

“Do you want something to eat?” he asks.

“No thanks, I ate at the mall,” I reply then sprint up the stairs before he switches back to my life plans, or lack thereof.

From a freshly graduated teen's perspective, my life is lame. Friday night and I'm sitting at home. Alone. Most everyone I know are likely sleeping off hangovers from last night's graduation parties I didn't get invited to. Not that I would have gone anyway. And though I hate to admit it, every once in a while it would still be nice to be acknowledged.

"Ugh, this is such a waste of time," I mumble aloud as I fumble through numerous open tabs on my web browser. It's like my brain thinks if I click really fast through them the magical career fairy will land on the lucky winner and the choice will be made for me and I'll live happily ever after. The thought of devoting four years of my life and an endless life plagued by student debt only makes it worse. But I know I can't continue working at the dry cleaner for much longer. It's a dead-end, minimum-wage job that I could never live off of. Frustrated, I shut the computer down, run a hot bath, and call it a night after that. Basking in the bubbles, contemplating life and whatnot, dozing off and on, I'm thankful the tub is a perfect fit for me so I won't drown. I've fallen asleep in here more times than I can count. Though I didn't expect a simple nod to fall into such a deep dreamstate, drawing me back to where last night's dream left off.

My face, still cradled in his hands. Our lips mere inches apart. I'm surprised at myself that I find solace in his embrace, given I'm one who cares to be touched.

Quivers of anticipation coarse through me as he tilts my head upward. I'm finally going to see who this mysterious man is and I'm happy to report I'm not disappointed. Michelangelo himself couldn't have sculpted a more flawless piece of art.

His lips, a blushful shade of red and so close to mine. God, how badly I want to touch him. But he is in control, I'm but a puppet and he my puppet master. Expressive yet familiar espresso brown eyes and thick lashes, staring down at me in wonder. Is he as curious as I? Has he felt the spark, the magnetic pull pulsing between us? His thick, dark brown locks are so silky my fingers long to run through them.

I finally mustered the courage to ask his name when he speaks, "Jess, it's me, David."

The air is striken from my lungs, bursting forth as it swirls like a cyclone outside my body. His last words as I gasp for breath, startled awake replay like a broken record. It's me, David. I want to go back to sleep but the adrenaline rocking through me won't allow for it.

Fuck. My. Life.

I grab a towel and race across the room, nearly falling on my ass as I fumble to boot up the computer. Repeatedly pushing the power button isn't going to make it go any faster. I

rip the desk chair out, plopping my butt down. As soon as it's loaded I open the internet browser and type in David Cordova then impatiently tap my foot in the puddle building beneath me while the results take their sweet ass time to load. I probably should've dried off first, you know safety and all that. But my brain is hyperfocused on figuring this shit out. If that really is David, my David, where's he been? Why is my brain conjuring him up now after all these years? And the ultimate question — what the hell is going on?

Shit, two million, eight hundred, ninety thousand results were found. Okay, obviously I need to be more specific so I type in: David Cordova, Royal Oaks, MI. Well, that narrows the search down to a mere one hundred and fifty-five thousand. Damn good thing I'm wide ass awake now, looks like I'm in for a long night.

“Okay, Jess, you can do this.” I draw in a deep, cleansing breath to steady my nerves and click on the first one. Not him, next. One by one, I work my way through the massive list and after several wasted hours, I call it a night. On the bright side, it seems he hasn't been to jail nor done anything bad. People love to put that shit on the internet. Nothing came up on YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram—there is literally nothing anywhere. It's like he never existed. Was that really David, or was this just one giant mind fuck?

The Nightmare Before Christmas ringtone on my phone blares and I damn near fall off the chair. The caller ID shows an unknown number but I answer it anyway.

“Hello?” I ask, wondering who’d call me at this hour of the night, err, morning.

“Hello, Jess, it’s David,” he pauses. His voice has every hair on my body standing on end. “I need to see you. Are you available tonight?”

Apprehensively, I mutter, “How did you get my number?”

But that question goes unanswered as he continues on. “I’ll meet you after work. You get off at seven, right?”

“How do you know where I work? How do you know when I get off?” My voice elevates with each syllable as I freak the fuck out but he hangs up without answering any of my questions.

What the fuck just happened?

How can you dream about someone you haven’t seen in years and then get a phone call from a person claiming to be them? It’s like I’m living in an alternate universe.

Somehow, my shaky legs carry me safely downstairs and to the couch. I drop and snag the remote then mindlessly flip through the channels like it's a competition. How quickly can they change? Let's test that theory. This is not calming the heart threatening to beat out my chest. If anything, the faster I flip, the faster it beats and the infomercials are kinda pissing me off.

But god, the image of dream David has my heart racing for a totally different reason. Errant thoughts venturing into erotic fantasy mode. Without approval, my subconscious chooses to place virtual David and I into some very precarious positions. And damn, dream Jess is a hot seductress. My hand slides south, between the warmth of my thighs. How long has it been since I got myself off?

"Ahh," I moan, beyond thankful my parents are in bed. One finger teases my clit as another slides inside. The wetter I get, the harder my breaths come. As I near release, my mother walks in, abruptly ending the seductive enslavement and spoiling a much-needed ending.

If men get blue balls when they don't come, what do women get? Angry snatch syndrome? Blue bitch? Either way, I'm not a happy girl and the disgusted look on her face takes away whatever blue there was and replaces it with red-faced embarrassment. To avoid further discussions I do not want to have on this subject, I run and hide in my room.

“Jess, what’s up with you? Do you realize you’re about to add bleach to a load of colored laundry?” Leah barks.

“Oh crap, sorry. I’m meeting a friend after work that I haven’t seen since grade school and I’m really nervous.” That seems to piss her off even more.

“Snap out of it before you really screw something up.” Leah storms off and returns to pressing the garment she was working on.

If only she knew how badly I may fuck up tonight, and I’m not talking about work.

My eyes are glued to the clock on the wall near the register. Six pm, the final hour which has drug on for an eternity. Yes, I know, that’s a dramatic teenage response which shifts to rapid-fire what ifs. What if he doesn’t show up? What if it’s really not him? What if... Now I’ve stupidly psyched myself out which could take a positive twist if he doesn’t show. I’m an idiot, why do I keep doing this? I’m such a pathetic loser. My sad, meaningless existence has turned my dreams into a neurotic reality. Heavy medication and padded walls are surely in my future.

A pinch of pink touches the sky and I turn toward the front window to watch the oncoming sunset, seeking the comfort I feel when witnessing one. My legs are on the verge of giving out, and I take a seat beside the machine. Deep breaths, girl. Ya right, I might possibly have set myself up for a date with some deranged kidnapper. Shaking off those thoughts, I focus on the view as a myriad of colors flow past and the calm sweeps through me. There are wonderful things in life you'll never get enough of and sunrises and sunsets are two of those for me.

Seven o'clock hits, and I find myself no calmer than I was an hour ago. After I clock out, I stumble through the walk of internal chastising toward my car, nervously scanning the parking lot and cursing myself the entire way. I'm not sure whether to breathe a sigh of relief or feel disappointed, having reached my car without seeing him. I rev up the engine and reach over to turn on the radio when someone knocks on the window and scares the shit out of me. I jump, my head darts in that direction only to find Leah and Cole standing there.

"Why are you sitting here? I thought you were hooking up with someone?" Leah barely gets the words out, laughing as hard as she is as I roll down the window.

Shakily, I reply, "We're not meeting yet, so I was just going to hang out until then."

“Do you want us to stay with you?” Cole asks, ever the protector. I love that side of him.

My head says yes, but my mouth overrides it, “No, I’ll be fine.” I think, well, more like hope.

They nod and start walking away though Cole glances back at me a couple of times. This is feeling more like the beginning of a B-rated slasher film and I’m starring as the dumbass female who always dies first.

After another ten minutes, I give up and turn on the headlights, ready to drive away. There he stands, in the bushes straight ahead. I don’t know if I should get out and greet him or to take off, and never pull this shit again. Option B would’ve been the right choice, but guess which one this dumbass goes with? What can I say, the suspense of meeting him is eating me alive. So, I turn off my car and sit there for a few moments, gathering the nerve to complete the mission even though my brain screams loud and clear, Abort!

I snag the can of mace from my purse, and slide it in my back pocket. Even though I get out of the car, I stand beside it with my keys between the fingers of one hand and the other on the handle. I’m not beneath poking another would-be attacker’s eyes out.

He holds his hands up. “Please don’t be afraid, I won’t hurt you. I know you’re confused, but I swear I can explain,” he pleads.

My pulse races, my heart violently beats inside my chest on the brink of explosion. With each step as he nears, the pounding in my ears intensifies until he takes my hand his. His ice-cold touch sends shivers down my spine, which reminds me of how I felt in the dream.

Is this really the same man?

“Take a deep breath, Jess, it’s real,” he says, though I couldn’t breathe deeply if I had to. Hell, I couldn’t breathe at all.

A zillion questions flood my brain, but my mouth is too dry to engage. Every other thought is plagued with get in the car now, Jess, but I can’t move. Gently, he peels my fingers from the handle as it joins his and just like that—I’m out.

I gasp for breath and bolt upright far too quickly and nearly hurl. I shut my eyes and count to ten as I slowly draw in deep breaths and reopen them. The room is too dark to make anything out so I feel around and locate a lamp on what must be a bedside table. With a click, the room is illuminated. Where am I? Am I okay? I touch myself, all my clothes are still

in tact and nothing hurts, though my mace is gone. What in the hell is wrong with me, why did I go looking for trouble? Now I'm trapped.

I stand up—still off balance and woozy—and as I reach for the bed a hand slides around my waist and I scream.

Another hand covers my mouth. “Ssssh, Jess, it’s okay, I’m right here.”

“Who the hell are you? Where am I?” That’s when the tears come. “Uh, uh are you going to k...k...kill me?” I stutter.

Much to my surprise, he laughs. “No, I’m not going to hurt you. It’s me, David.” When I look into the eyes of my killer, the familiarity in them hits me like a punch to the gut. David, my David, stares back at me, a whisp of hope and sadness in his eyes.

My legs buckle and he scoops me up before I can hit the floor and lays me back down on the bed. The sweet smile he gives me lights up my insides. Okay, now I feel weak in the knees for other reasons. Damn these teenage hormones.

I force my eyes away as my face heats and the overwhelming urge to get us out of our clothes strikes when I should be focused on looking for a way out. Thick, red velvet

floor-to-ceiling curtains cover one entire wall. The four-poster king bed has the softest linens in a satin shade of black. Beside the bed there's a nightstand and across from it a dresser and a desk with a chair. Everything in the room looks like it was purchased as a matching set straight off a showroom floor.

Nothing about this room is sick, twisted, or out of the ordinary. No freaky doctor tools lying on a cold steel tray nearby, no perverse abstract art, in fact, there isn't anything on the walls at all.

He remains quiet while I survey the unfamiliar surroundings. "Where am I?"

"In my bedroom. You fainted so I brought you here," he says.

"Where's my car?" At that thought, my heart returns to racing. If my car isn't here that would hamper any potential escape. On foot, I'd likely be caught again.

"In the driveway, you dropped the keys so I picked them up and drove us here. It's right out there," he gestures toward the curtained wall, "so you would have it when you were ready to leave."

"I'm free to leave? Whenever I want?" I question.

He nods but says nothing, like he knows I won't leave because I have too many questions.

"Why are you stalking me? How did you find me? How did you get my phone number?" I rattle off a few in rapid succession.

"I've always known where you are, Jess," he replies, his eyes never leaving mine.

"That's a little freaky and stalkerish, wouldn't you say? Watched one too many Dexter episodes?" It appears when faced with an uncomfortable situation, I rely on my inner smartass to do the talking.

Again with the laughing, why is this so funny to him?

"No, Jess, you are my alma gemela, my soulmate. I've always known where you are." His reply comes out like this is an everyday thing in his world. Soulmates? Really? Did he think that one would go right over my head?

And on that note, that's my cue to leave. I stand and head toward the door, only to realize once I get there that I don't have my purse on me. I turn to retrieve it when he hands it to me.

“You’re free to go, but I wish you wouldn’t. I didn’t mean to scare you. I hope in time you’ll allow me to explain,” his eyes plead with mine to understand, but at this moment in time I lack the ability to do so. It’s best to leave now, sort out my thoughts and deal with this when I’m in a saner state of mind.

How can he be so calm about this? Doesn’t he understand how insanely ridiculous his words are? This isn’t normal behavior. Soulmates? There’s no such thing and I sure as hell don’t want someone in my life that knows what I’m thinking or doing or where I’m at all the time. Takes away freewill and any freedoms I have.

I take a step back and he gestures to the bed, wanting me to take a seat though I wait for him to sit first—like that makes any difference, but somewhere in my mind it does. He walks over to his desk and pulls out the chair and sits. Satisfied with that, I move to sit on the bed and clutch my purse to my chest in case the need for a quick exit presents itself. He tosses my mace on the bed beside me, hurriedly I grab it like a lifeline.

“I think you owe me an explanation. I have stalking and kidnapping charges to file so you’d better start talking before I call 9-1-1,” I advise with shaky breath.

He grins, likely at my ridiculous antics. “Jess, do you believe in love at first sight? That there’s one true love for

everyone?”

“I would like to believe that, but reality and the high divorce rate leads me to believe otherwise.” Boy, my attitude is relentless when it comes to this man. He really triggers my inner bitch.

Ignoring my snide remark, he continues. “I’m a believer. I’ve loved you since the day we met. Do you remember that first day in kindergarten?”

How could anyone love someone in kindergarten? If memory serves me correctly, I had an unnatural love for the fruit-scented markers on the tables as well as for eating paste. Okay, I know what you’re thinking—sick—but it was kindergarten after all and maybe the fruit markers got me a little high. Maybe that’s why I munched on a bottle or two of paste.

“For someone who says he loves me, you have a funny way of showing it. As I recall, you were the one who took off in seventh grade without warning. Not a note, a phone call, nothing. Where’ve you been all this time and why have you chosen now to resurface?” My voice escalates with each word, the anger and hurt I’d felt all these years storming the gates and lashing out.

“I’m different than you, Jess. My family is not the same as yours.”

“And? No two families are the same. Take mine for instance, my mother is a bitch who can’t love anyone but herself and my father has chosen to be my mother’s personal slave, catering to her every whim. What the hell does that have to do with you disappearing without so much as a note?” At this point, I;m shouting. So many emotions flow through me, all battling to be at the front.

He rises from his seat and takes a seat beside me. “I’m not here to hurt you. It’s quite the opposite actually. I’m here to protect you and take care of you,” he says in true stalker fashion.

I puff up my chest like a proud peacock. “I can take care of myself, thanks.” What am I, some helpless female?

“Yes, I remember that night you were so brave and independent that you walked out to your car without a care in the world. Even though four guys stood beside it? That was very brave indeed,” he says with much contention.

“How do you know about that? I’ve never shared that with anyone.” My god, this night is a fucking roller coaster. One minute I’m up with my heart in my throat, the next I’m

somewhat calm. I'll surely have a heartattack before the night is over.

"Because I was there, I was the one who stopped them from raping you."

Every ounce of breath liberates itself from my body. "How did you know what they were going to do?"

He pauses for a moment, I'm sure selectively choosing his response to keep me from freaking out again. "I could sense their thoughts. The largest of the four men had no soul."

"No soul?"

He touches my shoulder and I move out of reach. "Are you okay?" he asks me.

"I thought you could read minds? If that were true then you would already know the answer to that question." Now I'm full-on pissed. This conversation is quickly going downhill.

"I can't read minds, per se, but one's body language gives way to their thoughts more times than not. On top of which the fact that they were ripping off your clothes while he undid your pants spelled it out," he growls the last words.

It occurs to me that I've only had two boyfriends, David and Luke. I've always shut everyone out or pushed them away so I never had to feel anything or know what it was like to be rejected. Maybe part of that was due to David's disappearance, maybe I pushed him away. Right after he left, I drifted more inside myself, abstaining from human contact. I guess his leaving scarred me deeper than I realized.

"Why did you leave me?" My voice trembles as I ask the question the plagues me.

The smile on his face fades, replaced by sadness. "I didn't have a choice, Jess. It was time for me to go." He pauses before continuing, "In time I'll answer more questions, but for now you probably need to home before your father reports you missing."

I glance at my phone screen as it lights up, four 4:24 am. Holy shit, I am in trouble.

I spring up and David is right by my side. Brazenly, he cups my face in his hands, and lifts it to stare into my eyes. "I hope I didn't frighten you. I'm here for you and would like to see you again, if that's okay?"

"Okay," I mumble, anything to get out of here. This is too much to take in and my brain is working overtime to decipher

it.

In a surprise move, he leans in and kisses me. A long press that leaves me reeling like someone smacked me in the back of the legs. Weak and stimulated at the same time. He releases his hold with a smug look. Boy, I hope he can't read my body language now. The last thing I need is him thinking he has any control over me.

He takes my hand and leads me to the front door. On the way there I mentally memorize the areas of the house we pass through. When we reach the foyer, he draws me into his arms and kisses me again then whispers, "Until we meet again, Mi Amor."

The stupid in me blurts out, "When will that be?" Wow, how desperate I've become.

He grins, "I'll call you tomorrow so we can plan something."

On that note, I choose to leave without another word. Mostly out of fear of making a bigger fool of myself. But as I back out of the driveway, the familiarity of the area catches my attention. When I reach the stop sign it dawns on me—I'm in my own neighborhood. This is way too eerie. How long has he

been watching me? This feels more and more like a ten o'clock news story in the making.

His house is only three blocks from mine. What really sucks is that I can't share this with anyone and what is even sadder is that I have no one to talk to even if I wanted to. I've alienated any potential friends I could've had by holding them at arms length. The need to find out more, where he's been, what he knows about me, is heavy even though I'm a little freaked out by this whole situation.

When I walk inside, Dash and Vi ran up to me which means my parents waited up. Oh, this is so not gonna go well.

My mother storms over. "Where in the hell have you been? Do you know how worried your father and I were? We've been up all night." Oh, she did not just go there acting like she cares.

All this coming from the woman who can't hug me or tell me she loves me. She doesn't care about anyone but herself. As my lips form the words our eyes meet, my thoughts must have been conveyed by my facial expression because she backs down and leaves the room. Score one for body language.

The smirk on my face is quickly schooled as my father approaches. The concern written on his nearly has me in tears.

“Jess, honey, we were worried. Are you okay?”

“Yes, Dad, I’m fine. I’m so sorry, I went to the movies with my friends and then we went to Denny’s and started talking and I lost track of time.” Fuck, I hate lying to him. But if he knows I was with a boy he would flip out. Some things are better left unsaid no matter how much it hurts to keep them inside.

He hugs me then holds me at arm’s length as he scolds me. “I love you, Jess, but do not do this again.”

“I love you, too, Dad, I’m sorry. I promise to check in if I run late again.” That seems to be the answer he’s looking for as he releases me and goes upstairs. The dogs and I are right behind him. After a quick shower, I hit the bed and crash land into the most risqué dream I’ve ever had.

We are in a hotel room, David and I, naked. He’s sitting on a chair and I’m standing in front of him straddling his legs. He spreads his thighs, forcing mine farther apart. I hover above him and as I bend over, my long hair frames our faces. My taut nipples are right where I want them to be—in his face. He kneads my breasts, sucking each nipple in turn. He releases them and grabs my ass, grinding it against his crotch. His lips find mine as he pulls back slightly, each breathing the other’s breath. He slides his hand between my thighs, feeling how wet

he's made me. I throw my head back and moan as he slides his fingers inside.

As we kiss, his thumb massages my clit and I begin riding his hand, but he forces me to hold still as he continues to finger me. My breathing accelerates as I near the edge. His tongue wildly fucks my mouth as he plunges deeper and deeper, penetrating me from both ends as I come undone.

Chapter Five

Jess



Thank the scheduling gods I'm off today. Last night's—or more like this morning's nocturnal emission left me sated, and confused. It's late afternoon by the time I emerge from my room and head straight to the kitchen for much needed sustenance when I spot a note on the table from my dad telling me they're running errands and basically to feed myself. "That's nothing new," I mumble aloud as I ball it up and throw it away.

The first thing I do as I sit down to eat is turn on the computer and my thoughts gravitate toward David. I know it's in my best interest to stay away from him, but it's like I can't help myself. Is there such a thing as soulmates, one true love? His words replay, as I seek validity in his declarations. I know I have to see him. I have to find out more.

My cell phone rings and the screen reads David Cordova. How in the hell did his name and number get into my contact list?

“Hello?” I ask, wondering who’s really on the line.

“Hi, Jess, it’s David,” says his familiar voice.

“Um ya, that’s what the screen on my phone shows. How did you get my cell number and manage to put your number in my cell?” I ask.

He clears his throat. “Um, I added myself while you were sleeping. I hope that’s okay?”

“Little too late to ask now, don’t ya think?” Well, that came out shittier than I meant it to. “Sorry, I just got up. Still not fully awake,” though I wonder what other liberties he took while I was out cold.

“Nothing happened, Jess, I swear.” His replying to my thoughts is not helping. “Jess, are you still there?”

“Yes,” I rub my temples, feeling a headache building.

“Can I see you tonight?” David asks.

Might as well get this over with. “Yeah.”

“What time do you get off?”

“How did you know my schedule for yesterday, but not for today? Today’s my day off.” Wow, my bitchy responses are even throwing me off. “Ugh, sorry. Just this whole thing is freaking me out.”

“I totally understand and for what it’s worth, it’s not meant to. Will you come to my house around eight? I’ll cook dinner and we can talk.”

“Yeah, all right,” I agree.

“Do you remember how to get here?” David asks.

“Yes.” I did after all manage to find my way home after the massive three-block drive.

The dogs and I spend the next couple of hours hanging out until it’s time to get ready. I don’t do much, pull my hair up in a ponytail, and put a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. This isn’t a date, at least, I don’t think it is. After I grab my cell phone I shoot my dad a quick text letting him know I’m going out.

David answers the door before I can press the doorbell, he must have been watching for me. As soon as I walk in, he pulls me into his arms and kisses me so passionately I nearly forget my name. Scenes from last night's dream come back. I nearly wrap my legs around his waist and ask him to take me upstairs. Thankfully, I get a grip. "Hi." My response is so unsteady he laughs. Gee, I'm glad he finds humor in my inability to control myself. But damn, that kiss was mind melting. On that note, I grab him by the shirt collar and pull him back in for another.

When we break for air he as nuzzles his nose to mine and asks, "Are you hungry?"

Food is the furthest thing from my mind, but I remember he said he'd cook. "Yes." He takes me by the hand, leads me to the table and pulls the chair out like a true gentleman.

The lavish spread he sets out blows me away and in the center of it all is a vase of fresh sunflowers. "Sunflowers, how did you know they're my favorite?" I ask, sliding one of the petals between my fingers.

"Would you believe a lucky guess?" he smirks, and I shake my head. "Let me serve you, Amor."

Cooking and serving, he's not missing a trick. I watch in wonder as David fills my plate with a little bit of everything.

There's no way he can be as perfect as he appears right now.
What's the catch?

He turns to me. "Let me know what you think."

The first bite hits my tongue and my eyes close. Every flavor of this lasagna bursts as it hits my tongue. Oregano, basil, garlic, even the sausage he chose is one of the best I've tasted. "This is fantastic. Where did you learn how to cook?"

"I took a culinary arts class," David replies.

Culinary arts, my ass, I took that class and all I succeeded at was burning water. Yes, I said it. I burning water. In other words, I left the pot unattended and all the water evaporated and the bottom of the pot got scorched. Needless to say, my teacher was not happy and the failing grade I got for that assignment nearly killed my GPA.

"Why aren't you eating?" I ask, noticing his plate sits untouched.

"Oh, I sampled too much while I was cooking and it filled me up," he claims, waving his hand in my direction. "Eat up. It pleases me to know you're enjoying the food."

“You invited me for dinner and then you don’t eat with me?” Why I am so taken aback by this, I can’t explain. It appears as of late my emotions control me, not the other way around.

“I’m sorry, I’m drinking wine with you and I’ll have dessert when you’re ready for it.” He smiles and winks, making me forget why I was angry.

When I finish, he clears my plate and brings in two ramekins of crème brûlée topped with fresh raspberries and a light dusting of powdered sugar. Beyond full, I need to get up and move so I start clearing the table.

“No, Amor, you’re my guest,” David says as he tries to stop me.

“It’s rude to eat at someone’s house and not help with the dishes,” I reply. “Besides, I need to move around. I’m suffering carb overload right now.”

He backs down and together we get it cleaned up and the dishwasher loaded and running. “So, what do you have planned for tonight?”

“I thought we could watch a movie or talk and catch up,” David says though he seems nervous.

“Well, we’ve already had our tongues crammed down each other’s throats, so talking before we get too far ahead of ourselves would be the wiser path.” Wow, did that come from me? Insert internal pat on the back for that mature response.

We move to the living room which is decorated much as his room is color wise. Black leather sofa, matching loveseat and chair. There’s also an ottoman that serves as a coffee table and a huge TV mounted above the gas fireplace with surround sound speakers in the ceiling.

We sit at opposite ends of the couch, neither saying anything for a few moments. He’s the first to break the awkward silence. “Do you want to watch a movie?”

I have so many unanswered questions. “I would rather talk, starting with, where have you been since seventh grade?”

“You would be amazed. I’ve traveled extensively with my parents and visited numerous countries. After they switched me from public school to home schooling, I actually graduated early. I was fifteen when I received my high school diploma.”

“Wow, that’s quite impressive.” We’re the same age, he has a house and I’m assuming a good job to pay for it. Yet here I am, unable to do something as simple as choose a college. Well, that kicks my inferiority complex up several notches.

His life is far more interesting than mine. “What countries have you been to?”

“Spain, Italy, France, Bulgaria, and India to name a few,” he ticks them off one by one.

“I’ve never been out of the US. Which was your favorite?” With each country he mentioned, I mentally pinpointed them on the map and noted which were on my bucketlist.

“Italy, Tuscany to be more specific. The land is beautiful, the sights are amazing, and the people are warm and welcoming. It’s a country I could see myself living in.” He stares off as though he’s recalling that very trip.

“You are an only child, right?” I ask.

“Yes.”

Well, at least we have one thing in common.

“What do your parents do for a living?”

“They’re elders on the council,” David says, staring intently at me as though he’s eagerly awaiting my reply.

I wrack my brain for the word elder and what it is associated with when it hits me. “Oh, like at your church?”

“Well, not exactly a church so to speak, but something similar.” His responses are vague, leading me to wonder what he’s hiding.

“Do they still live in Michigan?” How great would it be to visit and maybe drive through the old neighborhood. Whoa, don’t get too far ahead of yourself, Jess.

“They own houses in many places, but spend most of their time in Bulgaria.” His replies are almost coming through like he expects me to read between the invisible lines. What am I missing here?

“I thought church work didn’t pay well?”

He snickers. “It really isn’t a church, Jess.” Before I can say anything else, he continues, “I’m sort of a, um, a prince. It’s expected that I carry on the ancestral legacy and rule from our council seat in Bulgaria.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa, did he call himself a prince? Don’t they usually have like, entire countries that they rule and live in castles with moats?

The air between us charges and when our eyes meet that's it. Lips locked, hands roaming. Unrestrained impulsiveness has led us to this point and there's no turning back now.

His right hand grips the back of my neck, firmly holding me in place while his left slides up the bottom of my shirt. My hands are all over him, proving just how inept I am at this. I'm all but ripping the buttons off his shirt to get to the skin beneath. His belt proves no match for me as I unbuckle and slide it out like a pro.

At this point my clothes are already lying in a pile on the floor, though I have no clue how they got there nor do I really care at this point. I just want skin on skin.

His tongue lavishes my breasts, consuming my nipples. Who knew I had a nipple play fetish? I'm learning so much about myself tonight. "Oh, god," I moan as his finger slides inside. I'm so fucking wet, he's met with no resistance when a second joins in.

Wrapping my hand around his cock, I stroke in tune with his fingers inside me. If only I was doing it right. If his moans are any indication, I'm on the right path.

"Jess, Jess," David pants. "Fuck, I'm gonna come."

Faster, I stroke, riding his fingers as I know I'll someday do the same to his cock, chasing my orgasm.

I throw my head back. "Ah, Ah," I moan, every inch of my body is on fire.

"Fuck!" David groans as his cock throbs and warm come spills over onto my hand.

What we've done hits us both. We hop up and nervously put our clothes on, taking seats on opposite ends of the couch without looking at the other one. Hands folded on my lap, I twiddle my thumbs, embarrassed over what happened. Third base on a first date is not my style, but it was like I couldn't control myself.

I sigh, dreading and yet needing to answers. "Why are you really here, David?"

He slides next to me and tilts my chin up. "I'm here because of you. I want us to be together. You are all I've ever thought about. You are what I crave."

Is my mouth wide open? Feels like it is. His stunning admission isn't what I expected and I don't know how to respond. I do realize asking if we are dating would be fruitless at this point, he pretty much summed that up with his answer.

But me being me, I need to hear those words from him. “Um, does this mean we’re dating?”

David smiles wide. “You’ve been my only girlfriend since kindergarten, mi Amor,” and then he kisses me. As though making a statement such as that one is the norm.

We curl up on the couch, holding each other while getting caught up. Though far too soon, David releases his hold. “It’s nearly five a.m., Jess, you probably need to get home. Do you work tomorrow?”

“Yes, but I don’t get off until ten. Shit, oh my God, I’m so sorry, but I forgot to check in with my dad. He’s going to be furious!” I jump up and grab my cell, firing off a quick text to Dad.

“Can I see you after work?” David asks.

“Yes, providing my father doesn’t kill me first.” I have very few rules imposed upon me but now two nights in a row I’ve already screwed up the cardinal one.

“Think about what you would like to do, and then we will do it.” David walks me to the door and draws me back into his arms, kissing me with such intensity I tremble. “Hmmm, I guess I better work on that,” he teases and I blush.

On the drive home, I worry so much I nearly chew a hole through my lip. Sure enough, there's a note waiting for me on the front door in my lovely mother's handwriting:

Jess, enough is enough. Your father and I have been worried sick. There will be a family meeting tonight when you get home from work.

Family meeting? Great, there goes my night with David. What does she know about family? I tear the note down and sprint upstairs. With some genius, I might be able to get out of this mess. Maybe if I leave a polite, apologetic note, they might let it slide.

Mom and Dad,

I'm so sorry. I went to the library after work to do some research on careers. Afterward, I stopped for coffee and read through the books I checked out. Again, I'm so sorry, but when I looked at the clock it was two a.m. and I didn't want to wake you. I have to work today until ten so I won't be home until after you've gone to bed because I'm going back to the library to return the books.

I love you and all is fine,

Jess

I place it on the kitchen table and contemplate sealing it in blood, but decide against that. It isn't Dad I'm mad at and I know that she is only fueling a fire that needs extinguishing.

Chapter Six

Jess



Waking up late with little time to get ready for work, I snag a pair of jeans off the floor, sniff them for good measure and declare them clean enough. I finish getting ready and practically run out the door. I'm halfway to work when I remember David wanted to go out tonight. Hopefully he's game for hanging out at home because going home to change beforehand isn't happening.

When I arrive at work our boss, Mr. Davis, is sending Cole home due to being sick. A quick scan tells me the store isn't busy so it shouldn't be too bad with only Leah and myself closing. Mr. Davis asks if we want him to come back and help, which we quickly decline.

Around eight-thirty my phone vibrates. I pull it out of my pocket so fast it nearly flies across the room. Butterflies fill me as I read David's name on the screen.

David: Meet you by the front door?

Me: Yes, please.

With a goofy smile on my face, I return to shutting the machines down while Leah is up front balancing out the register transactions. "Mmm mmm, would I like to get me a piece of that." I pivot around to see what Leah is talking about and there stands David. He waves and smiles at me.

"Girl, are you getting an eyeful of that candy? I wonder if he's single," she hums.

An unfamiliar emotion rears its ugly head. "He's not single. That's my boyfriend, David," I snip, before the reality of what I said could sink in. Thankfully David didn't hear me.

Her face turns red as a twizzler and I nearly laugh. Nearly. "Oh, um, sorry," Leah apologizes.

As soon as we walk out, David sweeps me off my feet and spins me around while kissing me. When he finally lets me

down, I make the introductions, “Leah, this is my boyfriend David.” Go big or go home, right?

I chance a glance his way, wondering if I overstepped or not with the ‘boyfriend’ comment. Based upon the grin he wears I figure I’m good to go, though Leah’s mouth hangs open like a freaking idiot.

We walk Leah to her car then head over to mine. He pins me against it and gives me a proper kiss. After several breathless moments, he presses his lips to my neck and whispers, “Race you to my house,” then takes off toward his car.

“Cheater!” I holler out, but he’s already inside with the engine started.

My poor little VW Bug versus his shiny new BMW has zero chance of winning. When I pull up in front of David’s house, he is already standing on the porch waiting for me. My dad would have blown a gasket if I got a ticket so I stuck to the speed limit unlike someone else. Speaking of Dad, I better text him before I forget...again.

Just got off work. Don’t wait up. Out with friends. Jess.

“I made a snack for you,” David says after we step inside.

“You spoil me, Mr. Cordova.” A little snack he said. The man has a full-blown picnic spread out on a blanket in the living room. Strawberries dipped in dark chocolate, plump red grapes, crackers and a block of cheese. Off to the side, a bottle of wine chills in a bucket of ice. He gestures for me to sit. “Mi Amor, get comfortable.”

Why do I get goofy inside every time he calls me that?

He sits beside me, snagging a strawberry from the tray and feeding it to me. Is this really happening or is it just a dream? If it's a dream, please don't wake me.

Much like the night before, we lie together talking about any and everything until it's time for me to go. Reluctantly, we say our goodbyes and head home.

Things proceed this way for well over a month, seeing each other every night, never going past third base and trust me, my body screams for a home run. But as with most things, the jig is up when my father stops me on my way out.

“Tell me, Jess, what's his name?” He stands in the entryway, arms crossed over his chest.

I sigh, “David.”

“How did you meet him?”

“Funny you should ask. Cute story really,” I do my best to play it up.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he scowls.

“I’ve actually known him since kindergarten.” Is that my ace card because if so, I need a backup. This is one conversation I know my dad will not let go of.

“All right, Jess, spill it,” Dad demands.

Here goes nothing. “Do you remember David Cordova from grade school back in Michigan?”

“Vaguely.”

Down to one-word answers, never a good thing. “You have to remember him. It was always the three of us—Maura, David, and I—until he moved at the end of seventh grade.” I was devastated after that, there’s no way Dad doesn’t remember.

“How exactly did you run into him now and in Arizona of all places?”

Well, I can't tell my dad he was stalking me, because to tell you the truth, I'm still not totally clear on that whole situation myself. So, I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “I ran into him at the mall, he's out here to tour the campus at ASU. He's thinking of enrolling for the fall semester.” There is no way all these fucking lies won't come back to haunt me.

That response is a pleaser, the scowl on Dad's face morphs into a hint of approval though he'd never say it. “Well then, we should go to dinner while he's here. Do you know how long he's in town for?”

“I don't know, but I'll ask him next time I see him.” Way to play it off, Jess.

“Oh, like you weren't headed that way now?” he questions, brow cocked in disbelief.

Or not.

The mere thought of subjecting David to my mother does not thrill me, but I don't see that I, we, have any choice in the matter. Personally, I refuse to spend any more time with her than I have to, but my dad asks so little of me that it would be

shitty to decline his proverbial olive branch. I'm certain she'll find a way to be the center of attention while belittling me, which is not my idea of a good time. Especially not in front of David.

Thinking the conversation has ended, I reach for the door when he clears his throat. "Jess, I know you get off at seven on Saturdays so why don't you ask David if he will meet us at Mario's around eight?"

Shit, now there's no way out. I nod in agreement and barrel out the front door as quickly as my legs can take me. Know what's worse? David is far too excited to meet my parents for dinner.

Fuck. My. Life.

Saturday night gets here far too quickly. After I rush home from work and fumble through my wardrobe, or lack thereof, I settle on a pair of jeans and a lacey short-sleeved top with a pair of sandals. My nerves are shot. I have no idea what my mother is going to say or how horrifically she will act. My dad met Luke once, but it was at a school function so it was quick and painless with no time to talk, unlike tonight. Tonight will be nothing but talking. Ugh...

Promptly at eight, David meets us at the entrance to the restaurant. He shakes my dad's hand first. "It's nice to see you again, Mr. Cartright."

"It's nice to see you as well, David, please call me Tom," Dad informs him.

David turns to my mom, plastering on his most charming smile. Only her reaction isn't what I expected. She literally stands there staring at him, not saying a single word. David extends his hand and waits for her to raise hers. When she makes no move, he drops his.

The smile remains in place as he says, "It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Cartright."

She snaps to with a jolt like she's just been shocked. "Ah, yes. Nice to see you, too, David."

My parents walk ahead of us, following the hostess to our table. David pulls the chair out for me and my mother clears her throat and glares at my dad for not doing the same. It takes him a few seconds before the message is received, and I nearly laugh as he hops up to help seat her. Though once seated, she still shoots daggers at him.

Moments later, the waiter comes by to get our drink orders and recite the evening's specials. When he returns, we place our food order then the inquisition begins.

“So, what have you been up to since we last saw you, David?” Dad asks.

“My parents decided to home school me so we could spend more time together as a family. Mother was never one for the public school system,” David replies.

My father arches a brow. “That must have been tough for you, how were you able to complete your courses on time?”

“Actually, sir, in doing so I was able to graduate early. I received high marks in my classes as well as on my final exams. I received a full ride to the college of my choice,” David says, ignoring what I feel was an insult from my dad.

Fortunately, our salads arrive, but David doesn't touch his. He shifts the lettuce around on his plate and my father notices this. “Not much of a salad eater?”

David shrugs. “Not really, sir, a few bites of it and I've had my fill.”

Dad nods in agreement. “I don’t care much for it either, but the older you get the more roughage you need.” David smiles, but that’s an overshare I could’ve done without. Dad looks at me and laughs, I guess the look on my face says what the words I couldn’t convey for me.

Oddly, though, Mom has remained silent, staring at David like she’s starstruck. But Dad is enjoying himself and I’m thankful for that.

“Jess says you’re in Arizona checking out ASU. Have you decided if you’re going to accept their offer?” And Dad’s back on the college bandwagon. Maybe he should enroll? Get it out of his system and all that.

“Not yet, sir. I was hoping Jess could help me decide since she’s been doing so much research lately.” David winks and I can’t decide whether I want to pummel him for that, or crawl on his lap and smother him with kisses.

My father swerves back around to me. Thanks for that, David. “Jess, have you figured out what you’re doing?”

Yes, hopefully my boyfriend tonight. “No, Dad, not yet.” I haven’t thought about anything but David for the last month, though I won’t be sharing that with my father.

Note to self: remember to thank the waiter for choosing that moment to deliver our food. I am so hungry that I scarf down my entire plate of baked ziti, but David still doesn't eat. I wonder if he isn't feeling well. Thankfully, the rest of the evening is uneventful and goes by in a blur.

Once the plates have been cleared and we wait for the check, David asks, "Jess, it's pretty early. Would you like to see a movie or something?"

He had me at or something.

"I would love to," I reply.

When the check comes Dad reached for it, but David beats him to it. The look on his face is priceless. I'm sure he never anticipated that.

He smiles. "Thank you for dinner, David. You two go have fun. David, it was nice seeing you."

"You, too, sir." David turns to Mom, "It was nice to see you again, Mrs. Cartright," but all she manages is a nod. Dad scowls and takes her by the hand, waving goodbye on their way to the car.

“It’s your night, Amor, where would you like to go?” David asks after we are buckled in.

“Anywhere is fine as long as we’re together.” That was sappy, but he kisses me anyway. “I’m so worry for the way my mother acted. I don’t know what got into her.”

He brushes it off, I’m not sure anything riles him up. “Don’t worry about it. I thought the whole evening went well.”

He’s right, it could have been worse. She could have spoken. “I suppose. David, are you feeling all right?”

My question surprises him. “Yes, Jess, why do you ask?”

“You didn’t eat anything.”

He takes a deep breath. “Look, Jess, we need to talk. Is it all right if we go to my house instead of going out?”

That line is never good, he’s probably going to dump me or tell me we’re moving too fast. First he was all about going out and it being my choice and now we’re heading to his place. Wonder how long it will take to do the walk of just being dumped home?

“Yeah.” Not like I have a choice.

He pulls into the garage and as I reach to open the door, he beats me to it. How quickly my mood shifts. As soon as I stand he draws me into his arms. “Not to worry, Amor. As long as we’re together everything will be fine,” he presses his lips to my temple. Well, I guess he’s not dumping me, but I still don’t feel good about this.

He walks in and goes straight to the kitchen. “Do you want something to drink?”

“No thanks,” I reply as I sit on the couch.

He sits beside me and takes my hands in his. “We need to talk about our future.”

“Our future? We’ve only been dating a few weeks.” Is it me or did this just shift into hyperdrive?

“About college and stuff. You know I came to Arizona to be with you. I need to get my business degree before I return to Bulgaria. I was wondering if you’ve decided what you’re doing.” The honesty in his gaze as he asks me this nearly takes my breath away.

“I’m not sure. Business would be a good start, I suppose. Why do you ask?” Curiosity is killing me, I wish he’d just spit

it out—whatever it is.

“Because I’d like for us to attend college together, of course.” He fidgets with his hands, chewing on his bottom lip. Is it possible Mr. Calm, Cool, and Collected is nervous about my response?

“Oh, that would be cool.” Going to school with someone I know would ease some of the apprehension I have. Though I thought my answer would please him, his entire demeanor changes. “What’s wrong?”

Struggling to put his thoughts into words, he sits there for a few moments before responding. “I know we’ve only been dating for a short time, but I’ve loved you since the day we met and I don’t want to be without you.”

He loves me?

That is totally unexpected, especially considering the fact I thought he was dumping me. The only people I’ve ever said those words to are my dad and my grandmother in DC. I don’t know how to react. Do I love him? I know when I thought it was over I wanted to vomit. But was that love? I’ve never been in love so I don’t know if I feel it or am ready to say it.

“Do you want to be with me, Jess?”

“Very much. I just didn’t know what to expect when you said we needed to talk. My first thought was you were breaking up with me.” Too many decisions to be made. College. Love. Future. It’s like an elephant is sitting on my chest right now.

“That’s not an option, Amor. I’m deeply committed to this relationship,” he kisses the back of my hand.

Wow, this is getting serious. “What other colleges are you interested in? I haven’t checked business programs so what do you recommend? And I’ll need to get housing recommendations as well.”

“I’m leaning toward ASU so then I won’t have to move. But I would need to take night courses,” he replies.

“That makes sense. I can probably change my work schedule to days as well. I guess I’ve never really asked, but where do you work?” There are so many moving pieces to all of this. Has my dad even considered that through his relentless pestering?

“Jess, there’s something I need to tell you. It won’t be easy for you to hear, let alone understand. I need you to promise me that you’ll hold all judgment until I’m done and you won’t freak out.” David’s grip on my hands won’t allow me to pull

back. Guess he needs me near to keep him grounded through whatever he is about to say.

Why does my heart race and my head scream run? I'm already freaked out and he hasn't said anything.

"Please? I need you to promise me," David again asks.

I nod, but that isn't good enough. "I need you to say the words."

"I promise."

He rises, pacing back and forth. After a couple passes, he comes to a stop in front of me. "Remember when you asked if I was feeling okay because I didn't eat?"

"Yes, why?"

"Have you noticed anything else different about me?" he continues.

The only things coming to mind aren't that out of the ordinary. "Well, I know because of my work schedule we only see each other at night."

“It isn’t only because of your work schedule. I can only go out at night,” David replies.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say. Your touch is cold? Maybe you have poor circulation. I never see you eat. Maybe you don’t like the same things as me?” Where is he going with this?

“I don’t drink red wine and yes, this is really happening.”

He beats me to the punch. It is as though he reads my face perfectly, but wait—did he just tell me that really freaking happened, that he is in my head answering for me? “What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything, at least not out loud.”

Okay, it’s okay. Everything is okay, except it’s not and I’m freaking the fuck out. I jump and he’s beside me. How in the hell did he move so fast?

“You were just there and now you’re here. How, how did you get here that fast?” The blood rushes from my head and I wobble as the room spins. “What are you, a vampire?” I say in jest, expecting him to laugh it off, only he doesn’t.

“Yes.”

What the actual fuck?

“Jess, I would never hurt you or hold you against your will. We belong together, together for eternity. Soulmates,” says the super creepy yet ridiculously gorgeous guy standing before me.

This is so not good, he thinks vampires are real and he’s one of them. Does he have to sacrifice a virgin as some sort of initiation ritual?

“What?” is all that comes out, all comprehension of the English language is gone. How could I ever love someone who thinks they are a fictional being? How did I miss the red flags? How did I let things go this far?

Before I can stop myself, I blurt, “You think you’re a frigging vampire?”

He steps toward me and I take one back, managing to trap myself between the couch and the ottoman and he stops. “Jess, please don’t be afraid of me. You know I won’t hurt you. It’s important to me that you understand what I’m telling you. I don’t want there to be any secrets between us.”

“Secrets? Why didn’t you tell me you were delusional and need medication? You didn’t think that piece of information was important?” I nearly scream and he flinches. For a brief moment, I feel badly for doing so. Then I remember how we arrived at this point.

This is something straight out of a horror movie, or Bram Stoker’s *Dungeon*. Everyone knows vampires don’t exist. There is absolutely nothing funny about this. In fact, the more I think about it the more pissed I get. Why is he playing games with me?

I cover my face with my hands as I fall back on the couch and cry. “Why are you doing this to me? Do you think it’s funny to play games and fuck with my heart? If you’re not mentally stable you shouldn’t be pursuing a relationship with anyone!”

“I’m not mentally unstable, nor am I fucking with you. I would never lie to you. Think about it, Jess, you know it’s true.” When I glance up, we are face to face as he kneels in front of me.

Images from the past few weeks fast forward through my brain. Anomalys that happened I wasn’t able to justify so I brushed them off. The fact that I’ve never seen him eat, he’s never met me for lunch nor do I hear a peep from him during the day. His car windows and house are cryptically dark. Oh

God, did I just say crypt? Does he sleep in a coffin? Would he expect me to sleep in one?

Abruptly I stand. "I have to go. I need to go. Home. I need to go home. Now."

"I'll take you home," David offers.

"No, I'll walk. I need to be away," at my words, his face falls. "I need some time to think."

His saddened features nearly brea me. I want to hug him and run at the same time. My judgment is clouded, and I'm suffocating. I don't dare look back, I can't trust myself if I did.

Thankfully the walk home is uneventful given the late hour. Not the wisest of decisions to walk alone at night yet I did. I collapse on the bed and burst into tears. My poor dogs don't know what to do or how to act. I wave to them and they hop up and curl down beside me. Usually they make me feel better, but right now I'm not sure that's even possible. Worst of all, I broke my promise to David. I did freak out and to make matters worse, I ran away. Mental illness or not, he confided in me and I broke his trust, even though I did what was right for me.

My phone vibrates and I know without looking it's David so it's no surprise when the messages he sent come across.

David: Jess, are you ok?

David: Where are you?

David: Please, I need to know you're okay.

I don't respond. When I thought he was going to dump me it felt like a kick in the gut yet this ended up being so much worse. The least I can do is let him know I'm safe so he doesn't show up here.

Me: I'm home

I toss my phone down and cry myself to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Jess



It's late afternoon when I wake, depressed and numb. What a miserable feeling. I let someone in and now I regret it. I'm still unable to comprehend his words, a vampire. Do I help him seek the medical attention he clearly needs, or do I walk away for good and close this chapter of my life?

I peek into the living room to see who is home on my way to take the dogs out. Dad is in his usual spot watching TV, but I don't see Mom which is great because I'm not in the mood to deal with her shit.

“Good morning, Dad,” I greet him, hoping he doesn't look up. There's no way he can't tell I was crying and rehashing this isn't happening.

“Good morning, honey,” he says without taking his focus off the TV.

I spend the day catching up on laundry and cleaning my room, though I can't get the images of David's sad face out of my head. As the day wears on, I grow angrier with myself. Picturing life without him upsets me. I slam the laundry basket down and curse aloud, “Damn it, Jess, you need to hear him out no matter how insane it sounds. You owe him that much.”

My stomach growls so I go downstairs to make a snack and asked my dad if he wants something. I end up making us each a sandwich. I hand him his and take a seat on the couch. Figured mindless TV might help ease my thoughts.

“Thanks for making lunch, Jess. When was the last time the two of us sat around together?” Dad asks, way too cheerful.

“It's been forever, Dad. Oh ya, I submitted my application to ASU this morning,” I said.

His eyes light up. “That's great, sweetie, what classes are you taking?”

“Just core for now, but I think I'm gonna go for a business degree.” And there my mind wanders back to David. He is the one going for the business degree.

“Will you live at home then?” Dad asks.

“Most likely. Doesn’t make much sense to move into a dorm when the drive is only an hour.” Glad I made his day because mine sucked serious ass. I clear the dishes and go back to my room. I grab my phone to listen to some music and the screen lights up with another message.

David: Jess, can we please talk?

It wasn’t right the way I stormed out, but by the same token, it wasn’t cool for him to drop a bomb like oh yeah, by the way, I’m a vampire. But it’s really no big deal on me.

Me: Okay

David: Please come over as soon you can

Me: All right

I take my time getting ready, all the while contemplating the best way to handle this. What did he expect my reaction would be? Did he really think I would be fine with all of this? I grab my purse, kiss Dad on the forehead on the way out and tell him not to wait up.

“Be careful, honey,” he says.

When I arrive at David's, I sit in my car for a few minutes, gathering the strength I need to face this. By the time I get out and walk to the door, he's already standing there. I wonder if he saw me sitting there talking to myself. Great, now he probably thinks I'm nuts, too. Perfect match! Who am I kidding? He thinks he's a freaking vampire which makes me the only pseudo sane one in dysfunction junction.

Attitude in check, I walk inside. We act like total strangers, standing in the foyer, not making eye contact. Neither of us know how to react to the other. Is this how it's really going to end when twenty-four hours ago I couldn't imagine my life without him? "I'm sorry. I broke my promise and stormed out. It was an immature reaction."

David sighs. "Please don't apologize. I understand that was a lot to take in."

The tension is unbearable, the air so thick you can cut it with a knife. Our chemistry together is insane, a passion I never thought possible to have. A bond I once thought may be unbreakable.

"Fuck this." I launch myself at him, hoping he'll catch me before I eat tile and I'm happy when he does. It feels good to be back in his arms. The invisible wall between us is down and

I promised myself I would hear him out with an open mind and be there for him however I can.

He carries me to the living room couch and sits beside me. “Would you like something to eat?”

“Maybe after a while, we really need to figure this out.” I don’t think he expected me to jump right in, but it’s best to get this over with.

“Thanks for coming over. I appreciate you giving me another chance. Jess, I never meant to hurt you.” David apologizes and I know it’s true, but what he doesn’t see is that by not getting the help he needs he’s hurting himself, too.

“I want to be completely honest with you but it wasn’t easy or safe for me to tell you I’m a vampire. But I don’t want any secrets between us,” David says, and for a moment I really wonder if this is something I could’ve gone without knowing.

Through all this one question still plagues me. “Why did you leave in the seventh grade?”

“That’s when I started to change. So my parents had to take me out of public school and I was sent to the academy in Bulgaria for training,” he replies, like admitting this is a normal thing we all deal with.

“Training, what kind of training?” My curiosity is piqued.

“Once we begin to change, we must be taught how to live amongst humans and um,” he pauses, nervously rubbing the back of his neck. “How to feed without killing. There are many rules, both written and unwritten, and if we don’t adhere to them we won’t be able to blend in the human world.”

Well, whether I accept this or not, he clearly believes it to be true so I need to play along. “Did you know you were a vampire before you started changing?”

“No, my parents wanted me to live as normal a life as I could for as long as was possible. Once the change begins, we can no longer be exposed to sunlight. Tales of it killing vampires are true. We will die if the rays touch our skin. When my parents took me away from you, I thought my life was over. It was so hard to leave you, like my heart had been ripped from my chest. But the training began, I knew it was imperative I complete it. You were my muse, the driving force that pushed me through so we could be together again.”

Time now to ask the unavoidable question, which is kind of a catch twenty-two because not only do I need to know the answer, it’s also one I don’t want to know. “What do you eat?”

“Blood...”

Every hair on my body stands on end and I stupidly shout, “Am I to be your meal ticket?”

He snickers. “If I were going to kill you I wouldn’t have spent all those years training as hard as I did, learning self-control. I would’ve killed you the first chance I got and that’s not my reason for being here. I want us to build a life together.” When I don’t say anything, he continues. “I can survive off any blood—human or animal—but human is the best for us. For the most part, I get blood from blood banks, but on occasion I do have to hunt to maintain my strength.”

Hunt, does he mean he hunts and kills humans?

“Yes,” he replies without saying a word, reading my thoughts.

“How do you keep doing that?” I hate it. “And don’t feed me that line of body language bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit, but yes, I can read minds. Not in their entirety. Mostly glimpses of thoughts,” David says.

“Great,” I grumble.

He ignores my comment and continues on. “We’re trained to seek out humans without souls. Killing an innocent is frowned upon. Soulless humans are easy to detect. If you look deep into their eyes, you can feel the evil radiating within. Fragmented pieces of thoughts, plus many times we catch them in the act. The only way to lose your soul is by killing another. The more you kill the more pieces of your soul die until there’s nothing left. I only kill humans who are so far gone there’s no hope for redemption. Those who kill the innocent are called rogue vampires and they’re excommunicated. At times, they’re hunted and killed by other covens as they place our kind at risk.”

“How often do you hunt?” I ask, though I don’t know why.

“I don’t hunt as often as I used to. Mostly I consume the blood my contact at the blood bank provides me with, but I will tell you that you won’t see the guys who tried to rape you ever again.”

Oh my God, he killed them.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about that. Society can thank me later.”

A subject change is in order. “I didn’t know blood banks sold the blood they collected. I thought it all went to patients?”

“You’d be amazed what people will do for the right price,” David replies. I guess everything has a price and a market somewhere, whether legal or illegal.

“This whole mind reading thing bothers me,” I admit.

“It’s not reading so much. Telepathically, I can transmit my voice into your thoughts. I manifested in your dreams and shared my memories of our childhood. My hope was that when we finally met you’d be more comfortable with me and not alarmed. Fear was the last thing I wanted, but I can see that didn’t go as off as I’d anticipated,” David says and I try to see it from his perspective, but it just isn’t working for me.

“Your execution was seriously flawed. Didn’t you think it would freak me out to see someone from my dreams in reality?” How did he not see this coming?

“Not before now. I’m sorry. Will you ever be able to forgive me?” David asks.

“Yes.” Because the truth of the matter is I know I’m falling in love with him no matter how hard I fought it, though I’m not quite ready to share that with him, yet.

“Come on,” he stands and holds a hand out to help me up. “Let me fix you something to eat.”

“Why do you have food if you don’t eat?” This makes zero sense to me.

“For you of course.” He winks at me.

David throws a snack plate together for me. While I eat, I gather my thoughts and once we are comfortable again I open myself back up. “Where do we go from here?”

He kisses the top of my head. “Wherever you wish, Amor, you know that my heart is yours and wherever you are is where I want to be.”

Time to fess up. “I filled out the enrollment package for ASU today.”

“Perfect, I’ll do the same. What courses did you take?” he asks, far too pleased. Did he know I was going to do this?

I snort.

“What’s so funny?”

“Core classes for now but possibly moving into business administration,” I admit.

“You are going to keep me on my toes, Jess.”

Chapter Eight

Jess



Over the summer, we barely spend a night apart. Days he sleeps while I work and before we know it, the start of our first semester is only a week away. I take this week off so we can go to campus and purchase our books and supplies and map out where our classes are. Once classes start my work schedule will change to days and I also cut back my hours.

The Sunday before classes start my dad asks if he and I can spend the day together. It has been a while since we had a father daughter day. He asks if he can take me school shopping like we did when I was little and out to lunch. This brings back such fond memories for me.

The retailers are having their back to school sales and we get a ton of great deals. After shopping, we overindulge at the Olive Garden in all you can eat soup, salad, and breadsticks to the point of pain. But I'm never too full for those yummy chocolate mints that come with the bill.

"How are you going to swing work and school, Jess?" Dad asks while we eat.

"I cut my hours to part-time so I could take eighteen credits," I reply, pretty proud of myself for thinking ahead like that.

He's pleased with this. "That was very well thought out, Jess. I'm so proud of you." Dad then hands me a large envelope.

I assume he is trying to give me money so I hand it back. "Dad, living at home has allowed me to save my paychecks to help pay for the extras my scholarship won't cover. Trust me, I'll be fine."

He holds his hands up and refuses to take it. "It's not from me, sweetie."

"Huh?"

“Open it.”

I unclasped the back and remove the papers inside. There are a few legal documents, all of which refer to a trust fund that lists me as the beneficiary.

‘This trust belongs to Ms. Jessica Lynn Cartright. Date of Birth May twenty-fifth, year two thousand and four. This fund is to be dispersed to her upon her eighteenth birthday, May twenty-fifth, year two thousand twenty-two. Until that date, these funds will remain in the care of US Bank and Trust. Her Father, Thomas Wayne Cartright, is the sole trustee of aforementioned account until the maturity date above when it transfers to Ms. Jessica Lynn Cartright.’

I stare blankly up at my father, at a total loss for words.

“The bank book is inside. Your Grandfather Joe started this fund when you were born. He never told your mother or grandmother about it because he knew them all too well. Once he said to me he couldn’t believe the level of selfishness they’d both reached. He said he was elated to have such a great son-in-law with a solid head on his shoulders and that he knew I would always have your best interest in mind. He started this fund with one hundred thousand dollars. I placed the most recent statement in there so you’d know what your current balance was.”

Massive explosions of tears burst forth, running down my cheeks and I can do nothing to stop them. I always knew my grandfather liked me, I just didn't know he loved me like a grandfather should.

I reach inside and pull out the bank book and statement. When I unfold it I nearly fall off my chair. My hands shake as I take in the total then glance up at my father.

“Your grandfather loved you dearly, Jess. For each birthday until he passed he added as his gift to you, all the while it sat in the bank earning interest. No one but your grandfather and I knew this account existed. He was afraid your mother or grandmother would try and take it from you.”

I'm making such an ass of myself crying the waitress comes over to check on me.

“Is everything all right, sir?” the waitress asks my dad.

“Yes, she received some surprising but good news and was trying to digest it all.” He smiles.

I nod in agreement, attempting a smile though it likely comes off as a grimace.

“Okay, if you need anything I’ll be clearing the tables over there.” She gestures toward the area and walks away.

“Jess, use this money wisely, but if school and work get to be too much, I would rather you quit your job and focus on school and live off that money. You’re welcome to stay at home for as long as you like, so you don’t need to worry about housing.”

Relief washes over me. I was beginning to experience the mental challenge of balancing school, work, and David.

“Jess, I love your mother with all my heart, but I know she hasn’t been the nurturing one I hoped she’d be. I never knew why until I saw her around her own then it all clicked. Unfortunately, she’s an exact replica. Neither have an affectionate bone in their body. I’m not trying to apologize or make excuses for her, that’s not my intention, but I’m hoping this conversation can shed some light on the challenges you two had.”

No one knows me better than my dad. I’ll never understand how a mother can reject her own child, no matter how they were raised. You are the only one who can control you.

After lunch we run a few more errands and when we walk in the door, mine as well as dad’s arms are laden with bags.

“Thanks for everything, Dad, I had a great time. Even if I didn’t show it, today meant more than you know,” I say.

“Me, too, baby girl, I’m glad we got some time together.”
He chokes up, on the verge of tears.

I run upstairs to get ready to go to David’s. On the way, out I give Dad a quick peck on the cheek and holler, “Don’t wait up and thanks again, Dad, I love you.”

“Love you, too, baby girl.”

David greets me with open arms and kisses that I always look forward to. I no longer have to knock, he gave me a key a few weeks back. We walk to the kitchen where he has dinner waiting. I don’t have the heart to tell him I’m stuffed from lunch.

“Where did you really learn how to cook?” I ask, pointing an accusing fork at him.

“I learned in Italy from a chef named Vicente Mastrianni. He owned a restaurant off the coast of Naples.” He says it like this is normal for everyone, to be taught how to cook by a world-renowned chef.

“So, your mom didn’t teach you then? The lies come out,” I tease.

“Actually, she did. But Vicente taught me the proper way to prepare authentic Italian food,” David says.

He swirls a glass of what I hope is wine in his hand. The rich color swishes inside the glass, then it dawns on me. “What are you drinking?”

“Blood.”

The fork slides out of my grasp and hits the ground. I know the look on my face is less than desirable, so I do my best to smooth it over, first by closing my mouth and picking up my fork. Nothing further is said nor does it need to be.

He embarks upon clearing away the dinner dishes at a nauseating speed and I swear his feet never touch the floor. My starstruck gaze stops him. “I’m sorry, I usually move like a human when you’re around, but with the comfort level we’ve reached, I hoped I would no longer need to hold back.” He takes it down to a normal speed.

I’ve still not fully embraced the whole vampire thing. Ignoring it is the path I chose though likely not the right one. I walk over and slide my arms around his waist. “You’re right.

If this relationship is going to work, I need to accept all of you. I don't want special treatment. All I ask is that you be yourself around me and um, don't let me see you hunt." He laughs and kisses me.

"So, are you excited about school starting tomorrow night?" he asks once we get comfortable.

I crinkle my nose. "Well, excitement and school don't belong in the same sentence. I wonder if I'll be able to concentrate in class with you sitting beside me."

I don't know if it's the feral look he gives me or my inability to control myself around him but one thing I do know is that it's time. David's been insanely patient, never pushing me out of my comfort zone. Without a doubt, I know he's the one and he more than deserves the gift I'd held onto this long.

"David, I'm ready," I say, shaking like a leaf though I don't doubt my decision.

"Amor, are you sure?" he asks, gently running his hand along the side of my face.

"I've never been more sure of anything."

“I want to make sure we’re both in agreement. This is an important step for both of us. We’ll be bonded and you’ll bear my scent,” he informs me.

“Your scent? Like as in...I don’t even know what that means.” Would I smell like sweat? His cologne? Both of which would wash off.

“My scent would only be picked up by other vampires. You’d be marked as mine. It would be a warning to other predators to stay away,” he explains. “This is a big step, one I’m ready for but you need to be as well. There’s no turning back from this.”

I consider his words though only momentarily. This whole marking thing has dog pissing on your leg all over it, but it sounds like as a big deal in his world as losing my virginity is in mine. “David, you’re the one.”

He knows the question before I ask it. “I’ve been waiting for you as well, Amor. You’re the only one for me.” How we never had this conversation before I will never know, but I’m glad we did now.

“Oh, David.” I’m at a loss for words. This beautiful, emotional moment finally comes to fruition. Those three

words sit on the tip of my tongue. Before I can overthink it he scoops me up and whisks me away to the bedroom.

Slowly he undresses me as though unwrapping a delicate gift to be cherished. David glances up, our eyes meet, and my cheeks heat. I've been naked in front of him many times but this is far more intimate.

“You're beautiful, Jess.” He removes his clothes and lies down beside me, pressing his lips to mine. I swear, I could come just from kissing him. I'll test that theory someday, though now is not the time. The cold of his touch against my heated skin is a warm welcome. Soothing, yet sharp. His fingers glide along my flesh like a tickle, a choreographed dance of erotic fantasy that lights me on fire from the inside.

David slides between my legs, licking his way up my thighs. I grind against him, seeking penetration of any kind—tongue, fingers, cock—any part of him. When his tongue slides between the folds I moan and arch up. Devilishly forked is how I'd describe it as he flicks my clit while simultaneously orally pleasuring me.

“David, please,” I beg. “Need you.”

He lies atop me, his tongue sliding between my lips. Tasting myself on him is like an aphrodisiac. I can feel his cock as he

presses inside, his lips never leaving mine, doing their best to hold my focus. He meets with the barrier, the one that makes me a woman, and stops and stares down at me.

Our gazes locked, he pushes forward and I feel the slight discomfort as the skin breaks.

It's done, there's no turning back now.

“David! Condom!” I freeze.

“No need. I can't get you pregnant,” he says and I wonder how many women have heard that line through the years then nine months later never sleep again. “Jess, you're a human. Vampires cannot impregnate humans.”

Oh, ha. I feel like such a fool panicking in such a perfect moment. David nips the sweet spot on my neck, right below my ear, then sucks. I don't know how he does it but I'm right back to writhing beneath him.

“God, David,” I moan and cant my hips, needing to feel him deeper. Locking our fingers together, he raises my hands above my head and pounds harder, faster.

“Jess, fuck, Jess. Gonna come.”

Sweat drips from his forehead and onto mine. I wrap my legs around his waist and press against his groin, forcing him as deep as he can go.

“David!” I cry out as I come.

At the same time David growls, “Jess!” as I feel him throb inside me, filling me. Marking me. I am and forever will be his.

“Whoa,” he says, dropping down beside me. “That was better than I ever imagined.” He turns to face me, “Stay the night?”

“Yes.” I don’t want this night to be over. I’ll text Dad and deal with the aftermath tomorrow.

Chapter Nine

Jess



When I wake, David is still asleep, but I need to get home and take care of some things before our first class tonight. Hurriedly I dress and leave a note on the nightstand so he doesn't worry:

David,

Went home to shower and feed the dogs. Pick me up at my parents' house later please.

Love,

Jess

I haven't said the words aloud but I know it won't be long before I do. Last night has me in the best of moods today with a positive outlook on the choices I've made such as enrolling

at ASU and most importantly, giving David a second chance. I love him and it's time I told him.

Thrilled is the best way to describe how I feel when I pull up and both my parents' cars are gone. I run upstairs, assembling my backpack and reviewing the syllabus from each of our professors. Now all that's left is to get myself ready. While I'm buried in my walk-in closet, my phone vibrates on the nightstand.

Dad: Hope you have a great first day of school, Jess.

Me: Thanks, Dad!

Guess he's not that mad about last night, right? An hour or so later, another comes through:

David: I'll pick you up at seven.

He pulls up at seven p.m. sharp. I fly downstairs, sling the door open and run directly into a wall of muscle.

"Umph," I groan as I pair of familiar arms wrap around me.

"Good to see you, too," David leans over and kisses me.
"Ready to go?"

We walk into our first class and select seats toward the rear center of the lecture hall. Slowly the room begins to fill, I guess night classes work for many students. Professor Dean touches on the syllabus then dives right into chapter one. My hand cramp up as I'm taking notes. While massaging it, I scan the unfamiliar faces in the room. The majority of the female population are fixated on David. He catches my eye and grins, however, I fail to see the humor in this.

What the hell?

Our drive home mimicks a teleporting scene from a futuristic sci-fi movie as we travel from point A to point B at warp speed. At one point I have to close my eyes to keep from vomiting. When I'm finally able to open one, I eye the speedometer. David is going over a hundred and sixty miles per hour. I'm sure the only reason it isn't higher is due to the fact the gauge doesn't register that high. My gasp draws his attention and he chuckles.

“Don't worry, Jess. Heightened senses is a perk for my kind. I can see where the police are and only need to travel to a place once and it's mapped in my head. Trust me, we're more than safe.”

I sit back and try to become one with the leather seat, white-knuckle death grip on the belt, wishing I hadn't looked.

Exiting the freeway moments later, he asks, “Do you want me to take you home or do you want to come back to my place?”

“Yours, please.”

“You know if you wanted to leave some things there like a toothbrush, or extra clothes, you could.” Shyly, he turns his head away. It isn’t a bad idea, I do spend more time at his house than mine.

I shrug. “Maybe an extra toothbrush wouldn’t hurt.”

Again, he opens the door before I can grab the handle. Without thinking, or turning on my brain/mouth filter, I blurt, “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to your ability to move faster than the speed of light.” Outwardly, I’d accepted this whole ‘I’m a vampire’ deal but internally it’s a constant struggle. I can’t deny there are many unexplained gifts David possesses, though how he got them I silently question.

He laughs and closes the car door behind me. “Jess, I want you to feel at home when you’re here. *Mi casa es tu casa*. Help yourself to the food in the kitchen, it’s there for you. But err on the side of caution when you open the fridge. My food is in there, too.”

Ew, could have done without that, though I know it's something I need to get used to. Besides, it could be worse, at least I'm not an accessory by helping him bury bodies...

"Sorry, while there are many perks to being a vampire, consuming blood isn't one of them," David replies, staring at me like he expects me to run away screaming.

Between school, work, and David, I'm only home a couple hours a day, just long enough to check on my dogs, do laundry and grab clean clothes. With my grandfather's gift, I don't need to work so I'm not sure why I'm trying to kill myself. With that thought in mind, I decide to give my notice and focus on what matters. Building a future with David.

David turns out to be the best study partner. He literally retains everything we read and when I struggle with grasping a particular concept, he finds ways to put them into perspective for me.

Before I know it, the holidays are here and Thanksgiving is only two weeks away. I told Dad that I wasn't attending Mom's family gathering at my grandmother's house in Scottsdale. I'm an adult now and adult me is putting a stop to my being the family doorstop.

“You’re an adult now, Jess. It’s your choice whether or not you go,” Dad tells me.

“I choose not.”

“Understood. While I’m disappointed you won’t be there, I do understand and wish I didn’t have to go either,” he solemnly replies.

“You are more than welcome to spend Thanksgiving with David and me.” That would be so much fun. David would do all the cooking, I’d sample it, you know, for QC purposes, of course.

Dad laughs, “Although the offer is tempting, the consequences would be horrific for me.”

I know that all too well...

The guilt of leaving Dash and Vi all the time is getting to me. I ask David if I can bring them over once in a while and don’t get the answer I hoped for.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Jess.”

“You don’t like dogs?” My heart plummets, how could I be with a non-animal lover?

“I think dogs are great, but dogs don’t like me. I’m sorry.”

“How do you know? You’ve never met them. They’re so much fun, super happy, and love everyone.” Just talking about them has me excited and I only left them an hour ago.

“Animals have a keen sense of danger. They see us as a threat.” Defeated. That’s how I feel. My shoulders fall and I’m on the verge of tears. “Maybe if we start with a quick introduction at my house. That way if they freak out, it won’t alarm your parents and make things awkward,” he offers.

“Okay, riddle me this. Why do my mom and the girls in class act like starstruck idiots around you?” I’ve been meaning to tackle this question since our first class but with how busy we’ve been, I’d forgotten to ask.

“Vampires can use allure on humans, which is easier to do on the feeble minded. Compelling is another thing we’re taught to control when we go through training.” Before I can ask my next question, he jumps in, “No, Jess, I haven’t compelled you. You’re with me of your own free will.”

“How did you control the entire female population in our class, and better yet, why?” Depending on his answer he may or may not be getting lucky tonight.

“Just to mess with you, to see how you’d react?” The little shit grins.

“Hmm,” I tap a finger to the side of my face. “A man who does shit to see if his girlfriend will get jealous. Not sure that one deserves a reward.”

“Awe, Jess. No fair,” he pouts. Lips puckered, he gives me his best puppy eyes. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

“Better not,” I warn, though the words hold no venom. Since we’re on the subject, I continue the Q&A. “Do you age the same as a human?”

“No. Those who are born vampires don’t age past the human equivalent of twenty-one. Some of the older vampires are ones who were once human and were turned later in life,” he replies. Huh, wonder how many I’ve seen and assumed they were human.

“That sucks. One day I’ll be old and wrinkled and you’ll always be annoyingly handsome. That’s not fair. Guys already have the upper hand with the aging process,” I complain, and David laughs.

“Jess, when the time is right, we’ll have another discussion. Until then, there is no need to talk about it before your twenty-

first birthday.” He freezes. “Shit.”

I see the instant he regrets saying that. “What the hell does that mean?”

“By then, we will have been together for more than three years and my hope is that you’d know by then if you wished to spend eternity with me.” Ugh, everytime he uses the word *eternity* I picture Prince Vlad saying it.

Is it weird that I suddenly desire Gary Oldman?

Down girl, focus. “What does being twenty-one have to do with it?”

He sighs, clearly exasperated. “It’s forbidden for a vampire to turn a human before the age of twenty-one. In the past, it’s happened for various reasons, most of which were selfish and those who took part were dealt with. Like I told you before, we have rules we live by that were put in place for a reason.”

“Let me see if I get this straight. You’d have to turn me into a vampire in order for us to spend our lives together? What if I want kids?” Having children never crossed my mind before now. Better to get the answer and weigh the options.

“Vampires can only bear offspring with other pure-blood vampires. You would have had to have been born as such. Even then, there’s no guarantee. My family comes from an ancient vampiric bloodline which has consistently produced offspring each generation. Since I’m an only child, the bloodline will end with me.”

Whoa...

I’m unsure if I wish to proceed with the remainder of my questions because quite honestly, the answers have sucked. Moreover, this cannot be something his parents will be happy about. Which brings up my next question.

“David, do your parents know about me?” I hate to ask this, but need to know.

He squirms, “Ah, um, no.”

Well, fuck.

“Why do they think you’re in Arizona?”

“I told them ASU had a great business program so I came here to check it out and subsequently enrolled. They were happy when I told them.” David answers so fast I barely catch the words.

“What if they show up one day and I’m here?” Chills during sex are a good thing. Chills while finding out your undead boyfriend’s parents don’t know about you—not good.

“It’s not in my parents’ nature to show up unannounced. They’re very old-fashioned that way,” David says. Why do I suddenly have the urge to bow?

Let’s hope so, buddy, or we’re seriously screwed. The last thing I want to do is piss off any guy’s mom, especially one that can rip my fucking head off. A woman’s wrath is bad enough without adding them being a vampire to it.

I sleep over at David’s Thanksgiving eve. With no work or school, it’s senseless to be home and my dad promises not to leave the dogs locked in my room. They still like to tear up my mother’s shoes and even managed to partake in a ‘Coach Bag destruction event’ which cost me nearly seven hundred dollars. What started out as funny quickly ended as an expensive lesson.

#trainingfail

David and I decide against a traditional turkey dinner because I’ll be the only one eating it. Plus, I’m not a huge fan of turkey. Even though David offers to do the cooking, I’m not

feeling it. Instead, I opt for popcorn and a soda. We've heard so much about *Schitt's Creek* we decide to binge it. We curl up on the couch under a warm blanket and dive in. Honestly, I can't imagine a more perfect Thanksgiving.

Chapter Ten

Jess



Black Friday, the dreaded day of death for all who work retail. I wake, my dark prince still soundly asleep beside me. Quietly I tiptoe downstairs, pour a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee.

Not long after, David darts through the kitchen and straight to the refrigerator. Ripping the top off two bags of blood, he drains them in a matter of seconds. Oddly enough, I'm enthralled by this gruesome show of hungry power.

Hurriedly, I put myself together to run home and take care of the dogs and laundry. Plus, I'd like to see my dad, too. Probably would be nice if I stuck around and had dinner with my folks. Nothing could ruin my mood today.

Or so I foolishly thought...

Mom doesn't waste any time. As soon as I walk in she lays right into me. "Where have you been?" Hands on her hips, waving a freshly manicured nail in my face. "Out parading around like a whore. You're a disgrace and this behavior is unacceptable."

Well, there goes my mood. I glance toward Dad for backup, but he keeps his face pointed at the TV. He knew where I was, I checked in with him repeatedly. So why isn't he coming to my rescue?

In an attempt to avoid escalating this situation to the point there'd be no turning back, I decide to walk away. As I turn to move, Mom grips my arm and yells, "Don't you walk away from me! I'm not finished with you."

That unleashes eighteen years of pent up anger and hostility. "First and foremost, Mother, and I use that term loosely, don't ever touch me again and do not pretend you care. You've never given me the time of day. You know nothing about me and I'm not a whore. You both knew exactly where I was and who I was with because I texted Dad and told him."

She turns to my dad who purposely keeps his focus on the TV. Well, now I know where I stand and it's obvious where

my dad's loyalty is.

Not on me.

“Don't you dare talk to me that way, I'm your mother,” she spits.

“Mother? You call yourself a mother? You did nothing more than give birth then you handed me over to Dad. I don't remember you ever telling me you loved me or held me when I needed you to. Don't you dare call yourself a mother. You haven't earned that right.” I swear, I hear David's familiar snarl come through in my voice. Guess he's rubbing off on me.

She raises her hand and I catch it mid-slap which furthers her rage. “I want you and your dogs out of this house now.”

Still not a peep from dad.

I will not cry in front of her.

I will not cry in front of her.

She will not see me break.

I run upstairs and slam the door, then burst into tears. At the same time, my cell vibrates.

David: Jess are you ok?

Me: NO!

I drop to my knees and lose it.

What am I going to do? Where will we go? I guess the dogs and I could get a hotel room. Do hotels allow pets?

Knock, knock.

“Go away.” I don’t want to see either one of them. They’ve both basically abandoned me. My heart is shredded.

“Jess, can I come in, please?” my dad asks.

“Why? You didn’t help me when I needed you most, so what more do you want to do to me now?” What could he possibly want now? To deliver a message from her saying I had ten minutes to pack eighteen years worth of shit into my car?

Despite my decline of his request, he comes in anyway.

“Jess, I don’t know what to say,” he begins.

“Seemed to me like you didn’t have anything to say at all. Suddenly find your words?” I’m past the point of caring. Hurt has turned to anger.

“It was best I stayed out of it. I was just as hurt as you were by her words.”

“Hurt, how did any of that hurt you? Everything was directed at me as usual, not at you.” My voice escalates with each word, tears streaming down my face. “And you let me down. You let her say those cruel words and the entire time you knew where I was and who I was with.”

“I’m hurt that my little girl is now a woman, and I don’t know how to deal with it.” He begins to cry.

So he let me take the fall because of that? I don’t know what to do or say or do. I’ve never seen my father cry, but the fact he allowed this to happen fucking guts me. Ugh, watching him cry is the worst.

“Dad,” I sit beside him, “I’m almost nineteen and David and I are in love. I’m sorry if my choices hurt you, but I’m a responsible adult and I know what I’m doing.” That’s a lie. I have no idea how to be in a healthy relationship, or any of the

adulting rules. But I do know one thing—I'm happiest when I'm with David.

“I don't want you to leave, Jess,” the words burst out in between sobs.

“But she does.”

“Let me talk to her.”

No good will come of that and at this point, does it really matter? Her words are confirmation it doesn't. “Honestly, Dad, I'm done being under the same roof with her. I have a lot of decisions to make and they don't include living here.”

He nods, understanding the dilemma, and kisses the top of my head. “I love you, Jess.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

While we are talking, my phone nearly vibrates off the nightstand with the massive amount of incoming texts. Instead of sifting through them, I call David back and fill him in on what went down. He says, “Pack your bags and load up the dogs. It's time they saw their new home.” And that I do, not saying a word to my parents. It's high time to leave this twisted, toxic environment behind.

As I near David's house, my nerves shoot into overdrive, worried I won't be able to control the dogs if what David said holds true. Fuck. I sit in my car for a few minutes devising a plan to thwart potential issues. It's still too light outside for David to come out, so I gather our things and make sure I have a death grip on their leashes before we go inside.

Dash walks a few paces ahead of Vi and sniffs around. Vi is glued to me as my protector. Within seconds, their hackles shoot up and they growl. A low, menacing warning that I've never heard from them before. Dash immediately takes a protective stance at my side so I now have a dog poised in guard mode on either side of me. This is so not gonna go well.

David meets us in the foyer and stands still, like a piece of art on display. His stance is hypnotic, though the dogs aren't having it. I kneel beside them, running a soothing hand along their fur in the hopes it will have a calming effect.

"Move toward me, slowly, but keep a firm grip on their leashes so they know you are in control," David says.

Gradually, we migrate toward David, their hackles are still up, and a low growl still present.

We cut the distance in half, but the dogs aren't backing down. I look to David for direction. He drops down on bended knee at their level, no longer hovering over them like a threat. He extends a hand, palm up, and calls them to him. Hesitantly, they creep forward while growling. A foot away, they come to a stop. David holds his hand out to sniff, they extend their heads toward it but move nothing else. The growls stop, but trust is still not given as they return to my side.

“Well, it's a start, but I don't want to make any sudden moves that would spook them. I'll let them come to me when they're ready,” David says. That is a bit hairy but at least I don't have to pull any radical moves to separate them. This is the first time I've seen them this alarmed.

David rises. “Why don't you take off their leashes and let them roam around. They need to determine whether or not it's a safe place. Don't worry, there isn't anything they can hurt.”

Huge flashbacks of the infamous Coach bag incident hit me, but if he's sure...

We sit in the living room, but keep a watchful eye as they sleuth about. Dash and Violet, the great dog detectives pops into my head and I giggle. David cocks a brow and kisses me, a welcome distraction. I don't want to think about my problems right now; emotionally, I am spent.

“What if the dogs have to go to the bathroom?” I ask.

“Then you take them outside,” he replies, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind.

Duh.

“It’s still too light out for me, but you can go out back with them. It’s important to me that you see this house as yours. There’s no need to ask for permission, make yourself at home, Amor.” That sweet, endearing penname has such an effect on me.

“Did you say you rent this house?” I ask.

“I was, but when we decided to go to school here I bought it.” Remote in hand, he begins flipping through the channels like what he just said is no big deal.

He bought it, just like that?

“I have a trust fund that was given to me when I turned eighteen,” he says. I’m sure my gaping mouth eludes to the shock.

Oh shit, I don’t even know when his birthday is. As a girlfriend I truly suck. “Um, when is your birthday?”

“April tenth.”

I slide the phone from my pocket and add that to his contact info. He busts me, shakes his head and laughs. The dogs follow me to the arcadia door, ready to see what’s out there. Carefully, I draw the heavy drapes back that cover it, just enough for us to slip outside but not let any sunlight in. His backyard is well manicured, I expected nothing less. A palm tree stands at each corner of the block fence. Underneath the windows sit perfectly trimmed bushes with tiny purple flowers on them. The swimming pool takes up the vast majority of the yard. The water is so blue it looks like pictures I’ve seen of the Caribbean. And the jacuzzi, I can’t wait to relax in it.

“I didn’t know you had a pool,” I comment as we come back inside.

“Feel free to use it anytime. I haven’t been in it or the jacuzzi,” he replies. “Jess, I hate to bring this up, but have you decided where you’re going to live?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. But I can’t go back there and deal with her anymore.” Well, not dwelling was nice while it lasted. Now, back to your regularly scheduled adulting. Why does the voice in my head sound like an infomercial?

“Agreed. The introduction with the dogs went well, don’t you think?” he asks, but where is he going with this? “You spend most of your time here—which you know I love. The only reason ever went home was to take care of the dogs. I don’t want you to feel rushed or forced into doing something you aren’t comfortable with, but what if you and the dogs move in here, with me?”

I know the look on my face screams ‘deer in the headlights.’ Am I ready to live together? Am I ready to give up my freedom? What freedom, dumbass? You don’t do anything without him as it is. Hush, brain.

David’s never shown me a possessive or jealous side. Maybe things will stay as they are if we live together? Observing my parents over the years, I’ve watched my father get mentally beaten down into a spineless yes man. I refuse to let myself become that same controlling bitch my mother is. I refuse to treat David with such disrespect. I lie down in his lap and contemplate the pros and cons of his offer. David says nothing more, just runs his fingers through my hair and leaves me to my thoughts.

Over the next couple weeks, I run over to my parents’ house and bring more of my stuff to David’s. I haven’t addressed the whole living together subject again with David, I’m just letting

myself ease into it my way. David smirks when I show up with more stuff, but says nothing. I keep telling myself I'm not ready for such a big commitment, but when I glance around my empty bedroom I realize I've already made it. Closing the front door of my parents' house for the last time was like a weight had been lifted.

Christmas is just around the corner and I have zero ideas what to get David. With only days left, the pressure is on to get my shopping done. With his sleep schedule I'm usually up hours before him so I decide to head to the mall while he sleeps today and leave a note so he won't panic.

David,

Went shopping. Be back in a couple of hours.

Love, Jess

Aimlessly, I wander the mall, through the throngs of last-minute shoppers such as myself. Store after store I hope the ideal gift will jump out at me, but the only items I buy are clothes. Creative soul, I do not possess.

I leave his presents in the trunk of my car and go upstairs to wake my sleeping prince. When I lean over to kiss him, he whisks me off my feet and onto the bed, simultaneously removing my clothes and my jeans hit the wall with a thud. He

slides a blindfold over my eyes, and cuffs my wrists above my head.

“Leave your arms there, don’t move them,” David directs.

Wow, I guess foreplay has been elevated. I love this take charge in the bedroom side of David.

“Intro to bondage 101, Mi Amor,” he whispers as he nips along my neckline and down to my breasts. When the peaks hardened, he clips something to one of them.

“Nipple clamps.” He stares down at me, “Oh my god, that’s hot. Are they too tight?”

“No. It’s, ah, causing some throbbing,” I blush.

“I thought I’d introduce some toys into our foreplay,” he waggles his brows.

“For a man who claimed I was his first, you sure do know a lot about this.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think and research.” He sucks and stretches the other and clamps it.

David nudges my thighs apart and begins massaging my folds, working in a cream or something that has me all warm and tingly. And wet. So very, very wet.

“How does that feel, Amor?” His fingers dip inside. I can barely remember my name let alone put into words how it feels.

“Near. Explosion.” I squirm, not sure if my body is searching for more or what, but my lower half is grinding away.

“No squirming, Amor. Hold tight and don’t come until I tell you to. There’s more and I want see how much you can handle.” His hands return to my breasts, kneading them with the nipple clamps on. Fuck, that is intense. The relentless throbbing in my pussy increases. Control is lost, I buck my hips and spread my legs farther apart. The desperation to have him fill me is overwhelming. David grips my hips, lifts me off the bed and fucking spears me. The battle of good versus evil wages war inside me. One side enjoys having him use me like this while the other wants to claw at the flesh on his back. I want to grab him and ride him hard but I’m not allowed to move.

Maybe next time for his punishment, I’ll make him sit back and watch me masturbate. Tie his hands behind his back so he

can't touch. Hmm, pleasure versus torment. Such a fine line between pleasure and pain.

“Can't. Hold. Back.” I groan. The louder I get, the faster he moves. All these sensations electrify every inch of me. “David, oh God, David.” I moan as I come, gasping for air.

“Oh god, Jess!” he bellows as he roars through his release. No shit, he literally roars. I'm not sure if I should be turned on or look for a tranq gun.

He removes the restraints. The clamps leave behind a pleasant tingle, and massages my wrists, then draws me into his arms, “Did you enjoy class today, *Amor?*”

“Un-fucking-believable. I grant you full permission to enslave me anytime, Master.” Our playful banter is one of many perks in our relationship.

He chuckles and gets up to gather our clothes at the same time the dogs tear down the stairs like the house is on fire. David beats them to the front door and as I reach the top of the landing, our eyes meet and he utters two words that stop my heart. “Oh shit.”

Chapter Eleven

Jess



“Take the dogs and go upstairs, NOW!” he barks. The tone of his voice and the grave look on his face is enough for me to grab their collars. Unable to control them, David picks them up and hauls them upstairs as I follow behind.

“Stay here until I come and get you,” he orders. If anyone other than him said those words to me I’d have told them to fuck off. But something is wrong and I’ll stay put until he gives the all clear.

Finally about fifteen minutes later, David comes in. “My parents are here.”

“Wait. What? You said they never come unannounced!” I’m freaking out. This isn’t good. The house needs cleaning. I’m a mess. Our room reeks of sex. What. The. Fuck.

“Leave the dogs in our room.” He takes my hand and leads me downstairs. “Don’t worry, Jess, it’ll be fine.”

I wish I had his confidence.

“Mom, Dad, this is my girlfriend, Jessica. Jess, these are my parents, Aurelio and Lourdes Cordova.” I glance between the two stoic faces staring back at me.

His father stands and holds out his hand. Nervously, I placed my shaky hand in his. “It’s nice to meet you, Jessica.”

“Nice to meet you, too, sir.”

“Please, call me Aurelio,” he smiles. Okay, I think I like him. Now for the mother. With a nod and a smile, I turn to face her.

She scowls at me then turns to David, then her deadly glare is back on me. Her contempt for me is crystal clear. “*David, que has hecho?*” What have you done?

“Mother, Jess is fluent in Spanish,” David smirks, though I wish he hadn’t.

If looks could kill I’d be dead. On the spot. His mother would likely still be scowling over my dead body.

How am I going to fix this?

Their ethereal beauty renders me speechless. I can’t decide which is the more beautiful of the couple. His father stands at nearly the same height as David, around six-foot-two, with a strong muscular physique. He has thick, shoulder-length, nearly black hair with a hint of a wave just as David has. His eyes are dark, nearly matching his hair. While his outward appearance is that of a twenty something, his mannerisms and the way in which he speaks are of eras past.

David’s mother is a regal creature. The way she stands, exuding an air of confidence that screams don’t fuck with me. She too is tall, around five-foot-ten with long, billowy chestnut hair that pools around her waist. Natural curls that fall in ringlets. Her features scream goddess and I have the sudden urge to kneel in her presence. Her eyes are just as dark as Aurelio’s but it’s her high cheek bones that truly draw you in. She too is young in appearance, but her floor-length black gown has you wondering if she’s on her way to a ball. She catches me gawking and furls her lips, baring her fangs to me. David protectively draws me near him as a gasp escapes me.

Is this good? Or bad? Am I in danger?

His father motions for all of us to sit. He and Lourdes choose the couch while David and I are on the loveseat. David doesn't release my hand and that is the only thing grounding me right now.

His father is first to break the awkward silence. "How's school, David?"

"It's going well. What brings you to the desert, unannounced?" That's David for you, straight to the point.

"We thought a holiday visit was in order. It was your mother's idea not to call first." He shoots his wife a contemptuous leer that clearly says, We should have called first.

She ignores him, and continues shooting daggers at us.

"Mom, Dad, would you like a drink?" David asks them. I'm ready to get the hell out of here.

"That would be lovely. Thank you, son," Aurelio replies.

There is no way in hell I'm letting David leave me here with them. I spring up and stay glued to him.

"David, this is not going well. I think I should leave." I hope like hell he agrees.

He slides his arm around my waist and pulls me close. "Jess, when I asked you to move in with me, I opened my world to you. Even though you've not officially accepted my offer, I consider the fact that you not only stay here every night but that all your things are here as well as a yes, which makes this your home and no one will force you from it." He cuts the tops of the blood bags and pours them into goblets. The coppery scent fills the air and I nearly gag.

We return and David hands them each a glass. They take a sip and cringe, then set the glasses on the table. "Jessica, will you be joining us for dinner?" his mother asks.

I look to David for guidance. "David, this is a peasant's feast." She gestures to the nearly full glasses. "Join us for a hunt." Her blackened, dilated pupils hungrily eye me. Am I to be her meal?

"Mother, Jessica and I live together, here in this house. Out of respect for her, I choose not to hunt," David says, though I

wished he hadn't. The anger in her eyes at his words has me cowering.

Well, if she wasn't pissed before she sure as hell is now.

Aurelio places his hand on Lourdes' forearm. Her jaw ticks with how tightly she has it closed. When she finally speaks, it's through clenched teeth. "That's so thoughtful of you, David."

Great, not only have I pissed off a mother, but a vampire mother at that. How much worse can this truly get?

"How long will you be in town?" David asks.

"Until New Year's Eve," Lourdes replies.

Great.

"We assumed you had a guest room, but I think it's best if we go to a hotel," Aurelio says. My head bobs back and forth between the trio like I'm at a tennis match.

"We do have a guest room and you're more than welcome to stay here," David replies.

His parents accept and David and I go out to their car to bring in their luggage.

As soon as we are outside, I say, well, more like beg, “David, the dogs and I are going to a hotel.”

“No, I don’t want you driven from your home because she doesn’t agree with my choices. End of discussion, Jessica.” He loads up his arms with bags. There is no way they packed this much for just a week. Given the fact he just used my full name, I know he’s pissed.

“Will she even give me a chance?” I ask, though I know the answer.

“No, not only are you not a vampire, but you don’t even come from a pure vampiric bloodline. My mother is old-fashioned and as I told you, my parents come from long lines of pure bloods. A legacy I’m expected to carry on, one that cannot continue with a human or a human that’s been turned,” he reiterates. It amazes me that even among the undead there is still segregation and racism.

As soon as we step inside I feel her gaze on me. Studying me, reading me, it’s freaking unnerving. “Jessica, why do I get the feeling we’ve met before?” Lourdes asks.

“I used to live in Royal Oaks. David and I were friends there in grade school,” I reply, hoping this is a chance to bond on some level with her.

Wishful future mother-in-law-ing.

Her lethal eyes shift to David. Aurelio grips Lourdes’ forearm, holding her in place though I’m sure if she wished to break away it would take nothing for her to.

Maybe I should just stop talking because I piss her off no matter what I say or do.

“Did I hear dogs barking when we pulled up?” Lourdes asks. Please don’t let her hate dogs. Please don’t let her hate dogs, I beg the diety of pets.

“Yes, Mother, Jess has two boxers that are upstairs.” Why does every reply he makes sound propper and snippy at the same time? Is he purposely trying to push her buttons?

She stares up at the ceiling and growls. David and I exchange looks, both filled with concern. I wonder if he had the same thoughts as I did.

Out of the blue, Aurelia says, “I’ve always wanted a dog.”

That is so random David and I laugh. His father smiles, but his mother only sees red.

“How long have you two been dating?” Lourdes asks David.

“Six months,” David replies.

“This house was an investment then?” Lourdes asks.

“Yes, and a home for us while we go to school,” David says.

Why does he continue to answer so nonchalantly when he knows she isn't happy about us?

“What are your plans after college, or have you thought that far ahead?” Lourdes continues. This woman's pursuit to get what she wants is relentless.

“Right now, we're enjoying getting reacquainted. Only time will tell where it will lead, Mother.” I love that man but right now I wish he would shut the hell up. Turn the tables on her, ask about their lives and homes. Anything to get the focus off of us because every answer only furthers her displeasure.

“You have a lot of choices to make, my son, none of which will be easy.” Lourdes' words are clear as day—this is a

warning, son.

David holds her glare, matching it with his own.

“What do your parents do for a living, Jessica?” Aurelio asks me. He is definitely the peacemaker in the family.

“My father is an engineer and my mother’s a housewife,” I reply.

“What do your parents think about your current living arrangements?” Lourdes asks. She is really fixated on our relationship.

“My mother and I don’t speak. My father wants me to be happy and David makes me happy.” I glance at David and squeeze his hand.

Thankfully Aurelio seizes the opportunity to change the subject. “Son, will you hunt with us tonight?” But, not for a better one. I guess he thinks if he asks, maybe David would change his mind.

“No, thank you, Father. I haven’t hunted since Jess and I started dating.”

“That’s quite admirable, son, but how will you retain your strength?”

“I drink human blood, only it comes from a blood bank,” he informs them.

“You’re better than that. You’re a prince, for God’s sake. We don’t drink from bags. That’s beneath us,” she scolds.

“Lourdes, David’s a smart man. He knows what he’s doing. He looks great and is living well, so let him be.”

Oh, she does not like that and the look she gives David’s father clearly says ‘*butt out.*’

Aurelio rises. “Time to hunt, we’ll be back by sunrise, son.”

Once their presence is no longer felt, I can breathe again.

“I’m so sorry, Jess. I swear, they’ve never done this before,” David apologizes.

“Promise me you’ll never, ever leave me alone with her,” I plead. “I know she’s your mother, but she’s fucking scary.”

“You have no idea just how scary she can be but I promise, you’ll not be left alone with her.” He presses his lips to mine. His lips normally calm me though right now, I am anything but.

The dogs stop dead in their tracks in front of the guest room when we walk past it, hackles raised as they growl their dislikes toward our house guests. We pass David in the kitchen on our way outside. “They didn’t react well as we passed the room your parents are staying in,” I told him. This further reiterates the need to keep them in our room while they are here.

David agrees. “Their reaction to my parents was the one I expected to receive the first time you brought them over.”

“What did your mother mean when she asked about your plans after college?” I ask once we are outside.

“Remember, Jess, I’m next in line which means I’ll have to return to Bulgaria at some point. But this is nothing for us to worry about now.” He presses his lips to my furrowed brows.

“And when she asked about the choices you’ll have to make?” Her questions worried me that David will leave me behind.

This is harder for him to answer. “There are many choices for us to make if we decide to stay together; well, if you decide to stay with me. You already know I’m in it until the end.”

Like a tidal wave, our previous conversation comes flooding back. He would have to turn me after my twenty-first birthday, and we won’t be able to have children. The family legacy would end.

Is that a burden I want to bear? To be the cause of a centuries-old hierarchy ending?

“David, are you sure you want to be with me? I mean, it’s not like you’re giving up family holidays. You’d be giving up an entire legacy. There’s no way in hell your mother will let that happen.” My heart pounds an angry beat. I can’t get Lourdes’ angry eyes out of my skull.

“I’ll live until the world ends. What matters most is that we ride it out together. I cannot make the choice for you nor will I try, but you would be giving up far more than me. You’d lose your humanity.”

Not something you hear in every day conversation and putting it into blunt perspective as he just did is a hard dose of

reality. Sure, the choice is mine and mine alone and not one I'm anywhere near prepared to make now.

“Come,” he wraps his arms around my waist. “It’s almost sunrise, Amor. Time for bed.”

Lying in his arms is the only place I want to be right now.

A little game of cat and mouse would be a nice end to such a stressful day so being the bad kitty that I am, I tease, “Shower with me?”

“Race you upstairs,” echoes back as he is up the stairs and in our room before I even reach the foyer. By the time I get up there he is already in the shower. Washed, dried, and yawning, I thought for sure I'd fall right to sleep. That isn't an option as a pair of familiar evil eyes haunt me.

The next afternoon, I wake before David. Leaving our room and running into his parents keeps me in bed longer. We never heard them come back last night, so the dogs are calm for the time being even though I'm not.

“Good morning, Jess,” David rolls over. “What are you doing?”

“Lying here thinking of ways to avoid your parents. Will you go downstairs and get the dogs’ leashes so we can take them out?” Even to my own ears I sound like a wuss but it isn’t like I’m avoiding a snake, this is a supernatural human being I have to avoid. Huge difference.

He puts on a pair of lounge pants and runs downstairs, returning seconds later. “My parents aren’t up yet, but I’d still feel better with the dogs leashed just in case.”

With the four-legged duo secured, we speed past their room then down and outside. Fear of his mother tearing my dogs apart conjures a horrific image. That woman radiates evil and she would have no qualms destroying my beloved pets.

It’s Christmas Eve, and I’ve resigned myself to the fact that it isn’t going to be the intimate celebration I’d hoped for. Initially it was only the two of us, so we didn’t bother putting up a tree or decorations. Having uninvited, ill-tempered guests takes the merriment from the holiday, which is a bummer. I was looking forward to our first Christmas together.

By the time we dress and go back downstairs, his parents are up. His mother’s arctic gaze is on me before we round the corner. In order to avoid conflict I divert my gaze and greet Aurelio first. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Aurelio smiles.

However, the ice queen gives me a negative once over and utters, “Morning.”

Both acknowledge David with a boisterous, “*Buenos dias*,” and a hug.

Wow, from one family outcast to another. Will I ever get a break? Forever the unpopular kid no matter what table I sit at. The only difference this time is his family could drain me drop by bloody drop.

I pour myself a bowl of cereal and figure it is probably best that I stand at the counter and eat. His parents invite him to go hunting again, but he once again declines. That sets his mother off on a malevolent tirade.

“Son, you cannot live like this. We didn’t raise you to eat cold food!” She grabs a bag from the fridge and slams it on the table. The legs protest, the bag bursts and and shoots blood in all directions. The kitchen is a straight up horror scene.

Calmly Aurelio speaks, though it falls on deaf ears. “Lourdes, the boy is fine, leave him alone.”

Lourdes ignores him. “Humans do not belong in our world. This is a prime example as to why,” she growls at me.

David clenches his jaw and snaps, “Her name is Jessica and it’s a choice I made for me as well as out of respect for her. She’s never asked me not to hunt, nor would she. We have minds of our own and freewill to make our own decisions.”

“Lourdes, come, let’s hunt. You’ll feel better when you’ve had your fill,” Aurelio says, forever the peacemaker.

She stares me down. My stomach lurches and I nearly vomit. Between nerves and the horrific blood scene, I’m teetering on the edge. Suddenly Lourdes storms from the kitchen and out the front door with David’s father following behind.

“I can’t take this anymore. I’m going to a hotel until they leave. She obviously doesn’t like me and it’s really pissing her off that I’m around,” I inform him as I pour the bowl of uneaten cereal down the drain.

“Absolutely not. She’s the one who needs to leave, not you. This is your home and I won’t allow her to treat you this way. She’d never tolerate anyone acting like this in her house.” He runs his fingers through his hair, tugging on the ends. I’ve never seen him this frustrated.

“Have you lost your damn mind? Human versus vampire. How well do you think that will end?” I point out, not sure why he hadn’t envisioned this obvious scenario. It’s going down between Lourdes and me and I won’t be the victorious one.

“She likes very few people,” he says as though that helps.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Seriously. It’s like someone opened a bag of stupid in here. Together we clean the kitchen though I have to stop many times to keep from hurling. I’m surprised that it hasn’t stained the walls.

“Come, Amor, don’t let her ruin our first Christmas together.” He places his hand in mine and leads me to the couch.

We exchange presents while his parents hunt. He loves the shirts and the gifts I got him. David hands me two beautifully wrapped boxes. I do my best to not destroy the wrapping as I open them. Not sure why, it’s not like I scrapbook or anything.

The smaller of the two holds an exquisite emerald and diamond tennis bracelet. It’s hard to contain the rush of emotions that barrel through me. It’s gorgeous and the fact he remembered it’s my birthstone makes it more special. I take my time opening the second one which makes him nuts.

“Just rip the damn paper, Jess,” David complains.

I choose to ignore his outburst and continue. Much to my surprise he’s bought me a purse, a Coach purse. I never would have spent that much money on myself.

#Foreverfrugal

Ugh, he spent more on me than I did him. I try not to let that bother me, I know that’s not what the holiday is about. He’s so pleased with himself and my reactions to the gifts that it forces that chip off my shoulder. I scoot over and slide onto his lap. “Thank you so much. I love everything, and most of all, I love you.” There, I finally said it. He knows I love him, I know I love him but my stupid pride and fear of getting hurt has held back those simple words.

“I love you, too, Amor.” He removes the bracelet from the box and clasps it on my wrist.

It’s breathtaking. I feel inferior and undeserving of such lavish gifts. What did I do to win this man over?

After we clean up our mess and let the dogs roam around for a bit, we give Dash and Vi their silly gifts and laugh as they tear them apart like little kids. Paper flies in all directions.

I'm beginning to believe David was right—we are soulmates. Everything about us meshes from our thoughts, to our desire to be home rather than out, and our love for the dogs. The way our bodies fit like intricate puzzle pieces is perfect tie in.

Around four-thirty the dogs bolt toward the front door, growling and scratching at it. “Shit,” David says. “My parents are here.”

“I figured as much.” That's my cue to disappear. “I'm taking the dogs upstairs.”

“Thanks, Jess, I'd like to have a few words with my parents—alone.” There's no way that conversation won't make things worse for me. Why won't he let me leave? It would only be while they're here then he could enjoy his time with them rather than turning it into the fight I fully anticipate is brewing.

I stand behind the door to our room with it slightly cracked and eavesdrop. “Mother, I'd like a word with you,” David says, his voice leaving no room for argument.

“Yes, David,” Lourdes replies, far too sweetly. She knows what's coming and how to play her son.

“This is our home, mine and Jess's. You've treated her with disrespect and I do not appreciate that. You'd not stand for that

in your home so how could you expect I would in ours?”

“You’re ruining your life. You’re a prince and yet you choose to live the life of a peasant,” Lourdes snarls.

David’s voice escalates. “Well, Mother, this isn’t your life and this isn’t your choice.”

“Why would you jeopardize everything for this puny, insignificant human?” Jesus, who says shit like that? It’s like she’s plotting to take over the world. Why wouldn’t you be happy that your son was in love? Guess I don’t have the only problematic, unmotherly mother.

“Mother, you just crossed a line and it’s time for you to leave. You won’t be welcomed back until you can learn to treat Jess with the respect she deserves. In her own home.” And there it is, my death sentence, and David just verbally signed it. Am I proud he stood up for me—yes, though it seems he’s forgotten the strength of the army he’s put us at war against.

As quietly as I can, I closed the door. Before I can step away, the guest room door slams. Moments later the sound of a door being ripped from its hinges has the dogs and I running for cover in the depths of our walk-in closet. Not that we are

truly safe there, it's not a panic room, but it's the closest thing to it my brain could conjure in a moment of need.

“This is not over, not by far, son!” she yells before the front door slams so hard the house shakes.

“Jess, where are you?” David says, though he figures it out before I can reply. “They're gone and they won't be back.”

I run straight for his arms. “Are you okay?”

He nuzzles the top of my head. “I will be, but I must warn you my mother has quite the temper.”

I could've gone a lifetime without hearing those words.

David tightens his arms around me. “Nothing will happen to you, Amor, I will always be there to protect you.”

“Are you sure I'm the one for you, David?” I so desperately want him to say yes without hesitation though I know I should leave. Is it selfish of me to follow my heart and not my head? To not play the part the movies so often portrayed women in these circumstances in? Oh, my darling, I left so you could lead your life the way you were meant to—without me. It would crush me to play that role and though it may be the right one for David, it's the wrong one for me.

“I love you, Jess. Being with you is the right choice—the only choice for me.” He kisses me deeply, so passionately that all else melts away and I turn to putty in his arms.

Chapter Twelve

Jess



Over the next couple months, I remain apprehensive and always on alert. Fear of the unknown is real and partying inside me. Our relationship thrives, school goes great, and we've slid into a comfort I've yearned for my entire life. Living with someone who wants me there, no longer walking on eggshells or avoiding them and conflict. Initially, I feared we'd have nothing in common and co-habiting would bring a quick end to it all, but that hasn't been the case.

My favorite time of year is here, spring, and all is well until the Ides of March are upon us. Reciting Shakespeare in your head? I know I am and hope like hell it doesn't end with an, et tu, Lourdes?

David and I are chilling out, binging another series when the dogs shoot up and to the door. How they knew someone is there when they can't hear was uncanny to me, but they sense a presence they are not thrilled with. David's demeanor taking an abrupt turn furthers my apprehension at our unannounced visitor.

“There's another vampire here.”

Then, the doorbell rings.

As David opens the front door, he gives Dash and Vi the hand signal to ‘stay.’

“Tristan, how the hell are you?” he greets the person there. “Babe, come here. I want you to meet someone.”

I walk over to meet yet another vampire, wondering if my presence will in turn irritate them as it had Lourdes. I come to an abrupt stop mid-way through the foyer when I lay eyes on this Tristan that David knows. Before me stands the most unbelievably drop-dead gorgeous creature I've ever seen.

Dressed in a form-fitting black black slacks, his muscular thighs fill out all the right places. Of course, the top three buttons of his white button-up dress shirt are undone. The outline of his perfectly defined abs are clear as day through the

thin material. Tristan stands at the same height as David, blond hair falling just below his shoulder blades. The waves of flaxen locks entrance me. The feeling of lying on a warm beach, sand between my toes, waves breaking in the background plays through my mind. His arctic blue irises are captivating, lips a shade of ripe Georgia peaches. Gods, this man is a work of art. Are all vampires this enticing?

Jess, snap out of it! David's voice internally scolds me.

"Tristan, come in," David says and then introduces us. "Jess, this is my best friend, Tristan. Tristan, this is my girlfriend, Jess."

Tristan smiles, takes my hand and presses his lips to the back of it.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Jess," Tristan says.

#Player

"Nice to meet you," I squeak. Jesus, could this get any more embarrassing?

David's eyes widen, though he quickly schools it. "Well, Tristan, I see you've fine-tuned your gift. Too bad you're using it on my girlfriend."

Great, now they're both laughing at me. My cheeks redden and my ears are on fire. Politely, I excuse myself and run to the bathroom to splash cold water on my face.

Get it together, Jess.

I don't want to bother them while they get caught up so I take the dogs outside to enjoy the fresh air. This time of year is perfect in AZ, the evenings have a slight nip to them, but I just curl up on a lounge chair and watch Dash and Vi play. Not a cloud in the sky, the stars shine brightly and I test my knowledge of astronomy by calling each cluster out. What a gorgeous night.

Not too long after, David comes out and takes a seat in the lounge chair beside me. He grins and I know he's missed his friend. "It's great to see Tristan again. It's probably been two, maybe three years since we last saw each other. I think we were near the end of training." He reaches over and entwines our fingers.

I glance skyward. "Isn't it a remarkable night, David?"

"The night pales in comparison to you, mi Amor." He draws my hand to his lips, kissing the top.

“Beautiful, but cheesy, Mr. Cordova.” Though inside I’m all hearts and butterflies.

Our romantic interlude is short lived as Tristan emerges. “Sorry to interrupt you two love birds, but where would one find the guest room?”

Scratch, goes the proverbial record.

“Um, babe, Tristan is going to stay with us while he’s in town. I hope that’s okay?” he pseudo asks slash says right in front of the man in question.

#Awkward

When did my life become an unending series of hashtags...

Being the smart ass that I am, I feign exhaustion and roll my eyes. “Great, another mouth to feed.” David winks and kisses me then leads Tristan to the guest room.

The dogs are ready for bed so we go inside. When we get to our room, David is waiting.

“I hope you’re not mad that I offered the guest room to Tristan?” he asks me.

“I have no right to be mad, it’s your house.” I’m not mad and I hope it didn’t come out that way but given our last visitor’s reaction to me, I would’ve appreciated being asked.

“It’s our house, Jess.” All it takes was rolling my eyes and he pins me to the bed. Arms and legs spread, hands above my head with David straddling my torso. “Time to shower,” he teases and then hops off and undresses.

“Gee, I don’t feel dirty,” I tease and am immediately whisked off over his shoulder to our bathroom. Hastily, he removes my clothes and nearly ruins them in the process.

I’m held captive by the whirlwind of emotions David stirs within me. His body is sheer perfection, as though Donatello himself sculpted him. Tracing every ab with my fingertips, I watch as they glide along every indent. My touch arouses him as his cock springs to life. I never imagined I could feel this liberated, this uninhibited with anyone.

With tender strokes, he teases between my thighs while teasing my nipples into rigid peaks. I bite my lip to contain a squeal, but do so little too hard and draw blood. David’s eyes dart up, his facial demeanor darkening though he quickly schools it. He grabs my hands and pins them above. The cold tile of the shower wall startles me, though only momentarily.

David spreads my legs and thrusts himself inside. I'm spellbound by this animalistic side of him. The raw hunger of his barbaric penetration ignites senses I've yet to uncover. Until now.

I vibrate from head to toe as the orgasm builds. My legs wrap around his waist as he pounds into me with wreckless abandon. The beast has been unleashed and there is no turning back now.

“Nothing feels better than being inside you. Fucking you. Filling you with my come. Marking you,” he growls.

His words release the last of my resolve as I careen over the edge as my climax hits me full force. “David!” I scream, without a care who hears me.

David growls, fucking me so hard it shakes the glass of the shower enclosure. “Fuck!” His warm come fills me as I bask in the glow of truly being owned by this man.

David dries me off and carries me to the bed where I fall right into a deep, dreamless sleep. Hours later, an empty stomach wakes me. We throw on some clothes and go downstairs to the kitchen.

“We’ll have to move the dogs back to our room while Tristan is here,” David says, shooting me a non-verbal I’m sorry.

“It’s no big deal. But do you have any idea how long he’ll be here?” I ask.

“Now that you mention it, I forgot to ask him.”

“Good morning, love birds. Humans don’t build houses like they used to, do they? Were you aware that your walls are paper thin?” Tristan says, smirking as he enters the kitchen. I stared into my cup of coffee like it’s the most interesting thing I’ve ever seen.

Luckily, Tristan changes the subject. “Do you want to go hunting tonight?”

“Sorry, man, we have school,” David replies.

Tristan shrugs. “Maybe next time.”

David mumbles, “Maybe.”

He doesn’t look my way when he says it. I’ve never told David he can’t hunt, that is something he chose not to do. I’d like to believe it wouldn’t bother me, but I’m afraid it would.

There are some things I'd rather not know. Less is best, then I'm not an accessory for any crimes.

Recalling David's rendition of what hunting consisted of mortifies me, but maybe hunting those who are soulless and pose a threat to society really isn't such a bad thing. In theory at least. I'm not happy with the idea that my boyfriend is a murderer, but by the same token removing a predator from the streets is good. But what if his "soulless intuition" so to speak is wrong? Would he feel remorse?

"How long are you in town for?" David asks Tristan.

"I have no plans. Figured I would hang out for a while and see what delightful delicacies Arizona has to offer."

Gorgeous as Tristan may be, something about him isn't right. He hasn't been here long enough for me to figure out why I feel this way, but I'm sure I'll find out what it is soon enough.

"Jess, you're a quiet one," Tristan said.

"Nah, not really. I don't want to interrupt you guys catching up." I excuse myself to head upstairs and get ready for school.

David comes up shortly after. “I gave Tristan a key so he can let himself in when he gets back from hunting.” Why do I fear for the women of Arizona? The longer I’m around him the more uncomfortable I become. Not wanting to hurt David means I have to keep those feelings locked down.

I totally zone out during the drive to school, unable to decipher what my gut is telling me about Tristan. Though not speaking clues David in that something is wrong.

“Are you mad that Tristan is staying with us?”

“No, but I’m less than thrilled that you gave him a key. Which I know is stupid, he could just break down the door if he wanted to.” As soon as I say it, I wish I could take it back.

“If you are bothered by this I’ll ask him to leave,” he says, though his jaw is set and he clearly isn’t happy about that.

I shake my head. “No, I think it’s great you have a friend in town and I really don’t want to get a bad rap in your world for shooping anyone away.” I pause and try to put my thoughts into words. “Do you, um, plan to go hunting while he’s here?”

He keeps his eyes on the road. “Not if it’s going to bother you.”

This is part of who he is and it isn't fair for me pass judgment, though I still can't shake the murdering part of hunting. "It's not fair for me to ask that of you, but I'd appreciate it if you made certain your dinner—" I finger quote, "—was beyond redemption before, well, you know."

He finds humor in that statement. "I'll do my best to find such a monster for you."

My thoughts are on anything but class tonight. How is it that Tristan knew not only that David was in Arizona, but where he lived? David told me it's been a couple years since they saw each other so this isn't adding up. Did they text? Was there some sort of undead bulletin that went out? The more I linger on Tristan, the longer the list of questions surrounding him gets.

"Jess, you weren't paying attention in class. Are you feeling all right?" David asks during the ride home.

"I'm all right, just not feeling a hundred percent." Which isn't a lie. I need to pull my head out of my ass and quit dwelling on shit I not only can't, but don't want to control. Tristan just got here and I'm judging him without giving him a fair trial. Maybe he isn't so bad? David trusts him and says he's his best friend so there has to be good in him somewhere. Right?

“When you last saw Tristan, do you remember where you were?” I ask.

“It was at our graduation in Varna. Why?”

“No reason, just wondered.” When he says nothing else, I let it drop.

Tristan isn't home when we get there. We get changed and grab a snack. As I take my plate, David sneaks up behind me and slides his arms around my waist. “I love you, Jess,”

I lay my head back against his chest. “I love you, too.”

“Want to watch a movie?” he asks.

“Sure.”

We're locking up, getting ready for bed when the dogs start growling. “Tristan's home,” David says, though I've already figured that out for myself.

Tristan walks into the living room, looking like he's just come off the runway and flashes me a cocky grin. David is oblivious to the whole scene, thankfully.

“So, how was your night?” David asks.

“It was pretty decent. Have you heard of a place called The Hollow?” Tristan asks.

David cringes, uncomfortable with his question. “Yes.” Evidently this isn’t a place David cares for.

“I’ve reached my limit, so I’m going to call it a night. Goodnight, love birds,” Tristan says and winks at me over his shoulder as he walks off. I glance over at David to see if he saw that, but he’s facing the TV.

As soon as I hear his bedroom door shut, I launch my inquiry. “What’s The Hollow?”

“A vampire club in downtown Phoenix. It’s in one of the new loft complexes,” he replies, though I didn’t miss the contempt in his voice.

“Wow, are there really that many vampires out there? So many that they need a gathering place?” It’s like I’ve lived under a rock all these years. What other supernatural creature walks among us?

“Jess, vampires are everywhere. You’ve probably seen more than you know.” He kisses my forehead. “Ready for bed?”

“Sure.” I guess Q&A time is over.

The next few days are drama free. We rarely see Tristan, which is fine by me. David is bummed they aren’t hanging out more. When Friday night rolls around, David decides it’s a good time to go to the mall. With his birthday near, a shopping trip will be a great way to get some ideas.

We hit a couple of stores and then stop at the food court so I can eat. People watching at the mall is quite the experience. If I were a writer, I’d have nonstop inspiration here. My eyes land on a familiar figure. Taking a second look, I realize it’s Tristan, surrounded by a gaggle of gawking females. I tap David’s shoulder and nod toward him. “Is that Tristan?”

He turns. “Yes, and in his element I see. Tristan has a way with the ladies. It’s his gift.”

This is the one time I’m glad I don’t have any girlfriends for him to meet.

Tristan glances up from his entourage and catches our gazes. His facial expression is one of great amusement as he excuses himself and makes his way to our table.

“What brings you two to the mall this fine evening?” he asks, all smiles.

“We could ask the same of you,” David says and Tristan laughs. “I see you’ve found your way around town without any problems.”

“I have built in GPS, my friend,” Tristan taps his head. “Ah, Victoria’s Secret,” he points to the bag beside me. “Someone treats their body well.” The callous son-of-a-bitch winks at me, again, right in front of David.

I thought David busted him this time for sure, but he shrugs it off. “We needed a few things. Do you have plans tonight?” David asks him.

Tristan sighs as though we bore him. “I’m thinking of heading to The Hollow. You two want to tag along or is it past your bedtime?”

David’s mood darkens. “We will not be going to The Hollow. Not now. Not ever. That isn’t a place for Jess.”

Well hey, what if Jess wants to go? Not that I want to, but I don’t appreciate someone else answering for me. I glare at David in my what the fuck way.

“I just don’t think Jess would be comfortable there and I don’t want to take her anywhere she won’t like, or anywhere that could be detrimental to her health.” He flashes me an apologetic look though the glare he gives Tristan is cringe-worthy.

“Okay, old folks, I’m out of here.” And just like that, Tristan disappears.

“I’m sorry, Jess,” David apologizes. “It’s a sleazy place and a lot of shit goes down there that you shouldn’t be exposed to. If you were a vampire, it would be different.” I let it go. He knows how I feel about anyone assuming what’s best for me. No use in beating that dead horse or starting an argument after he’s already said sorry.

David runs the packages upstairs while I take the dogs outside. A few minutes later, Tristan walks in.

“I thought instead of going out, we could hunt?” I hear him ask David, though I don’t hear David’s response, but he must have said no. “Come on, man, you can’t live off of bottled human forever.”

“Actually, I can,” David says very matter-of-factly.

“Come on. It’ll be like old times.”

David comes into the kitchen. “Jess, would you mind if Tristan and I went hunting?” I scrunch up my nose. “I know it isn’t something you like, which is why I try not to do it. But it would be fun to hang with Tristan for awhile.”

I nod and he kisses me and hollers over his shoulder as he leaves, “I’ll be back by four and will provide you with a proper thank you.”

I grab the latest romance novel I’ve been reading and curl up on the couch. Three chapters in I doze off. Not sure how long I nap for but I wake when I hear them come in. I lie there and wait for David to find me.

Next thing I know I’m up in the air, over his shoulder, being whisked away while Tristan heckles him in the background, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

David looks radiant. He has color in his cheeks and a glow I’ve never seen to him. The glimmer in his eyes spell trouble for me, but in an oh so good way. Energized, like a tiger on the prowl, and I’m his prey. I enjoy every moment of his torturous foreplay, prancing about while I play the helpless damsel in distress.

This is like an out-of-body experience. Our love making has always been off the charts, but this is beyond anything I could

comprehend. This animalistic side the hunt brought out in him is crazy. Sex with David drains my energy and I'm out like a light each time.

Ravenous hunger is how I always wake afterward, but when I slide a hand over David's side, the sheets were cold. I run downstairs and find him playing chef, preparing breakfast for me.

"Someone has a lot of energy this morning," I slide my arms around his waist.

He throws his head back and laughs heartily. "Thought you might be hungry this morning." He spins around, cups my face in his hands and kisses me. Breathless. That's how his lips always leave me.

Right as I sit down, Tristan walks in with a smirk on his face. "Someone had a great time last night."

I keep my head down and shovel my food in though Tristan's stare bores into me as he takes the seat across from me. Every time I look up, he turn away. I keep a watchful gaze on him out of the corner of my eye, noting the numerous times he peers over at me. I want to yell, "What the hell are you staring at?" but not wanting to spoil David's good mood keeps me from doing so.

Tristan leaves the house less and less as time wears on. He isn't hunting, instead he depletes the blood supply David keeps. What is more unnerving is every time I turn around, he is right there trying to help me with whatever I'm doing and even offers to cook for me. David is completely unphased by this, but I'm not—not by a long shot. Something is up and I'm bound and determined to find out what it is. My dislike for him grows and all this negativity causes migraines and forces me into near bed-ridden seclusion.

Chapter Thirteen

Jess



Today is David's nineteenth birthday. I wake before him to initiate my surprise attack. Snuggling in behind him, I whisper, "Happy birthday, David. I love you."

After he opens his gifts, we go downstairs to study. What a domestic scene we've become. A few nights later, David says he has some errands to run. I figure since he didn't invite me, he's meeting up with his food supplier. While I'm making something to eat, a breath of air ghosts along my spine. I spin around, assuming it's David and that he'd forgotten something, but Tristan is there. He scares the shit out of me and I squeal.

That amuses him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you," he says, looking like a creepy stalker.

“I didn’t think you were home.”

Tristan steps back and says, “I was in my room,” then proceeds to take a seat at the table. I turn my back to him, and try to ignore his presence, but feel his eyes on me the entire time.

Finally, I lose it. “What are you staring at?”

Unmoved by my outburst, he leans forward and rests his head on his hands. “I’m hypnotized by your beauty.”

“What’s wrong with you? You don’t say shit like that to your friend’s girlfriend.” He has some nerve.

He comes toward me. “Do you need any assistance?”

Is he seriously flirting with me? In our house? That doesn’t make him much of a friend, let alone a best friend.

“No thanks,” is the nicest response I have before I grab my food and go back upstairs. Studying for finals in the sanctity of our room seems the best course of action. Though by the time I get there my head throbs so bad I nearly pass out.

My ability to concentrate falters knowing Tristan is nearby. Why is he doing this? Does he seriously think he'll get anywhere with me? Should I tell David? The questions keep coming and I have no answers. David probably wouldn't believe me if I told him, or he would blow it off and tell me that's how Tristan is and he doesn't mean anything by it. This would only end in an argument with David, which is the last thing I want.

Things with Tristan continue down this path for a few weeks and I fear he will never leave. Tristan's advances increase, and my nerves are on edge. The stress increases the frequency and strength of the migraines. I've become quite the recluse, living like a hermit exiled to our darkened room, which doesn't slip by David.

"Why are you spending so much time locked away in our room?" he asks one night.

"I'm studying for finals." Speaking, moving, nearly everything I do leaves me writhing in pain. But that answer must be good enough because he says no more.

Finals come and we both do well. With classes done until fall, I hope the summer heat will bring Tristan's visit to an end, but it doesn't. I have to find a way to tell David he's overstayed his welcome, but he enjoys having his friend around so much that it makes it difficult for me to say the

words. The problem now with school being over is I have no excuse for staying in our room. The more I am around Tristan, the more stamina the headaches gain and confine me to bed.

With everything going on I forget about my birthday. David wakes me and gives me his gift, beaming from ear to ear. “Happy nineteenth birthday, Jess.”

I open the small box and my mouth falls open. Inside is a diamond and emerald necklace set in white gold that matches the bracelet he gave me last Christmas. “Oh my god, David. It’s beautiful. Thank you. I love it and I love you.” Then it hits me—allure. David mentioned it to me the first night of class. Why hadn’t I thought of this before?

“Is there a way for humans to ward off a vampire’s allure?” I blurt out.

“That’s a random question at an odd time,” he eyes me curiously. “But to answer your question, not that I’m aware of, at least I haven’t heard of anyone being able to. We’re taught to control it for good reason, but if I’m not paying attention, then I don’t know it needs controlled. That day in class when you pointed out the girls were staring at me, I was able to nix it and they turned away. Is there something going on, Jess?”

“Ah, um, no. I was just wondering.” Fucking hell, I just lied right to his face. I either need to tell David what’s going on or find a way to set Tristan up so he gets himself busted.

Another week has passed and today is our one-year anniversary. I wake that evening to the tender touch of David’s lips to mine. “Happy anniversary, Jess, I love you,” he says as he hands me a box.

I reach into the nightstand and pull his gift out. “Happy anniversary, David. I love you, too.”

“Ladies first,” he gestures toward my gift.

Someone had all the gift giving holidays preplanned for me. The diamond and emerald ring inside completes the set he’s been gifting me pieces of since Christmas. I wonder what the meaning behind this ring is, though. David slides it on my right index finger and leans in to wipe away the tears. “I’m glad you like it, *Amor*. It’s a promise to be with you forever.”

Through bleary eyes, I watch the child in him tear through his package and I laugh. He quickly schools the shocked look on his face which I hope is a good thing. He takes the white gold men’s Figaro bracelet from the box and holds it up. “I love it, Jess,” he says and then puts it on.

We embrace one another, kissing and hugging. David's arms are the ones I never want to be without. But later that night, Tristan's flirting takes a dangerous turn.

I'm in the laundry room removing the clothes from the dryer. As I'm folding them I feel someone walk up behind me, which of course I thought was David. "Hold on while I start the next load."

The response I get isn't from David.

"I'll be waiting," Tristan says.

The headache coming on should've been my first warning it wasn't David. I debate whether to scream, but in the end, I once again ignore him and continue with what I'm doing. Unfortunately, that doesn't deter him. Infuriated, I try to push past him but he stands there and blocks the doorway, trapping me. There is no freaking way I can move him.

He reaches out, his fingertips tracing along my jawline. "Give into your temptations, Jess, you know you want me."

Shocked, I stare in disbelief as my right temple painfully throbs. "What the fuck does that mean?"

“You know you have feelings for me, give in and quit fighting them. Only then will the pain go away.”

He knows of the pain. He knows what he's doing.

Have I accidentally flirted with him and not realized it? No, because I would've remembered that. Have I done anything to lead him on? The pain is so intense I nearly drop to my knees when I hear my savior David in the kitchen. Tristan blows me a kiss and disappears. I escape the laundry room and run straight into David's arms.

As upset as I am, there is no way to play it off.

“Are you all right, Jess?” David asks.

I'm in no mood to hash this out. “My head's throbbing.” Which isn't a lie. I need to get that under control before I address any of this with him.

Gently, he presses his lips to my forehead. “Do you want me to make you some soup?”

I shake my head, grab a soda from the fridge and sit down while he gets himself a drink. David is concerned, but smiles at me. I love that smile and thinking about Tristan's bullshit and how it would hurt David really pisses me off. I consider

removing the curtains from Tristan's bedroom window so his shallow ass would fry in the sunlight but that would upset David and I'd likely be tried for his murder. Trapped between the man I love and his so called best friend is not a fun place to be. Do I really want to be the cause of either relationship having failed?

A couple nights later, David gets up to take the dogs out. I'm curled up on the couch reading. He's only been gone for a few minutes when I'm once again met with an uneasy feeling, one that says someone was behind me.

I reach back and wrap my arm around him. "See, you know you wanna fuck me."

Fucking Tristan!

My head pounds and panic shoots through me. I jump up only to find myself face to face with Tristan. Not an ideal position to be in. Before he can advance on me, the back door opens and Tristan flees. This war is far from over.

Later that same night, I'm cleaning the kitchen when a pair of hands grip my waist and twirls me around. Just as I lift my arms to wrap them around his neck I realize it isn't David. I try to break free, and beat my fists against his chest which is useless. Not only due to his strength, but the searing pain in

my head is crippling. The more I fight the worse it gets. Abruptly a door upstairs shuts and Tristan shoots over to the table and takes a seat, appearing innocent.

I slide to the floor doubled over in pain, tears streaming down my face. David runs over and drops to the floor beside me. “What’s wrong?”

The nerves take over and I scream, holding my head. “My fucking head is killing me!”

He takes the medicine bottle from the cabinet, hands me two pills and a glass of water. “Jess, these headaches are really concerning me. I think we need to take you to the doctor.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, then go upstairs to lie down, though I’m too wound up to sleep. My head pounds as I pace the room wondering how to make this stop. With every pace, the pain worsens. The more I’m around Tristan the worse it is.

Deep breath, Jess, that’s it. In and out. Free your mind of all thoughts.

I practice that mantra until I calm and then try to nap only to be awoken by the angry sound of nearby voices.

David is in our bedroom screaming at Tristan. From what I gather, David came in to find Tristan hovering over me. David stands at the foot of our bed and Tristan is next to me. I leap to the other side of the bed to get away from him.

David shouts, “What in the hell are you doing our room?!”

Tristan stands there looking guilty as fuck and says nothing. David growls as his features distort. Fangs bared, his eyes turn black as night. This is the first time I’ve seen him transform and it scares me to death. In an instant, he hurls Tristan across the room, through the wall and into the hallway. I never see David move, but there he is in the hallway with his foot pressing on Tristan’s throat.

“I asked you a question. What in the *fuck* are you doing in our room and if you value your life, you won’t fucking lie to me,” David growls. The look on Tristan’s face is grave. He never had a chance. David is clearly the stronger, faster of the two. Tristan tries to get up, but to no avail. Finally, he breaks down.

“She made me do it.”

“Who is she?” David demands, refusing to release Tristan.

“Your mother.”

“What?” David freezes.

“She sent me to break you two up. She threatened to remove my parents from the council and said she would personally kill me if I didn’t succeed,” Tristan admits. By the defeated look on his face, I believe him.

David gathers himself and releases Tristan. “You’ll leave this house and never return.”

Tristan begs, “Please, I can help you. If I fail she’ll send rogues to kill *her*.” Tristan points at me.

“Release your hold on her now,” David demands.

“The allure I used was bound with a spell. It will take time before she’s free from it. This has been the cause of her headaches.” Tristan’s shoulders drop as his head falls.

Spell did he say? Were witches involved in this as well?

Again, Tristan pleads, “Please, David, let me stay. I swear, I can help you fight the rogues. I promise, no more tricks, but I can’t risk your mother finding out I’ve failed. She’ll kill me.”

“Was my father aware of this?” David asks.

“Honestly, I don’t know. She made me swear not to tell a soul. Your mother has changed, she’s become reckless and the other council members fear her. The only ones she sees eye to eye with are Amelia’s family,” Tristan explains.

“Who’s Amelia?” I ask.

They seemed to have forgotten I was in the room as they both pivot in my direction. David casts Tristan a look of contempt and growls, Tristan cowers.

“Amelia was the vampiress my parents betrothed me to. It was an arranged marriage from birth and when I refused, it angered my mother, more so than I thought. Since then, she’s become bitter and enraged. It appears she’s taking her anger out on the council members. My mother’s family has held the controlling seat on there for centuries,” David explains.

“She’s grown strong and her sadistic hunting methods have threatened our community. She hunts with no regard for souls nor lives, no one is spared, not even children. No vampires have come forth with any evidence to substantiate these claims so she has remained untouchable, but feared by all. One particular hunt she was said to have orchestrated was in Virtron, Belgium. Her clan wiped out the entire village—children included. Their deaths were brutal mutilations. Many had their throats severed with deep gashes caused by fangs.

The villagers had no warning. This attack was devised by a vampire with no fear of retribution or regard for human life. Others were involved, but somehow no one saw anything.”

The look on David’s face is indescribable. If he were capable of being any paler he would’ve just achieved it as he is ghostly white.

“If she masterminded this, then my mother as I know her is truly gone.” David pauses. “I was thinking of contacting my father, but maybe I better not. I don’t believe there’s any way he could be oblivious to this. Even though I hate the thought that he may be involved, the possibility is still there so it’s best to keep this between us until I can gather more intel.”

How will David ever be able to trust Tristan again? How could he do this to David? To us? He’s supposed to be his best friend. What’s more, how could Lourdes do this to her own son?

“David, I’m sorry and I’ll spend eternity ensuring this wrong is righted. But you have to understand the position she put me in. I honestly want to help you, both of you, and in time I hope to earn your trust back. Part of this mission is to provide her with updates, the next is due by sunrise.”

David ignores his request. “Which council members do you feel can be trusted?”

“Obviously no one in Amelia’s family, they’re still pissed you refused to marry her. The Cordova and Vasquez families are out, at least until we see where their allegiances lie. My parents may be able to help. They know what your mother forced me to do and aren’t pleased with any of this. I told them so they’d be aware that she’s gone rogue and cannot be trusted. Other than that, I think we’re on our own.” Tristan’s words do nothing to assuage the situation. This is dire no matter how you look at it.

Tristan assesses the damages their fight caused. “Tomorrow evening I’ll go to the home improvement store and get what’s needed to make the necessary repairs. I’ll do the work myself since this was my fault.”

David mutters a half-assed thanks. “Please leave so Jess and I can talk.” Tristan nods and disappears.

“Jess, I’m sorry for all of this. But you should have told me what was going on. I knew you weren’t thrilled about Tristan staying here and now, I understand why. Unfortunately, he’s our only hope for getting this resolved. My mother needs to believe that you fell for his charms or she won’t back off, at least not until you’re dead. And that’s not an option I’m willing to accept.”

I clench my fists and stand, albeit shakily. “I’m not in favor of this and I refuse to play along. David, this is fucking insane.”

“Jess, if we can’t pull this off then she’ll send rogue vampires to finish it, to finish you.” His words stop me cold. I knew something was up with that woman. Though the *rogue* part of this still isn’t registering with me.

“What is a rogue, exactly?”

“They’re soulless and will rip you to shreds without a second thought.” Well, if I didn’t understand it before, I sure as hell understand it now.

Tristan knocks, though I’m not sure why given the fact he can see inside.

“Come in,” David says without looking away from me.

Somberly, Tristan glances from David to me. “Jess, I apologize for the pain I’ve caused you. I see the love you two share and it runs deep, a love like that is hard to find and no one has the right to take it from you. Fate decides who we should be with and no one has the right to stand in its way. I should be so lucky to find a love like this in my lifetime.

David's mother sent me here to break you apart and if she doesn't believe I've succeeded she'll order your death and will include a large bounty for your head to be delivered to her."

"We have to try and pull this off. It causes me great pain to do so as I lose either way, but we've been left with no choice." The anguish caused by his mother's betrayal is written across his face. Seeing David in pain guts me.

I nodded. "So, what do we do now?"

"Tristan will contact my mother and tell her we got into an argument and you ran to him seeking comfort. In the interim, I'll get a hold of Tristan's parents and make arrangements to meet. It's difficult to lie to a vampire when you're face to face, at least for those of us with souls. I got an uneasy feeling from my mother when she was here which leads me to believe what Tristan said is true. As a friend, he should have confided in me," he glares at Tristan, "and for that callous act, he will not be forgiven. But if she's lost her soul then the mother I knew no longer exists."

"Where are Tristan's parents?" I ask.

"They are in Varna, Bulgaria at the castle where the elder council resides," Tristan replies.

“Wait—you’re going to Bulgaria and leaving me with this back-stabbing piece of shit?” I yell.

“Jess, I’ll not cross you or David again. I give you both my word. I’ll protect you with my life and do whatever it takes to ensure you’re kept safe,” Tristan promises.

“Your word means nothing to me. You’re a spineless, back-stabbing weasel and I’ll never trust you.” My fists clench at my sides. I’m angry enough to hit him, and I’m not a violent person.

Tristan nods and slinks from the room, closing the door behind him which serves no purpose.

Chapter Fourteen

Jess



David flies out to Bulgaria tonight. The plan he and Tristan devised has David arriving unannounced at the council headquarters in Varna, visibly upset, where he will proceed to tell his mother I left him for Tristan. While he's there, he'll poke around and see what he can dig up on Lourdes and her family's history. He's determined to find out how much the council members and his father knows as well. I'm not in favor of this, but it's obvious my opinion doesn't matter. Tristan and I will stay behind where David feels I will be safest.

Tristan offers to take David to the airport, but I insist on doing it. I know it could be some time before I see him again which depresses the hell out of me. His flight arrives in Shumen, Bulgaria at midnight where he's rented a car and will then drive to Varna.

David and I walk silently from the car to the security checkpoint. An onrush of tears hit me as we near the point of goodbye. No matter how I try, I can't shake the fact I may never see him again though he swears otherwise. At this point, anything could go wrong once he gets there.

"Amor," David whispers as he cups my face in his hands. "I don't like being apart any more than you do, but I have to find out what's going on. I'll contact you every chance I get, but if Tristan steps out of line, I promise you that will not bode well for him. He knows where I stand with you and there will be no redemption for him if anything happens to you. I trust he'll not make the same mistake twice as he's given his word. When I return, you and I will talk about our future. We've been together for over a year now and you know I love you more than life itself. It's my wish that upon my return we marry, but you know what would be required."

Through my tears I can manage only a nod as words escape me. Not the proposal I expected, but still a proposal nonetheless. He's put his life on the line to ensure mine doesn't end and that's not something I'll soon forget. Knowing he'll always be there makes all the difference in the world, and unless I agree to be changed, I can't make the same sacrifice for him. No matter how I look at this, I will lose some part of me.

With the pads of his thumbs, David wipes away my tears. “*Amor*, it’s time for me to go, but I swear I’ll return to as soon as I can. You’re my love, my life. My reason for living.” Deeply, he kisses me. Heartfelt and filled with promises I will never forget, as it may be our last.

“I love you, David,” I choke out through sobs.

“I’ll be back. Please think about what I’ve said. I love you, Jess.”

As I watch the love of my life walk away, hands clutched to my chest, I fall to my knees and bawl hysterically. Travelers walk past, some gawk while others ignore the felled woman. My heart breaks though no one cares.

At some point, I manage to pick myself up and return to the car. Once safely tucked inside, I lose it—full blown screams, cries, and curses. Cursing another mother who only loved herself and the lost child seeking a love they’d never receive. The nightmare that he may never return is now at the forefront of my thoughts. All I can do was silently pray to whatever deity there may be to return my love to me so we may embark upon our journey to forever.

“Do you want something to eat?” Tristan asks the moment I step inside.

Though his question may be sincere, I have no urge to eat nor deal with him. “No, I’m going to bed.” Somberly, he watches as I turn my back and walk away. Now he knows how it feels to be rejected. I’m sure that’s a new emotion for him. Still, I believe this to be his fault. Had he not shown up, none of this would have happened and I’d be tucked in David’s arms right now. But the reality of it is that Lourdes set her plan in motion the moment she met me and she’ll never rest until I’m six feet under.

I drop onto our bed and cry myself to sleep, not waking until the next afternoon. Haggard and spent, I snatch my phone from the nightstand in the hopes a message from David is there.

David: Landed in London, boarding next flight. I love you.

David: Landed in Shuman, picking up rental car. Wish me luck. I love you.

Both texts stir conflicting emotions within. I’m glad he arrived safely but now the mission begins.

I go to let the dogs out and run face first into Tristan’s chest as I turn into the kitchen.

He smiles. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” I mumble through a clenched jaw.

I make some toast, hoping it will help with the nausea, and take a seat at the table to force myself to eat. Tristan sits across from me, sucking down a human juice bag.

“Jess, I gave David my word to protect you and that’s a promise I intend to keep. I know you don’t want me here and I understand why, but I’m not going anywhere except to hunt. I’ll need to maintain my strength if the battle I fully expect to rage ensues. Though I must insist you not leave the house while I’m out.”

The look I give clearly says *fuck off*, and I continue to pick at my toast and ignore his feeble attempt at a truce. I’m so disgusted with him that I can’t stand being in the same house, let alone on the same planet with him.

Anger, hatred, and rage have consumed me and made it difficult to move past what’s transpired these last few weeks. Forgiveness and trust will have to be earned and it won’t come easily for Tristan, not by any means.

Fear of this particular paranormal entity is non-existent. My heart has been ripped from my chest and the desire to live is

slowly dwindling away. The only thing keeping it alive is the hope David will return to me.

David's given me a lot to think about. Knowing I want to spend the rest of my life with him is an easy choice, though I'm struggling with the act of ending my humanity for it. There's no comparison between that and the fact David's risking his life for mine, which makes my struggle come off as childish and petty. Am I shallow? Most girls wouldn't balk at the idea of spending their life with a gorgeous vampire or give up a chance for immortality. So how is this an issue for me?

I rinse off my dishes and go into the living room. Reading would be a good way to get my mind off this. I lie down on the couch, Dash and Vi curled up at my feet and start the next chapter. The empty feeling, alone and terrified without David, has made it difficult to concentrate. His presence soothes me more than anything and now he isn't here. I detest the fact that it's come to this.

I run up to our room to grab my phone, the dogs right behind me thinking it's a game of chase. Oh how I wish their silly antics made me feel better. I overhear Tristan's part of a phone conversation as I walk by his room. Eavesdropping seems to have become a hobby of mine, but in this case it's the best way to find out what he is up to. I stand outside his door, perfecting my ninja skills by remaining as still as humanly possible though he likely feels my presence.

“Things are going as planned. David stormed out and didn’t say where he was going,” Tristan tells the caller on the other end, likely Lourdes. Well at least he’s keeping to plan. “She’s just another foolish female who fell for my charms. The allure I used was powerful, although I didn’t need to cast it so strongly. It was like taking candy from a baby.” He pauses. “Yes, I’ll stay around and see if he returns. I’ll keep you posted.”

I figure that is the end of their conversation. As I turn to walk away, Tristan emerges. “I just updated Lourdes on the situation.”

“What exactly did you tell her?” Tristan repeats word for what what I overheard so at the very least, he isn’t lying. This time.

I say nothing and go into my room, leaving him in the hallway. Right as the door shuts, my phone rings. I sprint across the room and nearly fall as I trip over the dog beds.

“Hello?” I gasp for breath.

“Hello, *Amor*, why do you sound out of breath? Is everything okay?” David asks.

“Sorry, I left my phone upstairs and ran to get it. I’m fine but I miss you so much, I hate all of this.” I sound like such a whiney, spoiled brat. How selfish have I been?

“Oh, Jess, I miss you, too. Soon this will be over then we can live our lives the way we want to, not the way anyone else sees fit.” He tries his best to calm me, but my emotions are all over the place. I do my best to swallow back the tears, and fill him in on the conversation between Tristan and Lourdes.

“I know it wasn’t fair to leave you behind with him, but I believe he regrets his behavior. He’s been my best friend for as long as I can remember and was put in a terrible position by my mother. I feel obligated to make it right. Not only for us, but for his family and the council as well.” Spoken like a true prince, he will do well when he assumes his seat on the throne.

David’s a noble man, but being reminded of this doesn’t make it any easier. “I’m near the castle. I’ll contact you whenever I can. I love you, Jess.”

“I love you, too, David.”

I roll over, assuming the all too familiar role of crying myself to sleep. When I wake, my eyes are red and swollen and my stomach aches. Depression makes me want to never leave the bed, but tending to the dogs force that decision from

my hands. Though when I get up and stretch and my eyes land on empty dog beds, I panic and rush downstairs.

The scene when I reach them, playing with Tristan, has me second guessing my inability to trust him. The dogs are no longer alarmed so maybe it's time I back off. They're chasing him around the kitchen island and I swear, Dash is smiling. Jowls raised as he strikes a proud gait following behind his new friend. As soon as they see me they stop playing and run over. "Um, thanks for taking care of the dogs," I mumble to Tristan.

He bows and tips his head. "What do you think about getting out of the house tonight and seeing a movie?" he asks as he tosses one of the dog toys into the basket. At my pause he quickly adds, "You can drive and pick the movie. I'm just tired of being cooped up."

"It would probably do me some good to get out of the house. Have you heard from David?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No, have you?"

"Last night after we talked in the hallway he called and told me he arrived at the castle, but that was it." Nothing this morning which has me back to worried.

“Well, Jess, the dogs have been fed so pick a movie and I’ll take you to dinner afterward.” His gesture is sincere so I agree and we go out.

Chapter Fifteen

David



Meanwhile in Varna...

I've barely entered the castle when my mother comes barreling down the staircase. Either she had prior warning I was coming, or she heard me drive up.

"Son, to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?" she nearly purrs, far too pleased with my visit.

"Jessica left me," I say, devoid of any emotion.

She attempts to suppress the pleasure this announcement brings her, but does a shitty job of it. I have to bite my tongue to keep from blowing my cover. A bite so hard my fangs pierce my bottom lip. She slithers over and wraps her arms

around me. “Come, my son. You’ll find your room just as you left it. How long will you be here so I can let the staff know?”

“Until I figure things out,” I say.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like. The Brandts arrive around midnight. They’ve just returned from visiting their family in Belgium.”

Great, I just walked in and she’s already pushing Amelia down my throat. I’m sure her conversation with Tristan led her to believe I was headed this way.

I take my luggage up to my old room and it’s just as she said, untouched. Now to figure out how to avoid Amelia. In the past, Amelia was unable to keep her claws off me. This will be prove to be quite the challenge given the reason I’m here. I hadn’t factored Amelia into any of this. Amelia’s not a virgin, quite the opposite. Tristan’s warning about her and her family is still fresh in my mind and I need to tread lightly around them.

I unpack and leave my room in search of Tristan’s parents. After the long flight I’m famished, but assume my parents will insist on a hunt after the Brandts arrive. That will be the perfect opportunity to see the group in action. Something I haven’t witnessed in years and unfortunately need to now. The

way a vampire hunts says a lot about their character. Any vampire with a soul will do so with care and compassion for their victim. We can feed without killing and are taught to do so.

Strolling through the castle brings back a wave of memories. Some good, some bad. I wrack my brain in search of something I might have missed or ignored about my mother from the past as I walk around. Oddly enough, nothing about the castle has changed. Paintings of past elders and their bloodlines adorn the hall walls, in the same spots they've been in for centuries. My mother's despicable family displayed on a lone wall, in embellished gold frames with embossed placards above the top, *Vasquez Family Elders*. Most of which are still assume to be walking among us, though they've fallen out of contact. My father's lineage is displayed several rows beneath theirs, reminding them of their place.

How does that not bother him?

As I stand here take it all in, the reality of how many members of my mother's family have been excommunicated from the council over centuries for various reasons sheds some light on the current situation. Things I'd only heard in passing but as a child meant nothing. Until now. The Vasquez apple didn't fall far from the proverbial tree. Maybe her lineage isn't as she portrayed it to be.

Sensing another presence, I turn to my father. “Welcome home, son. Your mother shared your unfortunate situation with me and I am sorry to hear of it. I really liked Jessica.”

I detect sincerity in my father’s voice and body language. Outwardly his facial expression is pure, but I’m still apprehensive. He opens his arms, inviting me in. As we part, he slings an arm over my shoulders and guides me to the nearby balcony.

“Son, aren’t these grounds breathtaking?” He gestures to the vast meadow below.

“Yes, Father, the countryside is divine.” It truly is a sight. How many nights Tristan and I spent out there just being boys. Unwinding after a stressful day of training, basking in the moonlight, talking about futures we wanted versus the ones that we were expected to carry out.

“This will be yours to govern one day, my son.”

Filled with a sudden discomfort at the way this conversation is going, I manage a nod in return. It has been beaten into me that I must take over the family seat on the council, though after I uncover what is sure to be hidden, I’m not sure the other council members will be in favor of our bloodline holding a seat any longer.

“I understand you have much weight to bear and sift through, son. I don’t mean to burden you with this, just know my words come from a heart filled with pride for the man you’ve become. Come now, our guests will soon arrive and I’m sure you’ll want to freshen up first after a long night of travel.”

After a refreshing shower, I descend the stairs to cordially greet each of our guests. I shake her father’s hand then begrudgingly, kiss the top of her mother’s, then turn to hug Amelia. I chance a glance at my mother, wishing I could smack the satisfied look off her face. Instead, I force a smile. My father nods, no facial expression whatsoever. I’m beginning to believe he isn’t the happiest of men.

Mother commands the servants as she always has to take the Brandts’ luggage to their rooms so they can change into their hunting attire and I decide to do the same. My parents need to keep things *pure* as they call it, and for things to remain as they once were centuries ago is archaic. Everything evolves—humanity, sexuality—I can’t think of a single entity that doesn’t outside them. They don’t like the way *humans* have allowed society to digress and prefer the days of old. And while I don’t necessarily disagree with portions of that statement, I know not all humans are to blame for this.

Donning my leather trench coat, the desire to hunt isn't there. Given the fact I'm hungry, bowing out now would draw unwanted attention. At least this will be a good way to keep an eye on them, especially mother dearest.

Amelia and I are the first to arrive back downstairs. She purrs seductively as she close in. "Have you missed me, David?" she asks while tracing the 'V' neckline on the top of my shirt with her freshly manicured nails. Her beauty would stun Aphrodite herself, but I've never been fooled by it. Amelia is tall and slender with long, billowy blonde hair that cascades down her back in ringlets to her waist. Her hypnotic sapphire blue eyes have brought the strongest of men to their knees.

Once the others arrive, the pack hikes into town, Amelia keeping pace alongside me. I wonder if my mother had somehow been forewarned of my arrival and notified the Brandts so they would return. Too many things aren't adding up with this trip. If Mother does have a coven of rogues, are they tracking me? *Note to self, notify Tristan and heighten security for Jess.*

As we cross the bridge into town, Amelia asks, "What brings you back to Varna, David? Have you finished school?"

"No, I have three years left." Elaborating any further would risk giving too much away.

“I heard you had a human concubine,” Amelia speaks with such disgust I have to fight back the urge to choke her.

“Yes, but that’s over.”

“Oh really,” Amelia purrs. How she thinks she has a chance is beyond me.

We reach the seedy edge of town where the taverns and whorehouses were. Generally, we’d lurk in the shadows, wait for unruly bar patrons to get expelled and start fights outside. Assess them, and pick our prey from there. I despise using humans as meals, but it’s a necessary evil of being an immortal. While waiting, I scan the area for my mother and spy her eying a young couple that’s walking down the other side of the street. She licks her lips as though they are a priceless treat.

They aren’t bothering anyone, merely enjoying their evening out. With their arms tightly wrapped around one another, they are completely oblivious to what is going on around them. From here I can sense their love for one another and no evil radiates from them therefore they should be of no concern to the pack. But Mother feels otherwise. The rest of the pack is gravitating toward a group heading to an alley behind the tavern. I stand back, assessing my mother’s next move. She senses my watchful gaze, shifting her interest from the couple to the group the rest are tracking.

I catch up to the others who've moved ahead. They are tracking a seedy group of men that has trapped a young bar maiden. They taunt her as she begs for her release. The men shove her down onto a table and push her skirt up. There is no way in hell I'm letting them take that from her. Without thinking, I dart out of the shadows and grab the man closest to her around the throat and feed. This sets the rest of his drunken comrades into mass hysteria though they don't stand a chance as the pack descended upon them.

There's nothing like taking that first bite, breaking the skin, the feel of the warm blood as it pulses through your veins. The rush you get is like heroin to a vampire. A euphoric frenzy to which nothing else compares.

The bar maiden screams and runs without looking back. She is of no concern to us, but just to be safe I drop the man I'm finished with and catch up to her. I compel her to forget what she saw and send her home.

We pile their lifeless bodies in the nearby forest, and swiftly set fire to them. Luckily, we are in a remote part of town on the far west side that isn't heavily populated. This is a poor, working class village and the likelihood of anyone seeing anything is minimal. Once all that remains were skeletal bones, we bury them and turn back toward the castle.

During the journey, my father paces himself alongside me. “That was a noble thing you did for that girl. I’m proud of you, son.”

Stifling a grin, I nod. While I wasn’t looking for my father’s approval, it’s still nice to hear. I gaze up through the group and discover my mother is not with us.

“Father, where’s Mother?” I ask.

He shrugs and says nothing, but keeps pace with the rest of the group though I turn back to search for her.

Re-entering town, I recall the young couple she ogled and wonder what her devious mind had in store for them. I backtrack up the main road, in the direction I last saw them. As I passed the familiar buildings, I hear a dreadful sound coming from a nearby alleyway. The coppery scent of freshly spilled blood wafts out and I follow it. What I stumble onto next stops me dead in my tracks. My mother is doused in blood, hovering over the lovers’ butchered bodies, their necks severed by her demented feeding craze.

“Mother!” I scream.

She turns and snarls. Her eyes are as red as the blood she’s spilled. She’s too far gone to recognize me. When vampires

fight or feed, their eyes are black as night—never red. Red is the sign of a rogue, a soulless vampire. She releases a deep, guttural growl and flees in the opposite direction of the castle, leaving her disfigured prey to rot.

Out of respect for the humans she mercilessly obliterated, I carry their corpses to the woods, and dispose of them in the same manner we did the others. If their remains had been found this would be detrimental to our community. I bury the bones and trek back to the castle, texting Tristan along the way.

Me: Tighten security. I fear rogues will be dispatched.

Tristan: Consider it done.

I walk up to the castle and Amelia stands outside waiting for me.

“Has my mother returned?” I ask as I try to walk past her.

She grabs my arm. “No, where did you go?”

I carefully weigh my response before I speak. “She wasn’t with the rest of the group so I went back to look for her.”

“Did you find her?”

I know Amelia isn't to be trusted. "No," I reply and then step inside.

I desperately need to find my father, but sunrise is drawing near, so it will have to wait. I'll tackle that demon tomorrow. After I shower, I shoot Jess a text to let her know I'm okay and that I love her. No need to alarm her any further with the details of tonight's events. It's bad enough I witnessed what I did.

Upon waking, I recall the previous night's events and know I have no other option than to confront my father and locate Tristan's parents. Filling them in on the crisis that unfolded last night is going to be difficult, but I fear for our safety with her on the loose. Nearing my father's study, the door is ajar and I hear my father's voice, but he isn't alone. An argument is underway, though I don't recognize the other voice. I creep closer, hoping to get a visual of the other party.

"We have to put an end to this madness, Aurelio. We cannot continue to cover her tracks for her and jeopardize all that the council stands for."

Father says nothing.

The man continues. "Did she return to the castle last night?"

“No,” my father replies.

The door blocks my view, but I now know my mother didn't return.

“Aurelio, we must call the council to order immediately. Her actions have proven detrimental to us as well as to the humans,” the man argues his point to which I agree.

My father sounds so sad and defeat when he speaks. “What am I to do, Richard? You're talking about the woman I love. The woman whom I've vowed to spend eternity with. Do you understand the position this has put me in? I could be condemned to death alongside her for her actions, none of which I have had any involvement in.”

Richard, that's Tristan's father. They're talking about my mother and are aware of something she's done, but what?

“Aurelio, do you think she had anything to do with the massacre in Belgium?” Richard asks.

Silently father sits for a few moments, contemplating this question. “I don't know.”

Richard's anger rises as he bangs a fist on the desktop. "You need to call an emergency council meeting now. Her bloodline's history speaks for itself and it's time the Vasquez family permanently relinquish their council seat."

Richard storms toward the door. I dart around the corner and take shelter behind a tapestry on the wall. Ironically, it's the very one that bears the Vasquez family crest.

I stay there for a few more moments, contemplating whether or not this is the right time to speak with my father. Having barely known my mother's side of the family, I now understand why. If she's found guilty of these horrific misdoings, she will be put to death. They'll assume my father had insight into it, and it's likely he would be tried for her crimes as well. Although I don't agree with what she's done or what she's become, I don't wish her dead. *Damn, I really need to hear Jess's sweet voice right now.* With that in mind, I decide to forgo meeting with my father and instead go to my room to call Jess.

I'm not in my room for long before a knock at the door comes. I open it, hoping to find my father there, but am gravely disappointed when it's Amelia.

"Are you hunting tonight?" she asks.

“No.”

I try to shut the door, but she puts her hand up to stop it.
“Can I come in so we can talk?”

“I’m not in the mood to talk.”

Playing coy, she flirts, “Oh, if you’re in the mood for something else, I would happily oblige.” She licks her lips.

“Amelia, as appealing as you think your offer is, I must inform you I find it and your slutty behavior abhorrent. I have zero interest in you whatsoever.”

She hisses, “You’ll regret that,” and then disappears down the corridor. Pissing her off is probably not the wisest thing for me to do, but I have no patience for her bullshit.

I press the button to call Jess, and she answers on the first ring. “Jess, I needed to hear your sweet voice.”

“David, are you okay?”

“This isn’t good.” There is no use in holding back, she and Tristan need to be on alert.

In hushed tones she reminds me, “David, I’m not sure you should tell me this over the phone, the others may hear.”

“You’re right, *Amor*, but I needed to hear you. Gods, how I miss you.” Her voice is a breath of fresh air and serves as a reminder of how important this mission is.

“I miss you, too, David. I hate to ask, but will you be coming home soon?”

“I’m not sure. This mess goes beyond you and me. Jess, I need you to promise me something.”

“Anything, what do you need?”

“I need you to promise that you’ll never be out of Tristan’s sight.”

“I promise. Should I be worried?”

“Yes.” There’s a knock at the door so I whisper, “Jess, someone’s at the door, I’ve got to go. I love you,” and hang up.

I slide my phone into my pants pocket and cross the room to answer the door. This time my father is there. He looks so crestfallen, his face sunken and the circles under his eyes are

darker than normal. A clear sign sleep has been an elusive demon for him. He walks across the room and sits down at the desk. I ask the question for which I already know the answer to. “Dad, is everything all right?”

“No, my son, it isn’t.” He rakes his hands through his hair.

“How can I help?”

“I wish you could, my son, but I’m not sure—wait, maybe you can. You might be our only hope.” He perks up.

“What do you need me to do?” I’d do anything for my father, anything that isn’t morally wrong that is.

“Your mother has followed in her family’s destructive footsteps and I fear she’s reached the point of no return.” He proceeds to fill me in on the massacres that have taken place including the one in Belgium I overheard him and Richard talking about. He shares the stories that have been kept from me of her family’s scandalous past and how they’ve all either been excommunicated or executed for horrendous crimes. He also tells me she never returned to the castle after hunting last night.

Intently, I listen. He needs to get this off his chest. But as soon as there is a break in the conversation I tell him what I

witnessed last night and how she fled after seeing me.

My father drops his face into his hands and shakes his head back and forth as he chants, “No. Gods, no.”

I place a hand on his shoulder, I don’t know what to say. Words are not sufficient in this situation and there is no mistaking my mother has turned rogue.

“Did you know she sent Tristan to break Jess and me up?” Carefully I gauge his reaction, searching for lies.

The surprise on his face tells me he isn’t aware of this. “No, son. I had no idea. I’m sorry for not letting you know what has been going on.”

“Don’t worry, things are fine between Jess and I. Tristan is guarding her while I’m here. Mother threatened to remove Tristan’s parents from the council and said she would personally kill him and his parents if he failed.”

My father rises. “Come, my son, we are left with no other recourse than to convene an emergency council session.” I follow him to his office and sit silently as he makes the necessary calls.

The council is alerted and seated in the meeting chamber in a matter of minutes. Father apprises them of the situation I witnessed, and informs them that he believes she not only spearheaded the Belgian massacre, but participated as well.

“She threatened to end Tristan’s life if he didn’t succeed with ending our son’s relationship with girlfriend,” he ends his speech with. Many growl their displeasure at the mention of a human, while others’ expressions remain neutral.

I gauge the council’s reactions as my father speaks. Amelia and her family along with a couple of others remain stone-faced, as though they aren’t fazed at all. Do they have a hand in this?

In order to remove Mother from her council that would require eight out of ten members to vote in favor. But to permanently remove the Vasquez family seat would have to be a unanimous vote. I’m not sure how this could be achieved based upon the Brandts having a seat.

The time has come for the council to vote on the first issue—to have Mother barred from the castle. One by one, all hands rise in favor. Now for the second and larger issue, to remove the Vasquez seat as well as their family history from the castle forever, as though they never existed. Each council member raises their hands until it dwindles down to the last one. All eyes are on Guillaume, Amelia’s father. He raises his

hand in favor though his icy gaze never falters. This action leaves Father as Chief Elder.

Immediately Father orders the servants to remove all Vasquez family photos, tapestries, crests, and mementos from the common areas and further instructs them to lock it in the dungeons.

“I am placing a bounty of one million dollars on her return, but I ask that she be brought in alive. She will then be placed in the dungeon until her trial,” Father orders.

After he adjourns the meeting, he swiftly exits the room. My heart goes out to him. This has to have been the hardest thing he’s ever done. He’s loved my mother since they were children, just as I’ve loved Jess.

Commotion ensues amongst the council upon his exit as all eyes dart in my direction. Not wanting to be privy to their discussion, I choose to leave and seek out my father. I knock on the door to his study, but he doesn’t answer, so I let myself in. He sits in the dark and faces the window with his back to the door.

He whispers, “Come in, son.”

I walk over to his desk and turn the lamp on. Blood-stained tears stain his cheeks, I pull the handkerchief from my pocket and hand it to him.

“David, I’m sorry you had to bear witness to your mother’s evil doings. I know she’s your mother, but what she’s done was wrong and it jeopardized all the council has worked diligently to maintain for centuries.”

“Dad, were you aware of any of this?” I have to ask.

“I’d heard rumors, but never personally saw any of it. She’s the love of my life, David, and I hoped it wasn’t true. I was foolish, blinded by my love for her and I wouldn’t be surprised if the council called for my dismissal as well. You should go home, son, once your mother catches wind of the council’s vote she’ll delve deeper into hiding and I fear she and her rogues will hunt you, Jessica, and Tristan. Jessica’s no match for them, but being Lourdes’ son, you may be the only key to bringing back the woman we love. That is, providing any of her soul remains.”

“I’ll leave tomorrow night, but I need to speak with Tristan’s parents first to let them know I’m going to ask him to stay with us until Mother’s apprehended.”

“Agreed. I’ll draft a covenant approving your marriage to Jessica. This will also allow you to turn her prior to her twenty-first birthday with no repercussions. Given our present situation, she’d be safer as a vampire than a human.” He reaches into the desk drawer and removes a red velvet box, then hands it to me.

I open the box and inside is a large, round diamond in a white gold antique setting. Glancing from the box to my father, he explains, “This was the ring last worn by my mother, your grandmother, who as you know was killed by a rogue almost a century ago. This ring has been in my family for as long as I can remember. It would mean a great deal to me that this be the ring Jessica wears, signifying your love and binding her to our family.”

Blown away by his act of kindness and love doesn’t cover the range of emotions I feel. Father stands and we hug.

“Thank you for your help, son,” he says and then resumes his position facing the window.

I take that as my cue to leave, but the happy moment we’ve just shared is short lived as I run into Amelia on the way back to my room.

“David, it was not wise for you to come here. Look at the trouble you’ve caused. Marry me and I’ll save you from the disgrace you and your family have brought upon the coven.”

“Save me? I’ve done nothing wrong, seems to me that you’re the one whose soul will need saving.”

Amelia moves closer and winds her arms around my neck. “We belong together, there’s no denying it.”

Forcefully, I remove her arms and hold them tightly to make certain what I am about to say is crystal fucking clear. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but we don’t belong together—not now, not ever.” I release her with such force she stumbles back.

She hisses and her eyes glow red. “Your human will be no match for the rogues. She will die a very slow, painful death.”

The anger I feel inside emerges, fangs bared as I descend and pin her to the wall with my hand around her throat. “I’ll destroy any vampire that dares come near her and that includes you, as well as my mother.” I drop her and she disappears, her growl echoing through the hall.

With the utmost urgency I have to tell Tristan and Jess what has transpired. Jess isn’t safe. Tristan answers on the first ring,

and I proceed to fill him in on the council votes and share the reactions of Amelia and her family. “I’ll leave tomorrow night for home. Make sure you don’t let Jess out of your sight.”

“I won’t.”

“Will you extend your stay?” I ask.

“There’s not a chance in hell I’m leaving.”

We hang up and I immediately call Jess. “Father has things under control and is sending me home.”

“Text me with your flight information as soon as you have it and I’ll pick you up.” Her excitement draws me like a moth to a flame. Though I know things are dire, as long as I’m with her everything will be all right.

“I love you, Jess. I can’t wait to see you.”

“I love you, too,” she says before the call ends.

I wake the next afternoon a bit earlier than usual as I still need to speak with Tristan’s parents. As I walk by my father’s study, I hear Richard’s voice again. The door is ajar but I knock so they know I’m there and then step inside.

“Hello, Richard,” I greet him.

“David, good to see you. How’s Tristan?”

“Tristan is fine. He’s going to stay with us a bit longer, at least until things calm down or my mother is shackled in the dungeon.” The image no longer bothers me as it once had. Knowing Jess’s life is in danger changed the game for me.

“Rogue vampires are not to be trusted, they have no regard for life—human or Vampire,” Richard reiterates what I already know.

“Last night, Amelia demanded I marry her. When I refused, she threatened to kill Jess, and send rogues after us. Her eyes turned blood red.” Their reactions are as I suspected, they had no knowledge of the Brandts having turned rogue.

My father and Richard exchange a knowing glance before Father speaks. “Thank you, son. We’ll notify the other council members. Please be mindful of what you say to her.”

Father stands and places his hands on my shoulders. “My son, I must again apologize for the pain your mother’s actions have caused. I was so blinded that I was unable to see her for what she truly was. It’s not fair that she involved you in this, but please know that word has been sent out to the vampire

community emphasizing the large bounty we've offered for her return. Once she's back she'll stand trial for her actions."

The pain in his eyes nearly does me in, though he continues. "I have the documents we spoke of yesterday and filed them with the council so all are aware of our agreement."

"Thank you, Father. I'm sorry for your pain. I wish I could do more to help." We hug and then I bid them farewell.

After I check in at the airport kiosk, I call Jess and Tristan to let them know. They assure me everything is fine and are both excited to have me home.

Home.

Funny how quickly life changes. I once considered this castle home. Now the only place that could ever be is wherever Jess is.

I take my seat on the plane and take one last glance out the window. Bulgaria is such a beautiful country, maybe one day I could bring Jess here. As I go to pull the shade down, a lone figure steps into view from the trees lining the runway. *Mother.* She makes eye contact for a split second, then swiftly retreats into the darkness. Quickly, I text Tristan and my father to let them know.

Chapter Sixteen

Jess



In Arizona.

The drive to the airport is painstakingly long. Tristan and I arrive and take a seat at the cafe outside the security checkpoint to wait. Having made the decision to spend the rest of my life with David, even though I don't fully comprehend the ins and outs of the whole *change* clause, I still feel at ease with it.

David is my forever, and I his.

As soon as I see David, this ridiculous smile plasters across my face and his is a mirror image of how I envision mine. We literally run into each other's arms and stand there hugging

and kissing as travelers pass us by. Not a care in the world for who is around or what they think. Tristan clears his throat, so we peel our lips apart and take the escalator down to the luggage carousel, not letting go of each other the entire time. I stand there thinking *I'm never letting him go.*

Tristan grabs David's bags and the three of us walk out to the parking garage. David and I slide into the back seat and let Tristan play chauffeur so we can cuddle.

"Tristan, thank you for keeping Jess safe," David says.

"No thanks are needed, my friend."

Once we get home, Tristan decides to go hunting so David and I can have some alone time. As soon as Dash and Vi see him their little nubs go crazy.

"David, I've done a lot of thinking while you were away."

He raises his brows. "Oh?"

"Yes."

"What were your thoughts of, *Amor?*"

“I’ve decided I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

His playful mood turns serious. “Do you fully understand what that means?”

“No. I figured when the time was right you would explain it to me.” Though I hope not in too much detail.

“To change would mean you’d have to die.” His words leave no room for misunderstanding. This is finite and I need to grasp that.

Die?

He never mentioned anything about dying. Internal panic mode initiates and anxiety takes over.

“Jess, deep breath. There’s nothing to fear, I’ll be with you the entire time. I need to make sure you understand the process because it will be very painful. I’m not gonna lie.”

“Could you lie a little? Like make it a soft and fluffy type of lie?” Jokes are my go to in uncomfortable situations.

“No. I said I’d never lie to you, especially not about something as important as this,” he says.

“Well then, I need you to elaborate on the pain part.” Me and pain, we don’t get along.

“Yes, of course. First you’d need to be bitten by a vampire and drained of your blood until just before your heart stops,” he begins, though I feel that is enough said.

I gasp.

“Second, you’d need to drink blood from a vampire. Then you’d die with vampire blood in your veins and be reborn as one. The process takes several excruciatingly painful hours,” he says like it’s a normal, everyday event. He stares at me and waits for my reply.

Chilled to the bone, the whole thing is horrifying and I start to second guess my decision. It scares the shit out of me. But I remember what it felt like to be without David and that seems far worse than this. This pain would be temporary, the loss of David would be permanent.

“David, if that’s what it takes for us to be together, then I see no other option. I know I cannot and will not live without you. Promise me you’ll be the one to change me and your blood will be that which brings me my new life?”

“*Amor*, I would have it no other way.”

He gets up and races downstairs, returning with a red velvet box.

He kneels beside me and opens it. “Jess, this ring has been in my family for centuries. It’s been worn by all the Cordova matriarchs except for my mother.” David pauses as he realizes the irony in that statement. “Jessica, my love, you hold the key to my heart and with that all my love. Will you marry me?”

I sit up, tears streaming down my face. “Yes. Yes, David, I’ll marry you.”

He slips the ring on my finger and I bound into his arms and kiss him without regard for the need to breathe. With morning approaching and both of us exhausted, we head upstairs to bed.

A couple hours later I wake and it’s still daylight outside. It pleases me to see my dark prince sleeping in our bed where he belongs. Craving a PB&J, I rush downstairs and inhale it in record breaking time. Still filled with restlessness, I slip into David’s arms, hoping for the calm they provide to come though the images from his description of what *the change* would consist of haunts me. Am I strong enough to make it through the pain?

At some point, I finally doze off and awaken the next night by a pair of sweet lips peppering my face in kisses. What a great start to any morning. “Good morning, *Amor*,” my handsome fiancé says.

Fiancé.

A smile crosses my face, I keep my eyes closed and enjoy this half awake-half dreaming state I’m in.

“Well, well, well, I bet you two are famished,” Tristan says, far too happy for my uncaffeinated ass.

“Jealous?” David smirks.

“Maybe...” Tristan’s voice trails off and I wonder if the playboy is ready to settle down.

“Hey, babe, we need to get our books and supplies soon. Classes start in two weeks,” I remind him.

David’s lips trail along my neck, clearly his mind isn’t on school.

“Um, is there something you guys want to tell me?” Tristan asks.

David removes his face from my neck and picks up my left hand, spinning the ring around my finger. “Tristan, Jess has agreed to be my wife.”

“Congrats, you two!” Tristan smiles. “Now let’s get Lourdes locked away so this wedding can actually happen.”

“Way to spoil a happy moment using her name, Tristan,” David groans.

Things have fallen back into place as they were before David went to Bulgaria. Having our lives back to our version of normal is like a breath of fresh air.

How does that old saying go? Something along the lines of *don’t get too comfortable, that’s when things go to shit?*

The Friday before school starts, I’m outside with the dogs. Their hackles shoot up and they race along the fence, madly barking. I pop up off the lounge chair to peer around the yard and see what they are after, fully expecting to see them chasing a rabbit or a lizard. At first, I don’t see anything and then out of nowhere, a pair of red eyes appear from less than three feet away, staring right at me. Before I can blink, a rogue has my hair in his grasp, and yanks my head back. I’m at his mercy, unable to move let alone produce a scream.

Fangs bared, he moves in for the kill when suddenly I'm yanked back as David and Tristan pull me from his grasp. They throw his body across the back porch. I never even heard them come outside.

The glimpse of battle mode David I catch is unnerving. The David I know is no longer visible. His face is distorted, nearly unrecognizable. Eyes turned black, fangs bared like a savage beast—this is worse than the night he fought Tristan.

“Go inside now, Jess,” he commands.

But I can't move. I'm in a state of total shock.

The rogue takes advantage of David's momentary distraction to attack and tosses David into the pool. Tristan grabs a nearby chair and breaks a wood leg from it. David resurfaces without so much as a splash and pins the rogue's arms behind him while Tristan stabs the wooden spear into his chest. David spins him around and lands a kick that pushes the stake straight through him. Blood shoots out and all over me. Tristan and David rip his head off and toss it out into the yard, followed by his body.

My hands immediately cover my mouth and filter a scream. David and Tristan turns, I stare in awe as their faces transform back to the men I know.

“Jess, I didn’t want you to see any of this. Why didn’t you go inside?” David asks. He isn’t angry, but he isn’t happy either.

I’m so freaked out all I can manage is an awkward shrug.

“Do you think we should bury him or something?” Tristan asks David.

“No, sunrise is near. Let nature do its job,” David replies. “Do you recognize him?” he asks Tristan.

“No.”

This whole situation is way out of my comfort zone. To be honest, I’m totally wiggling out right now, like as in full blown panic mode. Not only did I just witness my first murder, but it’s also the first time I’ve seen my fiancé transform into someone I don’t recognize. And oh ya, I nearly got killed by a rogue fucking vampire.

Murder.

Vampires.

Rogue.

All words that should not be in anyone's vocabulary. This is some straight out of a fiction book shit. Staring into those red eyes were like looking into the eyes of the devil himself.

“Will there be others?” I blurt out. The panic in my voice conveys just how *not* okay I am with this.

David and Tristan look at each other before David replies, “Luckily, this one was only a youngling. I'm sure there'll be others that are fully mature, including my mother.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jess



Three nights later we are back at school pretending like nothing happened. Personally, I was more than ready to be in a large group setting. Not that it would stop any rogues, but you know that whole safety in numbers thing. At least, that's the happy thought I chose to cling to.

Having not slept worth a shit since that night, I find it hard to focus on anything. The images ingrained in my memory are the cause of frequent nightmares and I'm back to constantly looking over my shoulder while my mind fucks with me.

When we get home from school, Tristan informs us he's headed out to The Hollow to gather intel. He hopes to hear rumbling of rogue sightings.

“Wow,” David says when he gets up to stretch, “it’s three-thirty in the morning and Tristan isn’t back.” David glances at his messages, “And he hasn’t texted either.” Neither of us has a good feeling about this, so we hop in the car to search for him. The Hollow will be our first stop.

On the way there, David gives me the low down. “I hate taking you here, but I wasn’t about to leave you home alone. Play it cool and stay in the car with the doors locked. That will deter them long enough for me to get to you.”

My heart races and my nerves jump into hyperdrive.

We pull up to what looks like a dilapidated row of old warehouses in the heart of downtown Phoenix. There are homeless people lining the alleyways. Most of the nearby buildings appear to be abandoned, except for a new loft building east of the warehouses. We drive around to the alley behind it and see a body on the ground behind the rear entrance to The Hollow. Our first thought is it might be a vagrant, but when David rolls down the window to get a better look, the smell of fresh blood permeates the car.

“Tristan!” he hollers as he bursts from the car and runs over to Tristan’s body. “Stay put, Jess.”

He scoops Tristan up and turns toward the car. I reach for the door to get out and help when David orders, “Stay in the car, Jess!” He manages to open the door and places Tristan on the back seat. There is blood everywhere and I can hardly make out his gnarled face. Bite marks and lacerations litter his once flawless skin.

“He’s been drained of nearly all his blood and left for dead. His wounds aren’t healing like normal cuts on vampires do, usually within seconds they’re gone,” David says as we pull out of the alleyway.

“What could’ve made these cuts and why aren’t they healing?” I want to help but don’t know how. Is it safe for me to touch him?

“The only thing that comes to mind is a bladed weapon that’s been doused with holy water,” David says. Well, that dismisses the *holy water burns vampires* statement as being a myth.

David defies all rules of the road in order to get Tristan home quickly because not only is the sun rising, but Tristan is in need of blood if he is to make it through the night. He carries Tristan up to his room while I grab a couple bags from the fridge and run them upstairs. We clean his wounds with a warm wash cloth. As soon as that is done, David bites into his own wrist and drips his blood into Tristan’s mouth. His lips are

cracked and gray, I'm mesmerized as I watch the crimson droplets slide between them. When he doesn't immediately respond, I know that isn't a good sign. David kind of freaks out and forcibly presses his wrist to Tristan's lips. "Damnit, Tristan, drink," David pleads, though no response comes.

He keeps his attention on Tristan but takes the time to explain the situation to me. "He needs fresh, warm blood. Your blood would be best, but mine will have to do. This will help with the healing process and hopefully bring him back to us."

About twenty minutes later, Tristan finally opens his weary eyes. "Where am I?"

"You're safe, my friend," David says to him, nearly in tears.

"Ah," is all Tristan manages before his eyes roll back and he's out again.

"Tristan should be fine in a couple days' time. Tomorrow will be the real test. If he makes it through the day and is stable, I'll see if he remembers anything. There's much to consider and this has been stressful to say the least. Let's get some sleep and when we wake I'll call my father and put a plan of action together." David pats Tristan's leg and we leave

him to rest. Funny how a man I once loathed has not only redeemed himself but become an important part of our lives.

As soon as David wakes the next night, he sprints across the hall to check on Tristan, only Tristan isn't there. He disappears downstairs and I follow. We find him sitting at the kitchen table. His wounds are still visible, though the bites show signs of healing and he's drinking a glass of blood, which is a positive. How those words fit into my everyday life and vocabulary amaze me.

David takes a seat beside him. "You scared the shit out of me. What the hell happened?"

Tristan sits there, swirling his wine glass while he stares blankly at the dark liquid. It takes a few minutes before he looks David in the eyes and speaks the words I know David fears most. "She was there. She knows the truth."

David stares at him, afraid to ask the question he already knows the answer to. "She who?"

Tristan swallows hard. "Lourdes."

David blanches. "Did *she* do this to you?"

“No, she stood by, cackling and cheering them on. She repeatedly told me how disappointed she was in me while her five rogues beat me into a bloody mess. She told them not to kill me because she wanted you to find me. She knew you’d come. They had weapons, which I didn’t fear until I felt my flesh burn. When I saw the wounds weren’t healing, I panicked. It was a set up.

“I was sitting at the bar inside The Hollow when they grabbed me from behind and drug me into the alley. Once we were there, she made her appearance. She didn’t dare go inside, it was a packed house and everyone knows about the bounty. She barked orders, *Akashi, dampen your weapons, drain him until death’s near*. Fucking Akashi. Why he sold his soul to the devil when he was already a force to be reckoned with is beyond me. His katana blades spun around like a tornadic thunder. The burn I felt every time they made contact with my skin was crippling. There was nothing I could do. I was helpless against them, unable to fight back. Her evil laughter in the background echoed through the alleyway.”

David bound upstairs and returned with the phone to his ear. “Dad, she’s here.”

Paralyzed with fear, I nearly faint as Tristan recounts his story.

“We’ll wait for your arrival. I’ll make sure Jess doesn’t leave the house or our sight. Safe travels, Father,” David says before he hangs up. “Jess, we won’t return to school this week.”

“Why?” I ask, as though that’s the most important thing in our lives right now. But clarity of mind isn’t present.

“The Elder Council is on their way to apprehend her and her coven.” David sighs, “She wants you dead and has offered a large bounty to any rogue who brings her your head. The only way for the council to catch them is to use us as bait to lure them in.”

I’m a lamb being led to the slaughter.

I hate being trapped, but the alternative is worse. I email our professors and tell them that due to a family emergency we won’t be able to return to school this week. They understand and email us the current week’s lesson plans.

On day two of what I lovingly call our entrapment, the dogs skyrocket into protector mode. David yells, “Get the dogs and go to our room. Lock the door and stay there until I come and get you.”

I learn quickly to not ask questions and do as he says, moving as fast as my shaky legs can go. When I reach the top

landing, the front door bursts open, sending shards of wood throughout the foyer and all hell breaks loose. I run into our room and lock the door then collapse behind it.

Chapter Eighteen

David



Mother and her rogue cover charge in. Akashi enters last and blocks the doorway, wielding his blades so no one can enter. The sound as the wind whips through them and the crunch of wood beneath our shoes is an eerie mixture. Mother turns and faces off with me while two others apprehend Tristan and secure his still injured arms tightly behind him. Tristan in his current state isn't strong enough to fight them off.

Mother signals for them to stand down. "David, my son," she says, red eyes burning like hellfire. "Of all the people to turn on me, I was surprised to find my son, my own flesh and blood, to be among them."

I stare her down, never breaking eye contact. “Mother, I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She seizes me by the throat, a move I should’ve predicted. “Oh, son, I think you do. A rather large bounty has been placed on my head and our entire community knows of it.”

I thwart her hold in a surprise move, breaking her stance and regaining control. The stunned gaze on her face, though she immediately schools it, is enough for me to know she gravely underestimated my abilities. “Mother,” I grab both her hands, “and I use that term loosely. After witnessing your barbaric hunting methods, I was informed by other council members of other vulgar attacks you’ve been said to have masterminded.” Forcibly I shove her and she stumbles.

Just as quickly she composes herself and shifts her attention to Tristan who is still restrained by her guards, awaiting her next command. “I see you survived, but I’m not sure I should have let you. You’ve been quite the disappointment, Tristan. You chose the wrong side.” She licks her lips and releases a menacing growl. With a nod to Akashi, it’s on.

“David is mine,” she snarls and lunges at me.

Akashi launches forward, positioned to slice Tristan’s throat. Unbeknownst to the rogues, my father and the council

members have arrived.

Father commands his team to apprehend them, no matter the cost. The rogues will be put to death anyway, if they die here then so be it. Richard goes to Tristan and together they fight the two that held him. A range of emotions crosses Richard's face as he inventories his son's visible wounds.

Father approaches Mother as she spits at me, "You called them and turned in your own mother?"

Bereft of all emotion, I rebut, "The day you turned rogue was the day you ceased to be my mother. You no longer have the right to call me son."

She lurches forward but Father blocks her mid-strike. This diversion allows the others enough time to shackle her.

The other two elders are unable to stop Akashi. He takes them both down with multiple lacerations across their torsos and arms before he escapes. Tristan and his father seize the two remaining with minimal resistance once Mother was under control.

She turns to me, eyes blazing. "This isn't over, David. You and your human will suffer gravely by my hands. Mark my word."

With a confidence I didn't possess before, I stare her down. "Lourdes, I'll personally end you and any others who dare to cross us."

Father places his hand on my shoulder. "Son, I know this wasn't an easy choice for you to make, but please know you did the right thing. Though I deeply regret that it came to this." We embrace then he and the council members leave.

"Well, I guess it's time for me to go, too. I'm sorry for all of the problems I've caused you and Jess," Tristan apologizes.

"Tristan, we owe you our lives. *Mi casa es tu casa*. You're in no position to travel, you can stay as long as you'd like." We hug, but I squeeze too hard and cause Tristan to wince from the pain.

"I'm so sorry."

Tristan shakes it off. "Go upstairs and get your woman."

I rush away and practically break the door down. We have enough repairs to make already and the drywall mud outside our room hasn't even dried yet. As soon as I'm inside, I cradle my wife-to-be in my arms. "I'm never letting you go, Jess. It's over. The council took her and two of her coven into custody.

Akashi, who was the one that attacked Tristan in the alley, got away. They're returning to Bulgaria now on the council's private jet where they will all stand trial. It's safe for you to come downstairs, but um, we need to leave the dogs up here until we get a new front door."

"Well, if the door got the worst of it then I'm a lucky girl," she replies.

We go to assess the damages while Tristan puts up a temporary front door, ours is beyond repair.

"Tristan, I owe you an apology," Jess says. "You nearly died fighting for us and that's something I," she glances over at me, "I mean *we* will never forget."

"No, Jess, the apology should come from me. I should've gone straight to the council with Lourdes' plan, but I feared what she would do to my family. I've come to realize that you and David are a part of that family and I'll never cross either of you again."

With my mother in council hands, we breathe a sigh of relief.

Regretfully, that is short lived...

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Raven Kitts pens contemporary and paranormal romance as well as erotica.

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